

That was then, this is now: Identity in the Auckland lesbian community

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Abstract

This article discusses the evolution of lesbian identity in the Auckland lesbian community from the early-mid 1970s until the early 2000s, exploring how it changed in response to the emergence of the queer community. The primary sources for this article are oral history interviews conducted in August 2019 with Rosemary Ronald and her daughter Shae Ronald, two generations of lesbian women who have lived their adult lives in Auckland, actively participating in the Auckland lesbian community. Through sharing their memories of this community and its significance in their lives, Rosemary and Shae offer readers a glimpse into the richness and complexities of lesbian history (or herstory) in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Keywords

Lesbian herstory, identity, queer Auckland

Introduction

This article considers the evolution of lesbian identity in the Auckland lesbian community from the early-to-mid 1970s until the early 2000s, exploring how it changed in response to the emergence of the queer community. The primary sources for this paper are oral history interviews conducted in August 2019 with Rosemary Ronald and her daughter Shae Ronald.¹ Rosemary and Shae represent two generations of lesbian women who have lived their adult lives in Auckland, actively participating in the Auckland lesbian community. The importance of marginalised communities – in this case, the queer community – being able to tell their own stories is captured by Joan Nestle's words from her book, *A restricted country*: 'History ... is the story of our glories and our sadnesses ... It is always a collective memory as complicated and contradictory as people who lived it, but it is always a people's story. Let our tale be marked by our knowledge of what had to be done, and let it shine with the passion of our attempt' (1987, 187-188). Through sharing their memories of this community, and its significance in their lives, Rosemary and Shae offer readers a glimpse into the richness and complexities of lesbian history (or herstory) in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

In 1972, Rosemary was a founding member of the Auckland Women's Liberation group and the associated Broadsheet collective, the latter of which was responsible for publishing the *Broadsheet* feminist magazine. She was also instrumental in the fight to open the first abortion clinic in Aotearoa/New Zealand and subsequently worked there as a counsellor. Throughout this time, Rosemary was very politically active in the national feminist movement and the fight for gay rights, while continuing to work as a teacher. She has maintained her activist involvement throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, running workshops at the Auckland Women's Centre, volunteering for Out Line (now known as Youthline) and, since her retirement, has continued her voluntary work at Youthline and the Charlotte Museum (an Auckland museum dedicated to lesbian culture). These highlights of Rosemary's life do not capture the full extent of her activism,

nor her active participation in Auckland's lesbian scene. Rosemary's daughter Shae has also been very involved in the community since she came out, and has worked for the Human Rights Commission since the early 2000s before moving to Youthline where she is currently CEO.

Given Rosemary's and Shae's experiences and community activism, I consider their views and the themes discussed during their interviews to be reflective of important shared experiences and commonalities across many lesbian activist communities. Speaking to them was an opportunity to discuss lesbian identity and community spanning several generations, including how the emergence of the queer community impacted lesbian identity and, by extension, the lesbian community. However, I should emphasise that their views are their own, and not necessarily representative of a particular 'us' in the community, nor should we assume, because of their relationship and shared experiences, that they always agree with each other.

When discussing lesbian identity and the lesbian community, part of the process involves defining the term 'lesbian' and establishing who has been (and still is) included within the lesbian community. It is important to note that the definition of 'lesbian' can be fluid and complex, and often depends on the era of lesbian history that is being discussed. As Rosemary noted, some women may fit a certain definition of 'lesbian', but choose not to use the term to identify themselves, even when they consider themselves part of the lesbian community. She recalled that in the 1970s, 'lesbian' was a 'dirty word', having long been associated with anti-social connotations prescribed by the dominant heteronormative society of the time. As a consequence, women of this era did not always feel safe to openly identify as either lesbian or queer, and would refer to themselves instead with more ambiguous terms, such as 'bisexual' or (as Rosemary recalled) 'a woman who was relating to other women'. Rosemary also pointed out that, in the 1980s and 1990s, the term 'gay' started to become part of the vernacular, and because it was perceived as a more neutral, socially acceptable term, a lot of lesbian women started to publicly identify with it. However, Shae also suggested that younger lesbian women might have identified as 'gay' (as opposed to 'lesbian') because they regarded 'gay' as a more inclusive term. 'Lesbian' had begun to represent a specific, prescribed identity, established by older lesbian feminists, which had to be strictly followed as both a political statement and a form of entry into the lesbian community.

During the last two decades of the twentieth century, to be outside the heterosexual model of women's sexuality (and, by extension, heteronormative expressions of gender and sexuality) meant being labelled as a homosexual woman, that is, a lesbian. Both Rosemary and Shae recollected that women with other sexualities and gender identities were always present in the lesbian community. Nevertheless, while they were not overtly excluded, they were expected to conform to a particular definition of 'lesbian' in order to have access to the community's safe spaces, support and friendship networks. This suggests that before the existence of the queer community, and the development of more nuanced understandings of sexualities and gender identities, there was neither the language nor the knowledge that would enable queer women to identify themselves in any way other than lesbian. As Rosemary noted, 'lesbian' was being used at this time as an umbrella term for every person trying to fit in somewhere, particularly transgender people who had difficulty fitting in anywhere and who found it hard to articulate who they were. It also included those women whose primary sexual relationships were with other women, and who identified at the time as cisgender, even when in today's language and understandings, their gender expression might have been fluid, non-binary or androgynous. This narrower and more particular definition of 'lesbian' influenced how the lesbian community constructed itself.

In the post-Stonewall years (from 1969 onwards), lesbian and (subsequently) queer history in Aotearoa/New Zealand can be divided into three distinct time periods, which form the

structure of this article.² The first is from 1972 to 1986, which spans the formation of the gay liberation and feminist movements in Auckland. These two movements coincided, driving forward a shift in attitudes towards wider acceptance and increasing visibility of gay, lesbian and feminist causes, while pushing for positive change and reform (New Zealand History, 2014a). This period also spans a time when women identified as lesbian for political reasons and/or as an expression of feminist solidarity against the patriarchy (Morgan, 1975). In 1986, the Homosexual Law Reform Act was passed, decriminalising male homosexuality in Aotearoa/New Zealand (New Zealand History, 2014b). Although lesbian sexuality was not technically illegal prior to the 1986 Act, many lesbian women were caught up in police raids of clubs, pubs and other known gay meeting places, and could be charged with unlawful assembly or associating with ‘known criminals’. Moreover, lesbian women faced various forms of persecution for simply being women outside of heterosexual society. For example, during this period, liquor licenses could not be issued to women, so women-only spaces and businesses, such as the KG Club (which opened on Karangahape Road – K’Rd – in 1972 and moved venues around central Auckland until 1980), had to sell alcohol illegally, and were therefore subjected to a cycle of police raids before eventually being shut down.

The Homosexual Law Reform Act significantly changed the lives of gay and lesbian communities. As a reflection of changing public perceptions, it proved to be a gateway legislation that set the groundwork for significant legislative changes around discrimination and the recognition of same sex partnerships.³ These reforms, and the shifting attitudes of heteronormative society from 1986 until the late 1990s (the second time period I discuss in this article), saw the Auckland gay and lesbian community gaining more protections and rights, being ‘out and proud’, and creating a relatively visible, vibrant and active community in central Auckland.

The final time period covered in this article, from the early 2000s to the present, has seen the emergence of the queer community, queer theory and queer culture. This has been propelled by the development of the internet, which, as Shae observed, has enabled information and connection to be more easily available, leading to an increasingly international focus. The queer community has enabled more diversity and a much wider, nuanced spectrum of sexualities and gender identities to be acknowledged and embraced. Shae noted that this diversity of identities is reflected in oft-used descriptive terms, such as the LGBTQI+ community or the rainbow community. Thus, during the fifty years or so following Stonewall, the lesbian community in Auckland was initially formed around political activism as well as social interaction. Once established, it became by default the overarching entity representing women with non-heteronormative sexual and gender identities. But, as both Rosemary and Shae mentioned, ‘lesbian’ has now become a category within the wider queer community that many queer women no longer feel connected to or able to identify with.

1972–1986

1972 was significant for Auckland lesbians, as it was the year that the first gay liberation group (the Gay Liberation Front) was formed in the city, signifying the start of a visible, public fight for gay rights and law reform (New Zealand History, 2014a). It was also, as Rosemary recalled, the year Germaine Greer gave her famous lecture at Auckland’s town hall, providing the inspiration for the New Zealand feminist movement. And so, the Auckland Women’s Liberation group was founded. Rosemary reported that the group quickly became organised and started the publication of the *Broadsheet* magazine, whose first issue was published in July 1972. These two political movements (the Gay Liberation Front and Auckland Women’s Liberation) influenced the Auckland lesbian community in terms of how it

interacted internally and defined its identity externally. The changes in the political climate from the early 1970s brought likeminded women together, creating opportunities for lesbian women to meet and network more openly. More importantly, the idea emerged that homosexuals did not *have* to integrate into society, nor beg for tolerance and acceptance; rather, they had the right to be themselves and live freely outside the closet (Laurie, 1993, p. 28). Rosemary spoke at length during the interview about her involvement in the feminist movement, which included running the distribution of *Broadsheet* out of her home. These activities, she believed, allowed her to meet and interact with lesbian women for the first time, which subsequently led to her leaving her marriage and coming out. She went on to describe how the Auckland lesbian community was initially formed around lesbian political factions, ranging from quite moderate lesbians – actively working with gay men in the Gay Liberation Front – across the spectrum to radical lesbian separatists, who felt that even making eye contact with a man was giving up their power. Rosemary noted that during this time, the lesbian social scene was centred around the KG Club in K’Rd, and later included the Alex Tavern in central Auckland. The KG Club was initially a mixed, inclusive space, welcoming to men and transgender people. However, with the emergence of the feminist movement, Rosemary recalled that the space was ‘taken over’ by feminist lesbians ‘demanding’ lesbian-only spaces’.

Nevertheless, anti-lesbian sentiment was still prevalent in Auckland, and frequenting these places was risky; coming and going from known lesbian spaces meant that women could be identified as lesbian and therefore vulnerable to physical and verbal attacks (Laurie et al., 2018). This reaffirms that lesbian life remained very closeted and hidden during this time, especially among women not involved in any political activity. As Rosemary pointed out, for the majority of lesbian women, being ‘out’ was not an option. She remembers that many women, particularly professional women, had to fit into heterosexual society for fear of losing their jobs, and were thus not ‘out’ in any aspect of their lives. If they socialised with other lesbians at all, they did so privately, visiting one another’s houses rather than risking exposure in more public spaces.

Rosemary also mentioned that during this time, the feminist movement was focused on women’s issues such as equal pay, child care, abortion rights and financial support for women, such as the Domestic Purposes Benefit (DPB). Though it did not specifically address lesbianism, the movement advocated for a woman’s right to control her own sexuality. During the years after the feminist movement’s emergence, some women identified as lesbian for political reasons, or as an expression of solidarity (Morgan, 1975). This sentiment was emphasised by a slogan of the time: ‘Feminism was the theory, lesbianism the practice’ (Laurie, 1993, p. 19). Lesbian women were often at the forefront of the feminist movement, leading groups and participating in what Rosemary described as the ‘dangerous stuff’, such as talking at public meetings or protests, marching up and down Queen Street and handing out pamphlets. These activities could result in public exposure, such as being filmed for the news, reported in newspapers or even being arrested. The lesbian experience was not a universal ‘women’s experience’, and some feminist and political groups eventually split up, as lesbian women identified different agendas than those being championed by heterosexual women. This shift away from the mainstream feminist movement also contributed to a more visible and defined experience of the lesbian community.

However, as the collective began to be defined, conflicts emerged *within* the lesbian community and the sisterhood turned out to be far more complicated than had previously been imagined (Laurie, 1993, p. 30). These conflicts were centred around the issues of inclusivity, access to safe spaces and feminist theory on heteronormative society. For example, could the

children of lesbian mothers be allowed in lesbian spaces, given their children were not lesbians and, if male, never would be? (Lesbian Feminist Circle, 1983, p. 32). This particular debate was fuelled by venomous commentary about male children being ‘potential rapists’ or, at least, destined to repeat the heterosexual social models that lesbianism was trying to dismantle. Another polarizing and ongoing debate that Rosemary recalled was whether or not bisexual women could ever have the status of being ‘real lesbians’, or if they were so-called ‘dibbler-dabblers’ who would eventually return to the safety and social acceptability of heterosexual relationships, leaving broken-hearted lesbians in their wake. This issue still stirs up very strong feelings and Rosemary recollected that, only this year (2019), an older friend of hers referred to bisexual women as ‘cockroaches on the community’, in reference to the breakup of a relationship. An equally contested issue at the time which Shae raised during the interview was whether the butch/ femme dynamic was an acceptable or even legitimate lesbian identity, or if it was simply lesbian women trying to ‘fit in’ by parodying heterosexuality in their own sexual relationships. She suggested that, within the lesbian community, the butch/femme dynamic was sometimes considered to be at odds with feminist ideals of women’s liberation. Feminist lesbians wanting to deconstruct heterosexual norms of sexual and gender expression were confronted by the reconstruction of heterosexual tropes within their own community.

Rosemary described Auckland’s lesbian community during this period as small, insular, cliquey and forever in conflict over political agendas, feminist ideals and, she added with a touch of humour, who was sleeping with whom. But more importantly, she noted, it created a space to belong – a safe place to explore your authentic self and identity, and to become comfortable and strong within yourself. The lesbian community was a safe haven for women with shared experiences of repression, discrimination, homophobia, sexism and misogyny. This was an era when lesbian life was at the margins and the external pressure of everyday living often led to excessive consumption of alcohol and drugs, not to mention violent outbursts. Thus, sadly, not everyone survived. Rosemary reiterated the daily challenge for many women during this period, who lived their lives in shadow. As she observed, ‘we do have that shared commonality ... and the shared commonality of fucked up-ness, lest we forget’.

1986–2000

In 1986, the Homosexual Law Reform Act was passed, decriminalising male homosexuality in Aotearoa/New Zealand, and, therefore, significantly changing the lives of many people in gay and lesbian communities (Laurie et al., 2018). This legislation also set the ground work for other significant legislative changes around discrimination and the recognition of same-sex partnerships (PrideNZ, n.d.). During the 1980s, especially after the Homosexual Law Reform Act was passed, there was a reclaiming of lesbian pride. Rosemary noted that, as a consequence, women-specific words like ‘lesbian’ and ‘dyke’ began to be used with pride and to represent a specifically defined identity. The reforms, the increased visibility and the struggle for survival during the AIDS epidemic all contributed to the creation of a wider acceptance, which culminated during the mid- to late-1990s, when the Auckland gay and lesbian communities were visibly ‘out and proud’. Lesbian identity was the overarching identity for these women whom we might now refer to as queer women, but there was no acknowledgement, understanding or even knowledge about the full spectrum of sexualities or gender identities that the queer community embraces today. Consequently, as Shae explained, being a lesbian meant being encompassed in a distinct community and cultural experience.

The spectrum of sexual identities and gender expressions were absorbed into lesbianism without being fully recognised as variants. Therefore, to be part of the community, or find support networks, friends and relationships within it, one had to comply with the somewhat narrower, accepted definition of what it meant to be a lesbian. Thus, for Shae, it felt as though ‘there were a lot of flannel shirts’. She suggested that someone who may now identify as queer, non-binary or gender non-specific, or who is transitioning, would have identified as a lesbian during the 1990s, because being part of the lesbian community would have been their only viable option to access safe spaces and a queer-orientated cultural experience.

The focus for the lesbian community during this time, particularly from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, was around lesbian spaces, such as cafes, bars and clubs, where women were able to congregate. In fact, Shae felt that being part of the lesbian community was associated with the experience of going out to lesbian spaces – walking into a space knowing that there would be queer, lesbian women present. This, noted Rosemary, created a safe space for women who were questioning or exploring their identity, enabling women to have a safe, physical, face-to-face connection with a diverse range of lesbian women. Rosemary also thought that lesbian identity and community were more accessible during this period through publications such as *Broadsheet* magazine, *Tamaki Makaurau Lesbian Newsletter*, and *Express*, as well as international lesbian publications which were becoming more widely available. Shae remembered a surge in lesbian visibility in the media, for example, in movies such as *Go Fish*. And Rosemary pointed out that, where there were previously no ‘known’ lesbians in the media or wider culture, role models began to emerge in the form of high-achieving ‘out’ lesbian women across a wide range of industries and professions.

There were, however, conflicts and debates within the lesbian community, which were similar to those in the 1970s and 1980s. They centred around how to define lesbian identity, and, therefore, who could be part of the lesbian community. Shae recalled that during the 1990s, this debate focused on bisexual women, particularly the questions of whether or not bisexual women were ‘real lesbians’ and if they were welcome in lesbian spaces. She noted that this debate became the forerunner to later debates about transgender women having a lesbian identity and being part of the lesbian community. Many women began to realign themselves with the queer community during the mid-to-late 1990s, initially manifesting through the language they were choosing to define their lesbian identity. For example, Shae explained that using ‘gay’ instead of ‘lesbian’ became a way to avoid restrictions imposed around lesbian identity by the community. It seemed increasingly unnecessary to adhere to the narrower, more prescriptive label of a historic lesbian identity, since it was possible to have a more ambiguous, and more fitting, personal identity. Shae remembered some local visibility campaigns which coincided with this shift, such as the ‘girl+girl equals love’ campaign that celebrated same-sex love without labelling it as exclusively lesbian. However, this was a circumstantial shift; cisgender women who were already accepted and socialising in lesbian spaces, as well as having relationships with other women, could use an ambiguous identity label, having already been included in a distinct and obvious lesbian community.

For Rosemary, Auckland during the 1990s was a moment of significant and positive visibility for the lesbian community, which led to lesbian women’s wider acceptance of, and pride in, their lesbian identity. There was also an expectation that the wider community and society in general would be more accepting of lesbian identity. As Shae noted, this period has been described as a time when it felt ‘special’ to be part of a distinct and identifiable lesbian community. It also contained an element of what she dubbed as ‘us being arrogant and young’, including ‘the Saturday club thing [when] going out was cool ... being lesbian was cool ... leather jackets, boots ... shaved heads or lipstick – it was cool ... is it cool now?’

The early 2000s

In the early 2000s, the queer community emerged as the overarching term of reference for what had previously been known as gay and lesbian communities. For Rosemary, this community's inclusion of the entire LGBTQI+ spectrum meant that the lesbian community and lesbian identity were relegated to a segment of something wider. As Shae went on to say, the lesbian community therefore became harder to visualise as its own distinct entity. Rosemary observed that this was the beginning of a generational shift; as young people came out and joined the queer community, lesbian identity began to be associated with a historical past, and with older women.

The queer community empowered people who would have previously identified as lesbian to embrace a much broader, nuanced and diverse spectrum of sexualities and gender identities. This, according to Shae, enabled people to step out of the 'gender box' with regard to both gender diversity and gender expression. Shae believed that the queer community changed several interesting identity dynamics that were previously significant parts of lesbian identity, such as the butch/femme dynamic and the acceptance of bisexual women. Whereas, in the past, a person may have identified as a 'butch' lesbian or a 'dyke', they can now identify as gender fluid, non-binary, gender non-conforming or androgynous-butch. If a person's gender identity is *not* being a woman, then by definition they may choose not to identify as a lesbian. The replacement of what was strictly *lesbian* space with *queer* space has, Shae suggested, ultimately created a platform for members to mix and connect with a much broader community that encompasses all gender and sexual identities, including non-binary and trans identities.

It is a reflection of the times that when we talked about the lesbian community being *within* the queer community, and the ways that lesbian women now identify themselves, both Shae and Rosemary immediately began to discuss transgender women. This was due, in part, to another heated debate that has pervaded the lesbian community for the past few years: the inclusion of transgender women in lesbian spaces. There has been a move towards 'reclaiming' lesbian identity as the identity of choice for queer women, while intentionally moving to exclude particular women on the gender spectrum from the lesbian community, even those who class their sexual orientation as lesbian. Rosemary noted that the concept of 'lesbian-only' spaces has been challenged for its failure to be inclusive. Shae added that traditionally termed 'lesbian' spaces in Auckland have had to (re)identify as 'queer' spaces, in order to ensure that queer women recognise them as adequately safe and inclusive. Moreover, the term 'lesbian' has fallen out of popular use with younger queer women, as they have sought to separate themselves from what they consider to be a transphobic position. This position presents gender in a binary way, reflecting wider societal understandings of gender. And, as Rosemary noted, the rejection of trans identities by some lesbian women is also a two-way street: the queer community is rejected by an older generation of women who, while readily admitting that their opinions make them 'dinosaurs', are also adamant that 'they, as lesbians want to know they are talking with lesbians'.

Shae believed that these issues have created division within the lesbian community. As its members argue about what that community is and who it represents, lesbian identity has again become a stigmatized identity. She recognised that the two 'sides' are exposing a generational shift: an older generation of women, identifying as lesbian in the historical context, who want to hold onto defined lesbian identities and women-only spaces; and a younger generation who want to include every gender and sexual orientation within queer spaces. Rosemary reflected one side of this debate when emphatically reiterating: 'I am binary defined, I am a woman out and proud, I am lesbian strong and proud and I am binary defined, and people

who aren't, I can really see they need their space but let it not be my lesbian space or my women's space'. This position is also a reflection of an earlier era when lesbians lived on the margins. It was also a time when the lesbian identity was an expression of political activism, and when any space was hard fought for. Rosemary's views on this issue differ markedly from Shae's position, whereby she assumes community spaces are *queer* spaces, inclusive of the full spectrum of gender and sexuality identities. Interestingly though, Rosemary distinguished between this debate taking place *within* the queer community and the issue of lesbian identity vis-à-vis the 'outside world' (i.e. heteronormative society). She believed that lesbian women accept being identified as 'queer' by a heteronormative society, which will assume a queer identity for everyone under the LGBTQI+ umbrella.

For both Shae and Rosemary, the definition of their personal lesbian community is a community that they have each created around their lesbian friends, as opposed to a wider, more tangible community with fixed places and spaces. Nostalgia, however, does creep in and both mother and daughter lamented the loss of something that they feel was important and central to their lives. Both raised the question of how young queer women who are lesbian can find safe spaces and a lesbian community within the queer community. As Rosemary asked, how can these women form a solid understanding of who they are, or find the inner strength of their lesbian identity, without having a distinct lesbian community to be part of?

Nevertheless, the Auckland lesbian community was essentially a construct – an overarching catchall used to encompass any women who located themselves outside heteronormative expressions of gender and sexuality. Yet it often struggled to embody the diversity of the very community of people it was trying to represent. A shared sexual orientation does not necessarily reflect shared experiences, socioeconomic status, values, faith or political ideals, nor does it exclude issues of racism within the community. As both Shae and Rosemary recognised, these issues are 'alive and well' but there was not the time or space in these interviews to discuss them in connection with the Auckland lesbian community.

The last two generations of lesbian women, who were part of the lesbian community before and during the emergence of the queer community, have experienced a visible and distinct lesbian community. Shae reflected that a younger generation of queer women are choosing not to identify as lesbian because of their perception of lesbian identity as old fashioned, so they have little or no experience of a distinct lesbian community. These women's sense of belonging is tied to an inclusive and legally protected queer community, located within a liberal and accepting city. They have the freedom to draw on a diverse range of identities, as opposed to the more restrictive lesbian identity that previous generations of women used. Yet this leaves Rosemary with some anxieties, echoing a wider concern in the lesbian community that the 'L' will eventually disappear from the LGBTQI+ spectrum. 'When we, as the older generations die off', she said, 'who will really be able to hold that lesbian space if they have never experienced or known such a thing? [And] does it matter? What is lesbian and what is lesbian community, and does it matter?'

What does seem to matter, as the concepts of identity and community continue to evolve, is that the stories and histories of lesbian communities are told and shared. This will enable us to retain the essence of who we are, and understand why we no longer have to live at the margins, but can comfortably be whomever we choose to be within the queer community.

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Notes

1. Permission has been given by both participants for this article to be published.
2. The Stonewall Riots in Greenwich, New York that took place over three days in August 1969 are recognised internationally as the event that is used to define the start of the modern era of the gay liberation movement in Western culture, that being gay and lesbian communities within Western Europe, North America, Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand.
3. For further details about the Homosexual Law Reform Act, see the range of interviews and other resources on the PrideNZ web page, Homosexual law reform (n.d.).

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