

Chapter 4

'FILTHY, OBSCENE AND MAD': ENGENDERING 'HOMOPHOBIA' IN AUSTRALIA, 1940S-1960S*

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In the 1980s, as a young lesbian in Melbourne, I was often the brunt of abusive verbal attacks – 'bloody lezo', 'You just need a good fuck', 'You're too ugly to get a man anyway'. I was heckled on the streets when I was alone, with a sexual partner and with platonic friends who were also lesbians. The taunts mostly came from men. Most of my lesbian friends and acquaintances had faced similar verbal abuse and others suffered violent physical attacks, including rape. I was never physically attacked, but like other women – who were perceived to be lesbian in public because of appearance, dress, being with other suspect women or being physically affectionate with another woman – I feared physical violence whenever I encountered hostility and hatred in the form of verbal abuse.

This hostility came not only from drunken men on the streets late at night. I vividly remember how shocked I was at the intense disgust and hatred expressed by some bishops and clergy from the Anglican Church while protesting with Angays [Anglican Gays] in Sydney against the exclusion of [out] lesbians and gay men from communion and service in the Anglican Church. Being abused – and even spat at – outside a cathedral by clergy purporting to act 'in the name of God' may have been less physically threatening but was certainly no less disturbing.

My experiences, however, seem almost inconsequential compared to many stories I have heard from lesbian women of an older generation. I clearly remember sharing life stories with women aged from 20 to 60 years at a Christian lesbian collective

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camp social scene; and examples of daring individuals such as Val, who not only theatrically and flagrantly defied 1950s codes of femininity by dressing mannishly – while wearing lipstick – but opened a coffee shop frequented by lesbians and camp men amidst the staid gender conservatism of 1950s Melbourne:

[We] were outrageous. We rebelled against the dreariness of Melbourne at the time ... An Italian woman tailor made me beautiful suits which were extremely mannish but beautifully cut and in very good taste. I used to carry a silver topped cane and wore a homburg if I was out.⁸⁰

Notes

- * Thanks very much to Judith Ion and Lucy Chesser for comments and suggestions on a draft of this chapter.
- 1 Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identities of all women, who have not given consent for their real names to be used.
- 2 Ruth Ford, *Deviance and Desires: Meanings of Lesbianism in Post-War Australia, 1946-1960*, BA Hons (LaTrobe University, 1992), Ruth Ford, *Contested Desires: Narratives of Passionate Friends, Married Masqueraders and Lesbian Love in Australia, 1918-1945*, PhD (La Trobe University, 2000).
- 3 The vivid memories of the passion, pleasure, the delight, as well as of emotion and pain, are conveyed more within the sound – in the expression of the voice, the intonation, the rhythm, the pauses, the volume variation – than in direct words.
- 4 The focus on sexual pleasure challenges assertions – such as by Lillian Faderman in her early work – that ‘women who identify as lesbians generally do not view lesbianism as a sexual phenomenon first and foremost’. Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: William Morrow & Co, 1981) p 142.
- 5 On pleasure, see Carole Vance, (ed), *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984) p 1.
- 6 For stories of lesbian desire with little intervention, see Ruth Ford, ‘Speculating on Scrapbooks, Sex and Desire: Issues in Lesbian History’, *Australian Historical Studies*, No 106 (1996), pp 111-126.
- 7 The term ‘homophobia’ has been critiqued extensively for focusing on individual behaviour of fears or prejudice – to be alleviated by therapy or education – rather than on behaviour resulting from and located within the structural construction of heterosexuality and anti-homosexual practices and ideologies resulting from heterosexism. More recently, it has been critiqued for ignoring the discursive and psychic reproduction of heteronormativity. Quoted definition comes

from Michael Flood and Clive Hamilton, 'Mapping Homophobia in Australia', (this volume). For an analysis of critiques of homophobia based on structuralism, queer theory and socio-historical theories see Barry Adam, 'Theorizing Homophobia', *Sexualities*, Vol 1, No 4 (1998), pp 387-404.

- 8 The term was coined by psychologist, George Weinberg, in 1973. See Daniel Wickberg, 'Homophobia: On the Cultural History of an Idea', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol 27, No 1 (2000), pp 42-57.
- 9 Houlbrook insightfully explores the 'ambiguous boundaries between intimacy and brutality' and the continuum and slide between intimacy, sex, blackmail, theft, verbal abuse and assault' in workingmen's encounters with queers, 'underpinned by dominant conceptions of [working-class] masculinity as toughness and resourcefulness'. Matt Houlbrook, *Queer London: perils and pleasures in the sexual metropolis, 1918-1957* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp 178-180, 222.
- 10 Similarly, it erases race. For non-Anglo lesbians/gay men, attacks on their sexuality are often entwined with racist attacks. See Gail Mason, *The spectacle of violence: homophobia, gender, and knowledge* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp 58-77.
- 11 *Ibid*, p 41.
- 12 *Ibid*, p 43.
- 13 Alison came to Australia on an assisted passage. Interview with Alison by Ruth Ford, 17 September 1992, Tape No: RF 92/9.1, RF 92/9.2.
- 14 *Ibid*.
- 15 Record of Conduct and Service, Reg No 12869, Victoria Police Historical Unit.
- 16 *Ibid*.
- 17 Interview with Alison by Ruth Ford, 17 September 1992, Tape No: RF 92/9.1, RF 92/9.2.
- 18 *Ibid*.
- 19 *Ibid*.
- 20 On women discharged from the armed services for suspected homosexual practices, see Ruth Ford, 'Disciplined, punished and resisting bodies: lesbian women and the Australian armed services, 1950s-60s', *Lilith*, No 9, Autumn (1996), pp 53-77, Ruth Ford, 'Lesbians and Loose Women: Female Sexuality and the Women's Services during World War II', in Joy Damousi and Marilyn Lake (eds), *Gender and War: Australians at War in the Twentieth Century* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp 81-104.
- 21 Interview with Alison by Ruth Ford, 17 September 1992, Tape No: RF 92/9.1, RF 92/9.2.
- 22 See Mason, *The spectacle of violence: homophobia, gender, and knowledge*.

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- 23 *Truth* [Melbourne], 22 May 1954, p 10; *Truth* [Melbourne], 23 June 1956, p 1.
- 24 Mary Douglas, *Purity and danger: an analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo* (London: Ark, 1984) pp 4, 113, 140.
- 25 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp 131-4.
- 26 See Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, pp 133; Iris Marion Young, *Throwing like a girl and other essays in feminist philosophy and social theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).
- 27 Mason, *The spectacle of violence: homophobia, gender, and knowledge*, p 45.
- 28 Mason, *The spectacle of violence: homophobia, gender, and knowledge*, p 46.
- 29 For an analysis of medical/psychiatric intervention regarding women's same-sex relationships – and cross-gender identification – and resulting incarceration in a mental hospital in the mid-20th century, see Ruth Ford, 'Sexuality and "madness": regulating women's gender "deviance" through the Orange Asylum in the 1930s', in Catharine Coleborne and Dolly MacKinnon (eds), *Madness in Australia: Histories, Heritage and Asylum* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2003), pp 109-119. On the 19th century, see Lucy Chesser, "'A Woman who Married Three Wives": Management of Disruptive Knowledge in the 1879 Australian Case of Edward De Lacy Evans', *Journal of Women's History*, Vol 9, No 4 (1998), pp 53-77. The classification of homosexuality as a mental illness was not removed until the early 1970s. It is difficult to research, because records do not often report the treatment of homosexuals per se, but are rather included under psychiatrically defined categories of deviant/sick behaviour like 'personality disorder', 'sexual immaturity'. See Jill Matthews, *Good and Mad Women: The Historical Construction of Femininity in Twentieth Century Australia* (Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1984). For an overview of psychiatry and lesbianism in America in the 1950s, see Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp 130-138. For an individual account of experience in the mental health system because of being a lesbian see Vicki Owen, 'A Story of Punishment', in Margaret Cruikshank (ed), *The Lesbian Path* (Florida: Naiad Press, 1981).
- 30 'Monica', another woman police officer – who Alison believed was also suspected of being a lesbian – was committed to Royal Park by a police doctor/psychiatrist, given electro-convulsive therapy, and discharged as unfit. Alison recalls that she was destroyed by the electric shock treatment and turned from an outgoing person into a 'zombie'. Interview with Alison by Ruth Ford, 17 September 1992, Tape No: RF 92/9.1, RF 92/9.2.

- 31 In fact, in her story it was men who tried to protect her. Alison recounted that one male police officer tried to warn her that she was being follow(ed). This is not to say that Alison did not have a gender analysis. She was one of only 50 women in a force of 4,000 men and commented on how police women attempted to intervene to protect female rape victims from the ways male police treated them: 'We used to have to rush to get to rape victims before the men got to them, because the men were absolute ... oh they were just terrible to the girls ... The way they carried on, it was if the girls were sluts and not the five boys who'd gang raped her.' Interview with Alison by Ruth Ford, 17 September 1992, Tape No: RF 92/9.1, RF 92/9.2.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 For a summary of the official version, see Colleen Woolley, *Arresting women: a history of women in the Victoria police* (Melbourne: Victoria Press, 1997), p 128.
- 35 Record of Conduct and Service, Reg No 12869, Victoria Police Historical Unit.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 See *Sun* [Melbourne], 23 October 1963, *Herald* [Melbourne], 21, 22, 23 October 1963.
- 38 Interview with Elva Carr by Colleen Wooley, 1992, quoted in Woolley, *Arresting women: a history of women in the Victoria police*, p 128.
- 39 *Truth* [Melbourne] 26 October 1963.
- 40 Interview with Alison by Ruth Ford, 17 September 1992, Tape No: RF 92/9.1, RF 92/9.2.
- 41 Interview with Jan Hillier and Doreen by Ruth Ford, 18 September 1992, Tape No: RF 92/10.1.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Interview with Jan Hillier and Doreen by Ruth Ford, 18 September 1992, Tape No: RF 92/10.1.
- 44 Interview with Alison by Ruth Ford, 17 September 1992, Tape No: RF 92/9.1, RF 92/9.2. Enquiries into relevant sources at the Victorian Police Archives met with No success.
- 45 Interview with Jan Hillier and Doreen by Ruth Ford, 18 September 1992, Tape No: RF 92/10.1.
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 On homophobia and female masculinity, see Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).
- 48 Interview with Jan Hillier and Doreen by Ruth Ford, 18 September 1992, Tape No: RF 92/10.1.
- 49 Stephen Tomsen and Gail Mason, 'Engendering homophobia: violence, sexuality and gender conformity', *Journal of Sociology*, Vol 37, No 3, Sept (2001), pp 257-273.

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- 50 Joan Nestle, 'Butch-Femme Relationships: Sexual Courage in the 1950s', in *A Restricted Country: Essays and Short Stories* (London: Sheba Feminist Publishers, 1988), pp 100-109.
- 51 Interview with Alison by Ruth Ford, 17 September 1992, Tape No: RF 92/9.1, RF 92/9.2.
- 52 An interesting reversal of 1950s codes of masculinity in relation to being a breadwinner.
- 53 For a summary of the case, see *A v A* [1962] Victorian Reports, 619. *The Matrimonial Causes Act 1959* was based on marital fault-based divorce on grounds which included adultery, desertion and cruelty.
- 54 Petition for divorce quoted in *A v A* [1962] Victorian Reports, pp 619-620.
- 55 Under the *Matrimonial Causes Act 1959*, a decree nisi for dissolution of marriage was not granted unless the court by order declares that 'proper arrangements in all the circumstances have been made for the welfare of children'. For a discussion of the *Matrimonial Causes Act 1959*, see James Walter, 'Designing families and solid citizens: the dialectic of modernity and the Matrimonial Causes Bill, 1959', *Australian Historical Studies*, Vol 32, April, No 116 (2001), pp 40-56.
- 56 Although the welfare of children was emphasised in the *Matrimonial Causes Act, 1959*, the notion of the best interests of the child was not a paramount consideration until the *Family Law Act 1975*. On rulings in relation to child custody of women in lesbian relationships after the *Family Law Act*, see Margaret Bateman, 'Lesbians, gays and child custody: an Australian legal history', *Australian Gay and Lesbian Law Journal*, Vol 1, No Autumn (1992), pp 47-71.
- 57 Justice Barry, *A v A* [1962] Victorian Reports, pp 621-622.
- 58 Ibid.
- 59 Ruth Ford, 'Lesbians and Loose Women: Female Sexuality and the Women's Services during World War II' in Joy Damousi and Marilyn Lake (eds) *Gender and War: Australians at War in the Twentieth Century* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2005) pp 21-104; Ruth Ford, 'Deviance and Desires: Meanings of Lesbianism in Post-War Australia, 1946-1960' BA Hons thesis (LaTrobe University, 1992).
- 60 See Ford, 'Deviance and Desires: Meanings of Lesbianism in Post-War Australia, 1946-1960',
- 61 Justice Barry, *A v A* [1962] Victorian Reports, pp 621-622.
- 62 Ibid.
- 63 For a discussion of other legal cases, see Ruth Ford, "'Lady Friends" and "Sexual Deviationists": Lesbians and Law in Australia, 1920s-1950s', in Diane Kirkby (ed), *Sex, Power and Justice: Historical Perspectives on Law in Australia* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp 33-49.

- 64 Under *Matrimonial Causes Act* 1959 of fault-based divorce and having to prove matrimonial fault, the cost of applying for divorce in 1962 was considerable and prohibitive to most people. This in part contributed to the very low 0.6% divorce rate.
- 65 It is unclear how common suppression orders were for matrimonial causes cases in 1962 and whether most divorce petitioners who applied for suppression orders were granted them or whether they were most common in cases involving children. It was not until the 1975 *Family Law Act* that withholding details that would identify parties, associates or witnesses was enshrined in legislation.
- 66 Mrs A's other four children were over 18 years old by 1962.
- 67 Interview with Joan by Ruth Ford, 14 May 1992, Tape No: RF 92/6.1.
- 68 Ibid.
- 69 Whether the story is read as Margaret constructs it in terms of being 'sorry' for a 'large, fat, clever girl' or in terms of her narrative directly preceding and framing the incident about not knowing who else was lesbian and the dilemma in acting on her desires because of the fear and hesitation in divulging herself suggesting that it was a miscalculated sexual advance, does not detract from its contribution to understanding anxieties around lesbian behaviour. Interview with Margaret by Ruth Ford, 1 July 1991, Tape No: RF 91/1.1.
- 70 Interview with Noel by Ruth Ford, 25 March 1992, Tape No: RF 92/3.1.
- 71 Interview with Elizabeth by Ruth Ford, 6 May 1992, Tape No: RF 92/4.1.
- 72 Her use of the term 'black' in this context highlights her whiteness and the racial politics of 1950s Western Australia. Interview with Margaret by Ruth Ford, 1 July 1991, Tape No: RF 91/1.1.
- 73 Talk by Gillian Hanscombe, 'Growing Up as Lesbian in the 1950s in Australia', at The Politics of Sexual Reform Movements Course, University of Melbourne, 24 March 1992.
- 74 Ibid.
- 75 Joan was referred to a psychiatrist after revealing to a Marriage Guidance Counsellor that she was having a relationship with a woman. The male psychiatrist did not attempt to 'cure' her, but advised Joan that it was fine to continue having sex with women, though not to get emotionally involved. For Joan this was incomprehensible as her sexual feelings were closely tied up with her emotions. Interview with Joan by Ruth Ford, 14 May 1992, Tape No: RF 92/6.1. Talk by Gillian Hanscombe, 24 March 1992.
- 76 Obtaining funding under the newly formed Howard Government was in large part due to the timing of the grants scheme and his election in March 1996. Thus, the [pre-election] funding recommendations of the Visions of Australia Funding Committee were not revoked, unlike later Howard Government ideological interventions in refusing funding to humanities projects relating to sexuality under the

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Australian Research Council scheme from 2004-2006 despite Committee funding recommendations resulting from a vigorous peer review process. See Stuart McIntyre, *The Age*, 16 November 2005.

- 77 See Ruth Ford and Lyn Isaac, 'Forbidden Love Bold Passion: an exhibition of lesbian stories 1900s-1990s', *Australian Women's Book Review*, Vol. 9.1, No Autumn (1997), pp 24-26.
- 78 'Review Comments' from the 'response box' of *Forbidden Love, Bold Passion: Lesbian Stories, 1900s-1990s* while at venues in Newcastle and Melbourne, 1996.
- 79 Institutional forms of this in Australia from 1996-2007 include Howard's refusal to allow lesbian/gay marriages; lesbian women being prevented from accessing IVF, reproductive services and adoption in some States; and same-sex parents being unable to be on their children's birth certificates. And yet, under the Howard Government, gay and lesbian relationships continued to be recognised for immigration purposes – albeit in reduced numbers than under the previous Labor Government.
- 80 Interview with Val by Ruth Ford, March 1996.