

LIVING ACTIVISM THROUGH LESBIAN SEPERATISM:

Building the Lesbian Community in Colorado 1970-1980

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The bars were definitely fun but I mean it was too bad you were always seeing people in a dark bar. We went out once -a group of us- just went out one time in the snow just to play. And I remember someone saying, - “oh, I never knew you had blue eyes!” --laughs- I’ve known you for months, but I always see you in a dark bar.

-Kate V., local Denver lesbian

Prior to the women’s movement of the mid 1960s through 1970s, gay bars remained one of the few social spaces available to lesbians. The anecdotal story is striking because it highlights the difficulties lesbians faced with connecting to each other in meaningful ways in a bar environment. The absence of a public space outside of the bars, denied lesbians the basic opportunities to be more openly engaged with each other. There was a desire and a need to build a community that had intentionally remained in the dark for so long. Kate, who had a clear enthusiasm for recreational activities, moved to Colorado in 1976 and like many women who lived in Denver at that time, she witnessed firsthand the transformation of lesbian social circles in the Mile High City, during the late 1970s and through the 1980s.¹ It was the advent of the women’s movement that forever changed the social spaces and interactions between lesbians.

While the bar scene played a fundamental role in connecting lesbians it was not a defining feature of lesbian liberation rather, socializing in the bar scene was more important to male gay liberation and contributed to women feeling overshadowed by gay men’s liberation. While lesbians aligned with the overall goal of social acceptance of same sex relations the way in

¹ Kate V., in person interview with author, January 6th, 2017.

Kate V’s interview was unplanned. She had wandered into the kitchen to get food when her Roommate Deborah Taylor was being interviewed. Kate moved to Colorado in 1976 and was engaged in the various lesbian social circles that had only recently emerged during the late 1970s and through the 1980s in the Mile-High City. She expressed mixed feelings about the bars and stated that the Women’s Outdoor Club (WOC), a lesbian outdoor recreational club that was unique to Colorado, was created specifically because it was a healthier alternative to meet women than the bars.

which they pursued this goal was different than their male counterparts. Pegg Rapp, a co-owner of the Women to Women bookstore gave a succinct analysis of this fundamental difference:

The lesbian feminist culture was building a different culture than the gay community. The gay community was building an individualist perspective, everybody does your own thing -type culture. As long as you weren't doing something that was going to hurt a lot of other people... Do your own thing and we all accept each other as who we are. The lesbian feminist movement was more -No! Get rid of some of these violent mantras, submissions, and dominations. You know let's try for a better more loving culture... We were put down as women. They still had the money and the power in the community so their ethics and their value structure was more male identified in many ways. So those were the fights from the lesbian feminist point of view. I think the gay community is very accepting but I don't think it always looks at what keeps people in certain positions of power and not... With lesbian-feminism it was a lot more about questioning you base values and what kind of culture are you promoting? Those were some of the issues.²

Additionally, that many in the Denver lesbian population simply found that the underground nature of bars wasn't conducive to community building. Kate's recollection reminds us how underground and anonymous the bar scene was. Outside the bars, however, lesbians in Colorado found meaningful connections as well as stronger political and public presence in spaces they created for themselves. Specifically, women owned bookstores, local publications, and meeting places like lesbian run coffee shops and social groups played an important role in community building for the Denver lesbian population.

To understand the significance of a lesbian community outside of the bars it is important to note the relevance of community to shaping identity. Personal identity is usually found through social relationships such as friends, family, and daily social structures that helps individuals make sense of who they are. Dark bars, on the other hand, typically connote a certain

² Pegg Rapp, telephone interview with author, March 10th 2017. (Lesbian-feminist Activist, Co-owner of the Women to Women bookstore, Contributor to *BMR*)

“seedy” association in American culture. For lesbian women in the 1970s and 1980s finding meaningful connections was something they usually had to seek outside of their families or their small towns. Searching for meaningful connections, many lesbians found themselves drawn to cities like Denver. Finding that meaningful connection also meant a place where everything from political ideology to eye color could be brought out into the light.

In regards to what helped facilitate the greater visibility of lesbians in Denver, evidence suggests that mass mobilization of the women’s movement was instrumental in the growth and public visibility of lesbian communities. The emergence of the feminist ideology and later lesbian-feminist ideology is what led to the unprecedented growth of the lesbian community during the 1970s and early 1980s. Scholar Daphne Spain points out in her book, *Constructive Feminism*, that women-only spaces became a hallmark of Second Wave feminism., in following the footsteps of recent social movement in the 1960s these new spacial institutions “sheltered disenfranchised groups while they gained momentum to fight for their rights.”³ Feminism was pivotal in creating a foundation, specifically through women’s publications and bookstores, to build on. In Colorado and throughout the United States feminist and lesbian-feminist publications were springing up in local communities and women’s bookstores facilitated the content and provided a physical space to network.

This thesis seeks to address when the emergence of lesbian culture and community in the city of Denver, really began to surface, and what it looked like. The analysis focuses specifically on the markers of lesbian liberation (rather than the gay liberation movement), and discusses how the women’s movement was critical in shaping lesbian identity and politics in ways that

³Daphne Spain, *Constructive Feminism: Women’s spaces and Women’s Rights in the American City*. (London: Cornell University Press, 2016), 25.

were distinct from the gay liberation movement. It was not until the AIDs crisis in the mid-1980s that gay men and lesbians converged into one larger movement. Prior to this, women were seeking societal acceptance by trying to analyze the current patriarchal structure and implement ways that would facilitate fundamental changes in society that could lead society to accepting women's love for one another. Gay men, exasperated from public harassment and police bar raids had focused their efforts toward public acceptance on the heels of the Stonewall riots of 1969.⁴ Thus the focus of the analysis also considers the importance of spaces that lesbian cultures grew within and thrived. The analysis of community building has relied significantly on the oral histories I have conducted. The consistency in certain topics from the interviews collected between October 2016 and March 2017 has revealed certain underlying factors that contributed to the growth and public presence of the lesbian community in Denver. The women interviewed came up in my research and generally had strong connections to the community building efforts through volunteering their time and their tenacious spirit in these endeavors. The women who interviewed for this project are predominately white, educated, middle class women and therefore cannot be fully representative of all lesbians in Colorado. The women interviewed for this paper were twelve lesbians and three bi-sexuals who all had strong ties to creating the lesbian spaces that were important to the Denver community in 1970s in addition to remaining very politically active during that decade (see appendix one for biographical information on subjects). It is not to suggest that the established femme and butch working class communities or lesbian women of color did not make meaningful contributions to the flourishing gay and lesbian community we have today in Colorado. The evidence suggests that mass mobilization of the

⁴ On June 28, 1969, a police raided the Stonewall Inn, a private gay club on Christopher Street in Greenwich Village, this incited several days of rioting by thousands of gay New Yorkers who had become increasingly frustrated by being targeted by police.

women's movement was instrumental in the growth and public visibility of lesbian communities. Although this is not exclusive to white, educated, middle class, women a large section of the demographic of second-wave feminists were white.⁵

In-fact most of the women interviewed identified as lesbian-feminists, a term that emerged in the late 1960s and was ubiquitous through the 1970s, which further suggests their important contributions. The emergence of lesbian-feminist ideology is what led to the unprecedented growth of the lesbian community at this time creating a foundation specifically through women's publications, bookstores, and other women-only spaces.

Historiography

Although the state of scholarship on gay and lesbian liberation has expanded greatly in the past 30 years it is not yet fully representative of all aspects of the movement within the United States, due to size and the immeasurable amount of diversity from one state to another. Colorado distinguished itself in the larger narrative of gay history but for disappointing reasons. In her 2015 book, *The Gay Revolution*, historian, Lillian Faderman, describes the locale of Colorado as "the mother of all antigay battles" in reference to "Initiative 2" (also known as

⁵ This predominately white demographic for second wave feminists exists for a few reasons. Purely on a quantitative scale Caucasian people make up a larger portion of the population of America. The other and more important reason is due to racial inequality that had only recently been addressed in the United States during the civil rights movement of the 1960s. White middle class women had easier access to mobility and higher education due to their skin color and the privilege of their class. This is a reflection of societal inequalities not the personal capabilities or characteristics for minority women. Their privilege gave them the resources to start building up women-only spaces which required both time and money and this advantage was not always accessible to working-class women much less minority working-class women. In the 1980s the term "white feminism" was used to explore and critique the goals of white women and their failure to address issues of racism as seriously as other traditionally feminist subjects like gender violence.

Amendment 2) pushed for by a conservative political group known as “Colorado for Family Values” in 1992.⁶ According to Faderman:

This initiative was to amend the state constitution to prohibit Colorado and all its municipalities and school districts -now and in the future, into perpetuity- from adopting any laws or regulations permitting the right to claim discrimination on the basis of ‘homosexual, lesbian, or bisexual orientation, conduct, practices or relationships.’⁷

Despite creating a comprehensive national history of the LGBT movement in her overall narrative, Faderman plainly minimizes the previous activism in Colorado by stating that Amendment 2 brought more men and women out of the closet than ever before. She briefly mentions “there’d been activist gay groups in Colorado since the Gay Coalition of Denver was formed in 1972 to fight police harassment”⁸ but she makes no further reference of these earlier gay activist groups much less lesbian activists or their various goals. They remained largely invisible to historians when in fact the thriving gay community here in Colorado was built on decades of living activism through the collective efforts of women organizing and volunteering to create women-only spaces, well before the one infamous year of 1992 that earned Colorado the nick name “the Hate State”.

While Faderman focuses on the events that had the largest impact nationally, historian Marc Stein, explores in greater depth the complexities of the gay liberation movement in his 2012 book, *Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement*. Stein not only offers a concise overview of the current scholarship, but he ties larger events to personal and group dynamics and his

⁶ Lillian Faderman, *The Gay Revolution: The Story of Struggle*. (New York: Simon & Schuster. 2015), 455.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 458.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 486.

analysis helps us understand how these interactions impacted the progression of gay liberation. By investigating the entire scope of the divergences and alliances within the movement he notes that the feminist movement exposed the patriarchal male focused structure that had existed deeply in the gay liberation movement and how it impacted lesbians. Lesbian-feminists and separatists were apprehensive and critical of the gay liberation movement. Stein highlights the differences in issues despite both genders seeking gay liberation. According to Stein gay men were construed as public and visible actors whereas lesbians were viewed as private invisible objects. This discourse played a role in the gay liberation movement in Colorado. There was a strong lesbian-feminist separatist presence in Colorado and similar tensions arose between local women's groups and the Gay Community Center of Colorado (GCCC), a local community center that catered its resources to support the gay community.

In fact, Stein's scholarship is quite illuminating as most prior scholarship on gay liberation focused primarily on gay men. Prior to writing *The Gay Revolution*, historian Lillian Faderman was one of the few scholars to focus on lesbian history. Her 1991 book, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth Century America*, fills a gap in gay history by reconstructing the long history of the evolution of lesbian identity in the United States. Rather than speculating on the origins of the term "lesbian" Faderman traces the development of lesbian subcultures over each decade. She argues that the manifestation has been intertwined with the social, political, and economic changes that America has witnessed over the last two centuries and is continually changing. Her commentary is important for understanding divisions in the gay liberation movement because she explores the lesbian feminists and separatist identities through the 1960 and 1970s and gives context to everything that brought them up to

that point, including the important role of emerging female -- financial, political and social independence.

Scholar, Junko Onosaka expands our knowledge on the important role that spaces played in lesbian liberation in her 2006 book *Feminist Revolution in Literacy: Women's Bookstores in the United States*. As one of the only books to go into depth on these unique spaces Onosaka examines the evolution of feminist ideals to feminist publications and eventually how they inspired women's bookstores and how this created a new space for lesbians to congregate. It was through the ideology of supporting other women that conscious-raising groups encouraged women to lift each other up through writing and taking control of what was previously referred to as a "gentleman's profession." She delineates how feminists cooperated with each other to circulate women's words and pass them into other women's hands as lesbian feminist works were likely to become targets for rejection in mainstream publications. Through their own network of women all over the country they were able to bring the women-identified ideology to a larger audience. The cooperation and feminist ideology also helped bridge gaps between straight feminist and lesbian feminists. Through this newfound cooperation women's bookstore sprung up all through the United States and helped further circulate newly printed lesbian-feminist literature. These bookstores often relied on volunteer collectives including Colorado's own Women to Women bookstore which became an important networking space for lesbians.

When exploring the importance of independent publication to lesbian liberation Marcia Gallo's 2006 book, *Different Daughters: A History of the Daughters of Bilitis and the Rise of the Lesbian Rights Movement*, examines how important publications were for connecting lesbians to one another. Gallo's book delves into the history and achievements of the first national activist lesbian organization, the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB). Within two years of its inception in 1955 a

small community in San Francisco grew from a social group to a national activist organization. This was largely due to the distribution of its own independent publication, *The Ladder*. As the first nationally distributed lesbian publication, *The Ladder* set a precedent of providing critical opposing commentary to the mass negative rhetoric and allowed the community to connect by advertising meet ups. The impact of *The Ladder* cannot be overestimated. It sparked a wave of gay publications for decades to come and likely inspired local groups to reach out to their communities like the Denver lesbian feminist magazine *Big Mama Rag* which ran from 1973-1984.

As gay liberation history expanded different regional case studies examined the influence that larger cities, like San Francisco and New York had on what became a widespread national social justice movement in the early 1970s. One intriguing local case study is Marc Stein's 2004 book, *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Love*. Whereas previous histories focused on largely on the east and west coasts. Stein looks at the gay and lesbian history of the city of Philadelphia by utilizing the print culture, along with an array of other sources such as oral histories allowing him to put another local gay community on the map, thus expanding our knowledge of how American cities and their citizens reacted during the gay rights movement. Regional explorations of gay liberation are still coming together. Denver being one of the larger cities in the Rocky Mountain West was important in this national trend. The unique terrain of Colorado, in particular, offers an array of recreational activities and community building for lesbians outside of the bar scenes.

Colorado, like many other states, has a rich history of gay and lesbian activism and Denver offers a particularly fruitful case study of lesbian community-building and activism. Similar to the national movement it has been a winding path, because progress is not always

linear. 1992 is a very small part of the larger history, and Colorado played an important role in the national narrative. This history of lesbian community building has for too long been overshadowed by the larger narrative of gay liberation history (or lack thereof) of Colorado in the 1970s and 80s. The legacy of Colorado in the gay rights movement cannot be left to be surmised as simply “The Hate State.”

These secondary sources help bring context to the complex social and political constructs at work that brought forth the Colorado lesbian community and made Denver a pillar in the West for homosexual communities. Moreover, by utilizing the oral histories of 15 local lesbians I hope to contribute to an expanding knowledge of how lesbian communities are built. There is very little written on how lesbians built communities and how they stood on their own aside of from gay men. Colorado is an interesting case study because it helps contribute to the larger narrative of gay history in the west. More importantly Denver lesbian spaces demonstrate the distinctive ways that the lesbian communities stood apart from the gay community through their own collaborative efforts.

Birds of a feather

While the bar scene was an instrument in connecting lesbians, it was not a defining feature of lesbian liberation as it was for homosexual males. Adrienne Rich, a noted U.S. poet, scholar, and social critic, describes the lack of autonomy in relation to gay liberation when she states that, “Lesbians have historically been deprived of a political existence through ‘inclusion’ as female versions of male homosexuality.”⁹ A distinct priority of male gay liberation was the ability to engage in public displays of affection and or to dance publicly with other men without

⁹ Adrienne Rich “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5, no. 4 (1980): 631-660.

the threat of discrimination or violence. Women dancing together was simply more tolerated in the bar scene and a push for visibility in that way was not always a priority for gay women in Colorado. To address the violence men were faced in public, they would participate in sit-ins or other types of protests in bars and dance clubs. While lesbians did at times partake in these types of protests, the goals of the protest were not as relevant to them since it was not addressing issues such as sexism.

In February of 1979, activists in Boulder staged a dance-in at a place called The Monkey Bar due to a previous incident where homosexual men had been asked to leave the bar when they danced with each other. When confronted over why gay women were not similarly asked to leave, the dance club owner Leonard stated, “Pretty ladies are more pleasing than men.” Many lesbians experienced indignation at this statement and sentiment. One woman commented, “It feeds into that really sexist nature of things... What it means is my love for women isn’t taken seriously, but love for men is.”¹⁰ This is telling of the feelings of invisibility lesbians faced in the gay community. It was not a place where they could really bring awareness against the sexism they faced in any discernable way. The women’s movement, on the other hand, did offer more to lesbians than the gay liberation movement because it dealt more concretely with sexism. Kathleen Riley, a local lesbian activist, also expressed this, “I didn’t feel like I had much in common with the gay men other than the civil rights struggle. Sexual liberation was not really part of it for me with lesbians. It was more comfortable. Gay men were going out, they were flirty and wearing outrageous clothing and picking each other up and glory holes and-- god what is with that? That and they didn’t seem to know much about feminism.”¹¹ The rise of the feminist

¹⁰ Beth Gaeddert. “Boulder Gays Stage Disco ‘Dance-in,’” *Rocky Mountain News*, February 4th, 1979.

¹¹ Kathleen Riley, in person interview with author, February 17th, 2017. (Lesbian Activist, Employee at the Women to Women Bookstore, Denver Local)

movement is critical in understanding the tension between gay men and women. Stein notes in his book, *Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement*, that over the 1970's fewer women participated in gay liberation groups due to the, "predominance of men the emphasis on male-defined sexual liberation, the masculinism of gay liberation and the sexism of gay men, which persisted even as gay activist declared their support for women's liberation." The separation of bars was only one aspect of it. Women's lack of economic privilege played an influence in their interactions. It set up their respective communities with different focuses and values. Volunteer run collectives and co-ops were a marker of the lesbian-feminist community. Feminist critiques of capitalism led many women to embrace more socialist and collectivist principals. Leona Lawrence, a local lesbian and Denver native, recalled economic disparity playing a role in how it shaped separate spaces for gay men and women, "they were separate, separate bars, I think part of it also was a reflection of society. The guys had all the money so they were the one that were setting up the Center, the (Tavern) bar guild was really involved money wise with that. They would get together about things that would happen. I went to a meeting once and I am listening to all these guys and there were no women there. We had a few women's bars but they didn't make much money and the bookstores... I think part of it was they had a lot of money and they still probably do." ¹² Rich, talks about how the lumping of lesbians in with gay men serves to understate this inequality in her essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.":

To equate lesbian existence with male homosexuality because each is stigmatized is to deny and erase female reality once again. To separate those women stigmatized as "homosexual" or "gay" from the complex continuum of female resistance to enslavement, and attach them to a male pattern, is to falsify our history. The term gay serves the purpose of

¹² Leona Lawrence, in person interview with author, December 29th, 2016. (Lesbian Activist, Contributor to BMR, Founder of Women's Outdoor Club, Denver Local)

blurring the very outlines we need to discern, which are of crucial value for feminism and for the freedom of women as a group.¹³

She goes on to say in the footnotes of her essay that, “women’s lack of economic and cultural privilege, qualitative differences in female and male relationships, and anonymous sex for gay men were what contributed to separate spheres.”¹⁴

The bar scene in Denver was limiting in its ability to meet the political needs of women wishing to engage in feminist discourse although it wasn’t for lack of trying. Three Sisters (later renamed the Velvet Hammer) on 34th and Mariposa was remembered by many as *the* lesbian-feminist bar. Tea Schook, Denver lesbian activist and 1990 candidate for Governor, likened it to a “coffee house that served booze.”¹⁵ It was a hub for feminist discourse and entertainment according to a number of interviewees. However, Schook recalled witnessing many heated debates between the factions of the gay community at Three Sisters that deepened the tensions in the lesbian-feminist community, “...you had all these conflicts in the community, and I remember, - and I say ‘the community’ there wasn’t a community there was the radical lesbian-feminists, the communist lesbians-feminists, there was the jocks, there was the bar gals and any number of groups you can think of that would come hang and oh yeah the outdoor girls...And so you had all these groups and they didn’t necessarily mix.”¹⁶ She explained that when the bar ownership changed, the name was changed, and “their idea was to create a feminist bar”

According to Schook, few feminists believed that a bar could even be considered feminist. Schook recalled that they believed, “You can’t be a bar that is taking advantage of addiction in

¹³ Rich. “Lesbian Existence,” 649-650

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Tea Schook, in person interview with the author, October 25th, 2016. (emphasis added) -- (Lesbian activist, 1990 candidate for Governor, Contributor to *BMR*, Denver Local)

¹⁶ Ibid.

women and sending women out for terrible things to be done to them, incapacitated and (also) be feminist.”¹⁷ A few of the women also commented in an interview that The Velvet Hammer wasn’t in the safest neighborhood and cars were constantly being broken in to. Leona Lawrence, recalled, “Once I had a brick thrown through my car window.”¹⁸ As a result of such crimes there was a clear desire to establish better means of networking and establishing meaningful community in a more secure environment.

Melanie Rhinehart, a Denver local and a forest service worker, talked specifically about the lack of comfortable places in the bar scene. In her home state of Pennsylvania, she regularly frequented a gay-friendly bar, “the only place we knew of at the time.” Rhinehart describes that, “the front part of the bar was a gay bar and the back part that opened out into the alley was a strip club --it was called the My Oh My and they shared a bathroom. I felt comfortable there until I realized that two guys from work went to that strip club. I saw them in line for the bathroom and I flew under the table...until they were gone.”¹⁹ Due to the fear of being outed, and thus their livelihood be threatened, the bars only provided a minimal amount of security for women. Safe spaces free from men were pivotal in creating strong bonds in which a community could be built on. Whereas bars typically offered entertainment and social spaces, women’s bookstores provided a more ideal outlet. Not only did such bookstores encourage women-only spaces, but they also provided intellectual spaces with an array of literature that helped women explore lesbian identity.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Lawrence interview, Dec. 2016.

¹⁹ Melanie Rhinehart in person interview with author, December 29th, 2016. (Lesbian Activist, Member of the Women’s Outdoor Club, Denver Local)

Women's Bookstores

Women's bookstores were the cornerstone of the lesbian community. The intertwined relationship between the feminist movement and the growth of local lesbian communities played a critical role in shaping how lesbians interacted with each other. The ideology of the women's movement evolved over time into a national dialogue that spawned a wave of feminist publications. Women loving women evolved into women writing for women and then women working together. Onosaka argues in *Feminist Revolution in Literacy* that women-only publications created a need for women bookstores that facilitated women-only events and spaces. This in turn helped establish politically active lesbian communities all over the country.²⁰

Independent publications planted the seeds of feminist discourse and women's bookstores supplied the water for the ideology to grow. While publications helped in articulating and refining the ideology of the "woman-identified-woman," bookstores helped materialize this into a reality. Like many women bookstores in the 1970s, the Woman to Woman bookstore at 2023 E Colfax offered a safe space to network and find announcements of demonstrations, concerts, parties, local support groups, job and housing opportunities and other activities catered toward feminists and or lesbians. In addition, they offered classes and a women-only safe space to have discussions. The bookstore was owned by three young lesbian-feminists from Seattle, Peg Rapp (AKA Peg Hickox), Vicki Piotter, and Kay Young. Just a year before moving to Denver in 1973, Rapp and Piotter started a three-hour cultural feminist weekly show on Pacifica Radio station

²⁰ Junko Onosaka, *Feminist Revolution in Literacy: Women's Bookstores in the United States* (New York, Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group. 2006), 66-67.

KRAB called the, “Women’s Survival Kit”²¹ that continued for several years after their departure. Piotter and Rapp also started a one-hour news radio show in Denver called “The Lesbian Radio Feminist Collective”. Additionally, Rapp contributed to articles in *Big Mama Rag*, the local feminist Denver paper, and *Northeast Passage*, a local community paper in Seattle.²² Rapp describes herself as being very concerned with inclusivity of minorities and wrote stories for *Big Mama Rag*, that mainly focused on the struggles of working class African-American women in the community.

Rapp, Piotter, and Young had previous experience with a variety of local various co-ops and volunteer collectives in Seattle and used their experiences with these collectives to found the Woman to Woman bookstore in Denver in 1974. Rapp explained that the aspirations for the bookstore was inspired by the collectivist communities of Seattle, “They had an ethics that said that you had to do political education and self-defense and you had to build community services as well you couldn’t just go to rallies and do this and that and go live your own life you are interconnected... that why we did the (women’s) center it was a support for the larger movement... and like other types of co-ops that deepened the whole movement”²³ Schook, who was friends with Vicki, explained that, “They moved out here from Seattle with the sole purpose of opening a woman’s bookstore. So they did that, although they were not necessarily trusted by the community. It took a while for bonding and acceptance to occur.”²⁴ With the gay community being shut off from mainstream society for so long, trust was often hard to come by. Rapp

²¹ Pegg Rapp requested that the other women Shan Ottey and Janine Carpenter who contributed to this radio show be mentioned for their inspiring collaborative efforts toward making the Seattle radio show the Women’s Survival kit, possible.

²² Barbara J. Love, *Feminists Who Changed America 1936-1975* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press.2006), 374.

²³ Rapp Phone interview, March 2017.

²⁴ Schook interview, Oct. 2016.

commented that this was probably because they had come from out of town and had brought with them very new radical ideas. “That [gossip] went away but they were talking... I think from where I came from was more radical, Denver was a pretty conservative city and for radical feminism, *Big Mama Rag* was great, but the city was much more conservative... we were more radically based and we brought that with us.” Most women commented that everyone knew about ten to fifteen other lesbians and that social circles remained rather tight, which may have contributed to this as well. The feminist movement and emphasis on women-only spaces such as bookstores facilitated safe spaces that encouraged an environment of trust in which to enter the lesbian community.

The presence of lesbians in the bookstore was an important side of it but the goals of the Women to Women bookstore were also to remain as inclusive as possible while still carving out a place for lesbian separatists as Rapp recalled:

It was kind of a mixed center I was big on trying to get in women of color. We wanted it to be more welcoming than some other straight white feminist places at the time. We were headed toward to what people are doing now... We wanted it separate in the sense that guys could come into the bookstore but when it came to having discussions or classes where you just wanted to talk to another woman we had a different area and they were not allowed in there and that made us separatists²⁵

Their earnest endeavor did earn them a solid place in the lesbian community all of the women I spoke to were familiar with this store. Rapp commented on this stating, “It was pretty much feminist and lesbian by nature, it wasn’t in the name on the door but it was in there it was who we were.”²⁶

²⁵ Rapp phone interview, March 2017.

²⁶ Rapp phone interview, March 10th 2017.

For many lesbians-- like Kate V., who gave the opening quote-- the woman's bookstore represented a beacon for lesbians. According to Kate V., "I call it the subculture - yeah because it was kind of hard to find each other and feel safe. - Like the book stores- the feminist bookstores were great. So when you go to a new town the first thing you do is find the woman's bookstore and the lesbian bar and then sign up for softball of course!" Likewise Ronnie Storey, a Denver activist, and contributor to *BMR*, comments on the atmosphere of the Women to Women Bookstore as such, "Yeah, it was about networking and it was a place of safety because being a lesbian was not the safest feeling in the world in the 70s in Denver- it was still a bit of a cow town."²⁷ One of the most important services it offered to these women was a place to explore and express the new found personal ideology of the women-identified-woman. The Women to Women bookstore offered not only an array of feminist literature but classes held in the basement of this store that were taught by other women to provide each other political education and raise the collective consciousness of women in the community. Rapp recalls, "We were trying to do political education but you know more from a woman's point of view... We tried to have events-- you know like a school with classes. Some of us were pretty radical too." In the main floor of the store there were two sections dedicated to engaging in conversation in addition to the basement. A large wooden table near the front entrance that had seating and a divided area near the back of the store that was available only to women who wanted to engage in conversations. The bookstore provided physical spaces where lesbian-feminists could share their newly acquired knowledge. Rapp recalls, "Whether you were more of a radical feminist or a socialist feminist...we would discuss everything from a women's point of view." The Women to Women bookstore closed around 1983 which Kasha Songer, a Denver lesbian activist described

²⁷ Ronnie Storey, in person interview with author, January 3rd, 2017. (Lesbian Activist, Contributor to *BMR*, Denver Local, Distributor for Olivia Records)

as a “real loss to community.”²⁸ After the Women to Women bookstore closed in 1983 someone mentioned that a new women’s bookstore was opening. Kasha recalled immediately volunteering her time. When discussing the emergence of lesbian presence in bookstores Onosaka states in her book that, lesbians were the ones who felt such a strong need for a community that they would continually get involved in multiple ways it was a “life giving and life altering activity” for many and week after week it was lesbians who signed up for a bulk of the volunteer shifts. ²⁹ Kasha went on to say her reasoning for giving her time was that, “It was a hard to find community. You would have to bump into a new friend from an old friend. Everybody probably knew twenty other women. But there weren’t large gathering places” A few years after, in 1985 Kasha had opened her own bookstore the Book Garden located on 2625 East 12th Street, that served the community for 19 years.³⁰

Lesbian Bookstores

The desire to connect with each other was still important to the lesbian community, even after the Women to Women bookstore had closed around 1983. Taking up the slack was Denver Songer and her lesbian bookstore The Book Garden. Kasha recalled that women would come from surrounding states just to be in Lesbian the bookstore, “We were also a safe-haven for women in Wyoming, Montana, the Dakotas they would drive all the way to Denver to sit in the bookstore and say hello to other women. Then they would hit the bars that night but they would

²⁸ Kasha Songer, in person interview with author, December 20th, 2016. (Lesbian Activist, Denver Local, Owner of the Book Garden)

²⁹ Onosaka. *Feminist Revolution*, pg.67

³⁰ Songer interview, Dec. 2016.

always leave with a book to read or a political pamphlet.”³¹ Songer recalled her own sense of isolation from she felt in her home town of St. Charles, IL. She grew up two hours outside of Chicago and only knew of two gay bars to go to. One was a butch/ femme type of bar and you needed a password to get in. “They didn’t feel safe without one. The first night I walked up I didn’t know that. The little door opens [and they’d say] ‘password’ and I said I have no idea. She looked me up and down though and said ‘come on in honey’ they were pretty sweet to us young kids who were trying to find that in.” Songer came to Colorado in 1980 describing her home town as, “not very progressive “and “uncomfortable” she had heard of a few places that had established lesbian feminist’s communities and Denver was one of them. A friend had coaxed her here, and she describes it as one of the best decisions of her life. “I adore it here, always have always will.” Because of the isolation Kasha loved to involve herself in community building in her new home here in Colorado.

Due to the greater public invisibility of lesbians and traditional gender assumptions that women were inherently dependent on men coming out as lesbian in the context of the women’s movement had profound impact on the growth and emergence of the lesbian community in a way that was not possible in the gay bars. Kathleen Corbett, a local Denverite who worked with Kasha in the bookstore commented on the opportunity that bookstores offered outside of the bars. “I was there for five years. It was a lovely experience. I went from a store that had fifty people on staff to working with Kasha and two other people. Something I really loved about it was we really were a focal point for the community that we served... because you are serving an underserved community. It wasn’t just the lesbians in Denver [either]. Lesbians from all over the

³¹ Ibid.

region. women would come to Denver for the weekend to see what was new on the shelf... It was a lot about being a focal point for the lesbian community that wasn't a bar." In the interviews conducted many women expressed the isolation they felt stating that this had in part motivated them to make the move to Denver. According to Deborah Taylor, who came from the upper middle class suburbs of Boston, "I always spent my life worrying about being feminine and thinking that I wasn't feminine enough and it fucked me up...trying so hard to fit in as a woman."³² The community created inside bookstores and what this meant to lesbians in particular cannot be overstated.

Women bookstores were critical to lesbian identity for two reasons. It emphasized separatism and feminist education. Separatism was important because lesbians are a minority of the population, a mixed gender crowd makes it harder to meet other gay women. The assertion of isolation ended up building a strong foundation for lesbian dating and networking. Secondly women's bookstores provided women with a distinct political education that encouraged them to take on their own oppression in a way that distinguished lesbian liberation from gay liberation. The lesbian feminist doctrine led some to strong convictions about the importance of separatism to build their community and attain their political goals. Faderman states "Some lesbian-feminists even thought it was necessary to excluded all heterosexuals and homosexual males as well as heterosexual females from their personal and political lives, just as militant blacks had urged separatism from all whites."³³ Another local Denver lesbian, contributor to *BMR*, and former Olivia Records distributor, Ronnie Storey, expressed that the militancy stemmed from a

³² Deborah Taylor, in person interview with the author, January, 2017. (Lesbian activist, Denver Local, contributor to *BMR*)

³³ Faderman, *Odd Girls*, 218.

need to carve out an individual identity that was separate from men in general and expressed that lesbian separatism was a necessary part of creating their own visible identity as well as refining women centered goals for gay liberation. “In the 1970s lesbian-feminist identity was pretty new... politically, in order to go off and create your own identity you have to go off and be separatists for a while to figure out- who are we? What are our politics? How do we get where we feel we need to go?” Prior to the women’s movement lesbians had little access to acquiring, much less debating, radical ideas. Schook recalled in coming to Denver from Ann Harbor Michigan, her first exposure to lesbian-feminists’ collectives caught her off guard, “They were talking about things I had no clue about, they used the word privilege a lot... I knew the words but this whole lefty, manifesto context just totally threw me...I learned how to talk like a radical lesbian, learned what I liked and didn’t like, such as self-crit... I learned to speak for myself.” As mentioned before independent publication planted the seeds of feminist discourse. A lesbian could educate oneself through feminist publication that were easily available in the women’s bookstores.

Independent publications

Historically, independent publications offered communication and connectivity for various social movements because it produced material that mainstream media generally considered too radical or controversial. When talking about what she got out of alternative publications Kathleen Riley noted that, “You know, the news was a big part of it. Our stories and our news was not covered in mainstream media; I have to stretch to remember what it was like before the internet. It was also covering black liberation and issues in Central America, which

you just didn't hear anything about."³⁴ As Faderman notes, in the mid-twentieth century U.S. culture print culture exercised a powerful influence for LGBT communities. She explains "Within a year of the Stonewall, hundreds of gay publication and organizations sprang up, many of them lesbian, and those publications and organization helped to bring more and more lesbians into the new movement."³⁵ Print culture played a fundamental role in connecting lesbians with each other.³⁶ Similarly Onosaka observed this in her work, "Mushrooming lesbian papers and writings were the most crucial tool to communication with each other."³⁷ Publications not only provided communication within the community but they helped define the community. In addition to women's bookstores, the Denver feminist publication, *Big Mama Rag*, which will be discussed later in this paper, represents one the biggest examples of such community building efforts in Denver.

Publication History- A connection and a positive image

The first national lesbian's magazine, *The Ladder*, was originally published in 1956 by the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), the first nationally recognized lesbian activist organization. *The Ladder*, demonstrates just how influential and collaborative the power of print could be. *The Ladder* connected previously isolated women through commentary on lesbians and also by organizing and advertising meet ups as well as support groups in San Francisco. As, *The Ladder* began to gain national readership local chapters began to produce their own local newsletters to advertise meetings. Perhaps most importantly, the magazine offered an alternative commentary

³⁴ Riley interview, Feb. 2017.

³⁵ Lillian Faderman. *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Columbia University Press. 1991),196.

³⁶ Onosaka, *Feminist revolution*, 45-91.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

on homosexuals that was much more positive than what was portrayed in the mass media in the 1950s. As noted by historian Marcia Gallo in her exploration of the DOB, *The Ladder* addressed the lack of positive representation by endorsing an array of lesbian literature, conducting new research on lesbians, and printing reputable scientific and educational articles that were gay friendly. In particular, the publication challenged the stereotype that homosexuals were intrinsically morally deviant, and helped open minds to the idea that homosexuals were no different than heterosexuals other than their sexual preference.

By the 1970s bureaucracy and tensions between how to approach activism eventually caused the DOB's downfall as a national organization, although many small chapters including one in Denver survived longer. The implosion of the DOB coincided with the San Francisco Bay area's expansion of the homosexual rights movement. By the spring of 1969, DOB members had helped organize many gay friendly groups. The DOB had given lesbian activists the opportunity to build experience that would serve them in the gay rights movement. As for the magazine, *The Ladder* eventually split from the DOB in what some founders considered a theft of the magazine by long standing DOB members³⁸ and the publication ended in 1972. Significantly, in the same year, many new lesbian feminist journals carried the torch of independent publication all over the United States including Colorado's own *Big Mama Rag (BMR)*.

³⁸ Marcia Gallo, *Different Daughters, Different Daughters: A History of the Daughters of Bilitis and the Rise of the Lesbian Rights Movement* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers. 2006), 165-166. --Although these women don't dispute that they took mailing materials and back copies without authorization, they believed that they were trying to save the magazine. Grier insisted it was an act of lesbian feminist salvation because they didn't believe that it would survive the DOB's demise. However, despite having a large readership Grier and Laporte could not survive on subscriptions alone.

Big Mama Rag

In her memoirs-in-progress Jacqueline St. Joan, a Denver activist, author, and retired Denver County Court Justice talks about her role in the founding of *Big Mama Rag*. According to St. Joan, the name was inspired by two things: the song “Rag Mama Rag,” a 1930s ragtime tune by Blind Boy Fuller and a counterculture slang at the time which referred to underground newspapers as “rags.” *BMR* was also a way to also reclaim the idea of women “on the rag.”³⁹ In the first issue the volunteer feminist collective laid out its goals and aspirations for the purpose of the magazine.

Our hope is that this paper, with the help of all the women who read and contribute to it... will replace the often empty rhetoric of “sisterhood is powerful” with a viable and tangible reality. Our hope is that feelings expressed through *Big Mama Rag* will relate to the feelings of all women everywhere, regardless of their position or situation- to those who are lost in solitude of a prefabricated woman’s role and to those who have begun to feel the underlying strength in being a woman. Our intention is to serve as an effective communication system for surrounding area groups, actions and events... If there were to be a dedication it should be to all the women whose lives have passed without the slightest understanding, that lay suffocating somewhere...⁴⁰

This statement from the front cover of the first issue attests to the fact that independent publications for women by women brought hope to many who felt silenced prior to the women’s movement. It also speaks to the desire of women to reach out to each other and raise each other up. The awakening of female consciousness that defined the feminist movement found its voice and its audience in independent publications, and proved especially important for lesbian-feminists. Stein mentions this in *Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement*, that women used multiple channels to explore the political dimensions of “the political is personal” one of those

³⁹ Jacqueline St. Joan, in person interview, January 6th, 2017. (Denver Local, Activist, Founder of *BMR*, Former Denver Country Court Justice, Published Author)

⁴⁰ Author Unknown, “Cover page,” *Big Mama Rag*, vol. 1, no. (June 1973): 1. Independent Voices: An Open Access Collection of an Alternative Press.

important channels being feminist publications. This provided a unique opportunity for lesbians, specifically to call into question gender expectations of marriage and the “prefabricated women’s role” and even their heterosexuality. In this way the new generation of independent publications was focused less on goals of promoting a positive and digestible image to the public as *The Ladder* had, in the past. These were women finding their voice and expressing discontent with the world around them. Onosaka also talks specifically about how lesbians found a voice and an audience in independent publications, “...they added invaluable insights and power to the women’s movement as well as feminist publishing community.” Being able to connect with others like them they began to reflect outward on society’s condemnation of homosexuality. As Onosaka explains, “Having learned to speak out and be honest to themselves in social movements, lesbians refused to be silenced and invisible and started to speak out about what was wrong with the larger society rather than with themselves.”⁴¹

In regards to exploring ideology, *BMR* was also unique in the sense that, this particular collective feminist magazine made a valiant effort to remain all-inclusive to a multitude of issues that faced not only lesbians but women’s community at large-- issues of racism, sexism, classism, economic issues, local, national, and international women’s news. This women’s journal in particular encapsulated the flexible umbrella of feminism and its ever expanding goals of equality by incorporating intersectionality into their articles before there was even a name for it. For example, in 1973 the magazine discussed minority issues such as women of color dealing with sexism and racism in the workforce in an article titled, “Black Sister Fights for Her Job.”⁴²

In addition to examining local issues of women of color they also reported on controversial

⁴¹ Onosaka, *Feminist Revolution*, 67.

⁴² Author Unknown, “Black Sister fights for her job, “*Big Mama Rag*”, vol.1, no.4 (September 1973): 5. Independent Voices: An Open Access Collection of an Alternative Press.

international foreign policies and oppression that impacted women in other countries. One example of that is an issue in 1975 that included an article called, “Mexican Women Ripped Off” that discussed the plights of women in Mexico City fighting for a living wage from their corporate employers, the International Business Machines Corporation (IBM) and General Electric (GE) who had factories in Latin America.⁴³ Every issue included international women’s news stories. The local effort of the women of *BMR* contributed to connecting its own female community in Colorado to the concerns of a broader global community.

BMR not only brought an alternative commentary into Colorado regarding issues surrounding feminism, but also it was one of the few publications in Denver at the time to include lesbian issues. Although it was not initially considered specifically a “lesbian” journal, the earnest feminist collaborative project, materialized into what ultimately played a large role in both the women’s movement and lesbian liberation in Colorado. Observing *BMR* go from a women’s journal to a lesbian-feminist magazine was one of the ways that women were able to articulate the ambiguity and fluidity of lesbian-feminist identity.⁴⁴ In *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, Historian, Lillian Faderman suggests that because the women’s liberation movement was so deeply entrenched in women helping women free themselves from the constraints of gender roles and the patriarchal structure many women began to wonder if their heterosexuality was consistent with their personal and political ideology. *BMR* explored this in an article written by

⁴³ Author Unknown, “Mexican Women Ripped off,” *Big Mama Rag*, vol.1, no.4 (July 1975): 7. Independent Voices: An Open Access Collection of an Alternative Press.

⁴⁴ Women loving women (i.e. lesbianism) was a concept that expanded traditional heteronormative understandings of sexuality and this was important in the emergence of the lesbian-feminist identity. The mass mobilization of women initially was for women to come together and raise their collective status in society above the current state of second class citizenship. Lesbianism became the quintessence of feminism because it emphasized the importance of women loving and respecting themselves and other women and putting women first in all aspects of their lives including sexually. The emergence of the complexity of ideology of lesbian-feminism created controversy but also its flexibility is what ultimately facilitated the promotion of women only spaces that were critical to lesbian identity and the growth of the lesbian community.

one of the founders in the “lesbian issue.” The article titled, “What Does the Word Lesbian Do to You?” boldly asks the reader to examine their heterosexuality and connect it to lesbian feminist ideals of freedom, “I’m beginning to think that lesbians are the only non-masochistic women in our society. How can you conquer an oppressor when you sleep with him every night? Yes, I did say conquer, the only way women are going to obtain liberty is to take it.”⁴⁵

St. Joan explains in her autobiography that “Our third issue was the lesbian issue, a controversial subject. No one had published openly about lesbian issues in Denver before. The effect of that issue was to attract new volunteers to the paper who brought professional skills and fresh energy. By 1974 the paper changed from a homegrown local effort to a publication with a lesbian-feminist perspective and a national scope and readership.”⁴⁶ In becoming a national publication, by 1974 *BMR*’s widespread influence was attracting lesbians to Colorado. Schook said that *Big Mama Rag* was part of what motivated her to move to Denver from Michigan in Summer of 1974. By the Fall she had already immersed herself in the gay community. She had read *BMR* because it was sold at the women’s bookstore in her home town of Ann Harbor, called HERshelf. When she came to Denver in 1974 one of the first places she looked for was the local Woman’s bookstore. Within a week she found that *Big Mama Rag* was just a few short blocks from her apartment and joined the *BMR* collective. “I moved out here within the intent of getting involved in the newspaper. I was here for a week when I found them-- it turns out they were two

⁴⁵ Maureen Mrizek, “What Does the Word Lesbian Do to You?” *Big Mama Rag*, vol. 1, no. 1 (June 1973): 10. Independent Voices: An Open Access Collection of an Alternative press.

⁴⁶ Jacqueline St Joan, *Love in Public*, Chapters 1,6, and 12 (Memoir in progress printed with permission of author).2017

blocks away from the little apartment we were in. So it was very easy to get to. So was the Woman to Woman bookstore that opened about two weeks before we moved here.”⁴⁷

The widespread circulation of *BMR* gave the impression that there was a solid established lesbian community in Colorado. One of the important effects of feminist bookstores and publications was that it gave women a place to start exploring their sexuality through reading about lesbian- feminists’ criticisms of assumed heterosexuality or prefabricated women’s roles. It helped give their feeling of “otherness” a name that would help them make sense of who they were. The Women’s bookstore offered a physical space for this *BMR* for instance brought awareness of other spaces, groups and events that helped lesbians find each other. Kasha Songer, a local Denver lesbian and activist, moved to Denver from a small town of St. Charles, Illinois she noted that *BMR* was her first exposure to feminism. When asked about what purpose independent publication served for her personally she stated that, “Connecting with the community was so valuable, I wasn’t alone!”

BMR makes a compelling case study because it offered tangible, easy access to the physical lesbian community, with information about upcoming protests as well as upcoming social events. In addition to writing news and opinion pieces *BMR* had a dedicated section to highlight women’s local health services, job listings, as well as educational and political opportunities for both straight and lesbian feminists. The longevity of the magazine’s eleven year run also speaks highly to the needs of the lesbian-feminist community. St Joan expressed that it was a necessary tool to be able to effectively communicate and coordinate with the local feminist community, stating, “The women’s movement was bursting at that point [and] 1972 was kind of

⁴⁷ Schook, interview, Oct. 2016.

a primo year. So locally there were several women's and feminist's institutions and organizations that were just starting up. But there was no clear communication between them so then it became pretty obvious that we needed some means of communication."⁴⁸ Kathleen Riley, a local Denver Lesbian, and contributor to *BMR*, noted the significance of the local community news for lesbians and why *BMR* was significant to her, "News was a big part of it. Our news was not covered. Delivering the news which was hard to get [but] also creating a community and building an ideology... we also helped publicize other events. Our community calendar was a big part of the news... There were ads to the women's bars and ads for dances coming up."⁴⁹ The advertisement of women-only events on the event calendar on the back page of every issue of *BMR* helped publicize these events. Thus, making them more successful. These women-only spaces created an ideal situation for lesbians and they became the pillars of the lesbian community.

Conclusion

These volunteer collectives started in the interest of putting feminists' ideals of women raising each other up, into practice. The not only raised women's status but their feminist ambitions also raised up the lesbian community. The feminists who pioneered these women-only spaces in Denver forever changed the landscape of the lesbian community here in Colorado. Despite being remained underground due to social stigma, rampant mistrust, tensions in the gay community, and factions in the feminist community they persisted and their desire for meaningful connection drove them to build community. Their persistence brought lesbian issues

⁴⁸ St. Joan, interview, Jan 2017.

⁴⁹ Riley, interview, 2016.

to the forefront and their presence into the public sphere without shame. The women's movement breathed new life into the term lesbian. The term had long associations with shame and sickness.⁵⁰ This resulted in more out lesbians in American in the 1970s than any other time because radical feminism had transformed the term. To attempt to separate lesbian liberation and women's liberation is impossible and that is one of the ways that it is distinct from male gay liberation. Lesbian-feminists whether they identified with sexual meaning or political meaning (or both) created the spaces for lesbian culture to grow. Feminist did this not just through pursuing protests or law reform, but through living activism. Through these women-only spaces feminism brought the lesbian community out into the light for all eyes to see (including each other's).

⁵⁰ Lillian Faderman, *To Believe in Women: What Lesbians Have Done for America-A History*. (New York: Simon & Schuster. 2015),455.

Appendix I:

Author's note: The order is alphabetized by last name. Although quotes were not used from every woman interviewed, each woman's story was extremely useful in understanding in more depth what it meant to be a lesbian in the context of 1970-1980s. Their descriptions of day to day life as a lesbian in Denver gave me a broader scope in which I could derive my analysis of lesbian spaces and why they were so meaningful to the community.

Diane E Buettner, in person interview with author, December 29th, 2016.

(Identifies as lesbian)

Diane Buettner was raised in Oklahoma and moved to Colorado after finishing college at Utah State around 1975. Even in Salt Lake City she recalled having little access to the gay community as there was only one gay bar she knew of. Buettner fondly recalled facilitating Every Woman's Coming Out Group (EWCOG) here in Denver, a support group through the Gay Community Center of Colorado (GCCC). It was a support group for women who were coming out of the closet. Her wife, Mary Anne Bower, and her friend Leona Lawrence also contributed to starting the Women's Outdoor Club, a lesbian outdoor recreational club that was unique to Colorado. Her longtime partner Mary Anne Bower was also heavily involved in the Gay Community Center of Colorado.

Kathleen Corbett, in person interview with author, January 13th, 2017.

(Identifies as lesbian)

Kathleen Corbett moved to Denver in the summer of 1980 from Casper Wyoming she came out as a lesbian in 1979 when she felt like telling the truth about herself became more important to her than feeling accepted. Kathleen immersed herself into the Denver cultural lesbian community through local lesbian theater groups as well as being in a musician in the local band The Dead Sinatras. She joined the Gay Community Center of Colorado (GCCC) and volunteered her time and efforts there for a few years. She also worked closely with Kasha Songer at the Book Garden for several years.

Nona Gandelman, Over the phone interview with author, December 21, 2016.

(Identifies as Bisexual)

Nona Gandelman didn't describe herself as politically involved in the lesbian-feminist community but she did occasionally frequent some of the lesbian bars and was socially active in that way. Her biggest contribution was her involvement in the cultural arts scene in Denver including promoting women's music, and gay acts which she has done now for 30 years. Promoting women's music and events was crucial part of lesbian spaces. She recalled the Women-to-Women bookstore selling tickets for the shows she promoted in their store shows like the band Raw Honey a lesbian band that was popular in Boulder and Denver in the 1970s. She also helped launch the career of Cris Williamson, an American feminist singer-songwriter who was a pioneer as a visible lesbian political activist. Gandelman has worked with a range of women's artists over the last few years including Ani DiFranco.

Leona Lawrence, in person interview with author, December 29th, 2016.

(Identifies as lesbian)

Leona Lawrence was born and raised in Denver. She recognized that she was a lesbian in high school and had her first girlfriend in 1973. In her twenties, she considered herself a lesbian activist and recalled participating in numerous protests. Leona was also a contributor to *Big Mama Rag*, the Denver independent lesbian-feminist publication. She was also one of the founders of Women's Outdoor Club a lesbian outdoor recreational club that was unique to Colorado. She is happily married and her and her partner Cheryl have been together for 34 years.

Carma Lowler, in person interview with author, December 29th, 2016.

(Identifies as a lesbian)

Carma Lowler moved to Colorado in 1955. She was a child welfare worker for many years and never came out of the closet at work. She worked in child welfare for 17 years and worked in the Jeffco school system for 18 years starting in 1973. She recalled one of her first encounters with the gay community here was a men's chorus line, she was invited to from a gay male colleague. Although they both understood that each of them was gay they still never discussed it which is fairly typical of older lesbians who lived through the McCarthy era that targeted homosexuals. Though she was sure her parents suspected that she was gay she never formally came out to them.

Nancy Mohler, in person interview with author, January 13th, 2017.

(Identifies as lesbian)

Nancy Mohler moved to Colorado in late 1985 from Frankfurt, Indiana. In her interview, she described moving out here as a pivotal part of coming out. Coming from a small town she described feeling like she was the only lesbian around. She grew up in what she felt was a

homophobic environment that was discouraging of women in sports She was thirty-three when she moved here and shortly after moving here she became an active member of the Women's Outdoor Club.

Pegg Rapp, telephone interview with author, March 10th 2017.

(Identifies as Bisexual)

Pegg Rapp moved to Denver in 1973 from Seattle Washington. Unlike most of the women interviewed she had not come from a small town. Prior to coming out Rapp had been married for 10 years and came out as lesbian while working at the Seattle bookstore "It's about time." (although she now identifies as bisexual). With her (then) girlfriend Vicki Piotter and their friend Kay Young they founded the Women to Women bookstore in 1973. The women came to Colorado specifically to help spread the women's movement into the west and to bring their radical ideas to a new place. When asked why she chose Colorado specifically she stated that the scenic mountain terrain is part of what drew here. The Women to Women bookstore, also referred to as the women's center, became a crucial networking area for the lesbian community in Denver for ten years.

Melanie Rhinehart, in person interview with author, December 29th, 2016.

(Identifies as lesbian)

Melanie Rhinehart moved to Denver from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to work for the Land Management Agency (LMA) in 1980. LMA which she described was harsh on women and being gay because they were a government sector. Despite knowing, she was gay as a freshman in College in 1972 Rhinehart mentioned that she always tried to remain cautious of where she went. Rhinehart stayed closeted at work for her entire 34-year career in public service. She was not as politically active as some of her friends she recalled participating in various gay events such as performing with the Rocky Mountain Clogging group, a dance troupe for gay men and women in the mid-eighties.

Kathleen Riley, in person interview with author, December 27th, 2016.

--in person interview with author, February 17th, 2017.

(Identifies as lesbian)

Kathleen Riley, came to Denver in the fall of 1976 from Chicago, IL. She joined the *Big Mama Rag collective* almost immediately after moving here and described it as an extension of her Political Science degree. She was also very involved in the Women to Women bookstore collective with her partner Paula who has since passed. Self-described as a political lesbian she remained very active in rallies and protests in Denver through the 1970s.

Anne Rosenblum, in person interview with author, December 29th, 2016.

(Identifies as lesbian)

Anne Rosenblum moved to Colorado in the 1980s. She came out of the closet in her twenties while she was still living in California. Although she was one of lucky few who found acceptance from her parents early on she describes her work life as very different. Coming out at work was not an option unless you worked for yourself. She had gay male friends who could pose as a boyfriend for work functions. She contributed to the *Big Mama Rag* publication and with Leona Lawrence also helped start the Women's Outdoor Club.

Tea Schook, in person interview with the author, October 25th, 2016.**(Identifies as lesbian)**

Tea Schook was nineteen when moved to Denver in 1975 from Ann Harbor Michigan. Schook moved to Denver with the intent of working on the feminist magazine *Big Mama Rag*. She had been exposed to *BMR* from the women's bookstore in her own town called HERshelf. As continually active member Schook participated in a number of important local groups including the Gay Community Center of Colorado (GCCC) as well as facilitating Every Woman's Coming Out Group (EWCOG), a support group for lesbians coming out of the closet. She also participated in Lesbian events such as the lesbian follies, an annual lesbian fundraising event and started a lesbian theater troupe named "Star Tripping." She also has run for office and was the 1990 candidate for Governor here in Colorado.

Jacqueline St. Joan, in interview with author January 6th, 2017.**(Identifies as bi-sexual)**

Jacqueline St. Joan moved to Denver in 1971 with her former husband who was pursuing a medical internship here and their two children. After her husband, had come out of the closet St. Joan also explored lesbianism. She identified as a lesbian at that point and through the 1970s but currently identifies as bi-sexual. She was one of the founders of the Denver's independent feminist magazine, *Big Mama Rag*. Also, self-described as being politically active she was involved in the Colorado Feminist Federal Credit Union, the Lesbian Mother's Defense Fund, and the National Radical Feminist Conference of 1975. After leaving the magazine she attended law school and graduated from the Strum College of Law at the University of Denver in 1977 and was a practicing lawyer in Denver for many years. She was a co-founder of Project Safeguard, a domestic violence advocacy organization; she was the first presiding judge in Denver's Protective Orders Court; and she led the Battered Women's Clemency Project at University of Denver where she was director of Clinical Programs and has been published in various magazines and had published 2 of her own books.

Kasha Songer, in person interview with author, December 20th, 2016.

(Identifies as lesbian)

Kasha Songer moved to Denver in 1980 she stated that she had very isolated in her home town of St. Charles, IL and described it as not a very progressive place to live. Self-described as a lesbian-feminist Songer often volunteered her time to various lesbian organizations including the bookstores. In 1985 she opened the lesbian bookstore in Denver called the Book Garden that was a focal point for the lesbian community for 18 years.

Ronnie Storey, in person interview with author, January 3rd, 2017.

(Identifies as lesbian)

Ronnie Storey moved to Colorado from California in 1975. Olivia records, a major women's record label in the 1970s, had lost their Denver representative and asked Ronnie to Colorado. In 1976 she joined the Women to Women collective by signing up for various volunteer shifts. She also contributed to the *Big Mama Rag* publication.

Taylor, Deborah, in person interview with the author, January, 2017.

(Identifies as lesbian)

Deborah Taylor moved first to a hippy commune in Boulder, Colorado in June of 1976 and then moved to Denver in September of the same year. She described her home life as New England "WASP" blue blood type family and expressed she needed to leave home to discover that side of herself and identifies as a lesbian. She described herself as very politically active during the 1970s and attended numerous protests. She was a contributor to *Big Mama Rag* the Denver lesbian feminist magazine, and recalled participating in various lesbian-feminist social, and political events.

Kate V., in person interview with author, January 6th, 2017.

(Identifies as lesbian)

Kate V., move to Denver in 1976 from Washington, DC. Her contribution to this paper was not initially planned she had happened to wander into the interview with her roommate Deborah Taylor. She was an active member of the Women's Outdoor Club and later became a group leader. She was considered herself more as part the jock scene but she did describe herself as a lesbian-feminist. She frequented the bars but didn't see them as the healthiest environment in which to meet other women.

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