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Reaching across Land and Ocean: Daughters of Bilitis, Minorities Research Group, and Resistance Formation in the International Lesbian Network

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REACHING ACROSS LAND AND OCEAN: DAUGHTERS OF BILITIS, MINORITIES
RESEARCH GROUP, AND RESISTANCE FORMATION IN THE INTERNATIONAL
LESBIAN NETWORK

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Department of History
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Abstract

From 1964 to 1972, the lesbian rights organizations, Daughters of Bilitis and Minorities Research Group, shaped the resistance of lesbians in North America and Europe by providing a platform to challenge harmful narratives about lesbianism in their magazines, *The Ladder* and *Arena Three*. This thesis is the first to examine the close relationship of the Daughters of Bilitis and Minorities Research Group, and how their collaboration helped lesbians in the international lesbian network move from the shadows onto the international stage years before Stonewall. More often than not, DOB and MRG leaders could not agree on what was “best” for lesbians, and these disagreements strengthened their resistance by forcing them to consider other tactics in elevating the lesbian reputation. Correspondence, both private and published, advocated for this greater visibility and helped many lesbians feel less isolated during an era when lesbianism was broadly condemned. Both organizations laid the groundwork for later lesbian rights groups by providing examples of how to use international networks to broaden the reach of local activism.

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Introduction

In 1970, Venice Oswald writing as “Val Vanderwood” argued in *The Ladder* that the “American Lesbians who visit England these days have a pleasant surprise in store because the contemporary Lesbian scene is healthily upbeat, expanding, and communicative! The past decade, in fact, has been as progressive a change as a walk from darkness into dawn.” Although Oswald celebrated these achievements in England, she understood that “to achieve maximum success, however, we must somehow gain more volunteer leadership and support, in both England and America, for our Lesbian organizations and publications.” Oswald saw that the potential of this network of lesbians went far beyond helping women around the globe feel better about themselves. She called for an “international Lesbian organization, or at least an international subsection as part of our existing organizations” because “as mankind keeps rediscovering, we humans need to try for the Impossible, need to reach out—for the moon, certainly, but also for human understanding. [We] are urgently needed for the ‘Well of Loneliness’ revolution in England, in America, and the world over.”¹

By likening lesbian leadership to the moon landing, Oswald insisted that achievements in the fight for equality for lesbians affected mainstream society on a large scale. The ties between American and British lesbians not only increased same-sex representation, but also broadened lesbian agency across national borders. While the popular narrative claims that Stonewall was the moment in which gays and lesbians “came out of the closet,” my thesis argues that the international lesbian network helped lesbians move from the shadows onto the international stage years before that night in New York City in 1969. Correspondence, both private and published, advocated for this greater visibility in the media and everyday life, and the

¹ Val Vanderwood, “Lesbian Life in England,” *The Ladder*, April-May 1970, 6-9.

resistance of American and British lesbians was strengthened by the close relationship between the first national American and British lesbian organizations: Daughters of Bilitis and Minorities Research Group.

In 1955, a group of lesbians established the Daughters of Bilitis to build up the San Francisco lesbian community, but with the arrival of their magazine *The Ladder* a year later, their aims soon expanded to include lesbians across North America and Europe. Minorities Research Group formed eight years later to elevate the lesbian reputation in Britain. They challenged persistent narratives of lesbianism in medicine and the media, and they created the magazine *Arena Three* to advertise the group, its social activities, and to bring lesbian content to women who felt isolated because of their sexuality. With help from the DOB, the magazine successfully reached women across Europe, North America, and elsewhere. Martin Meeker in *Contacts Desired: Gay and Lesbian Communications and Community, 1940s-1970s* argues that lesbians participated in “communication networks” when consuming lesbian media such as *The Ladder* and *Arena Three*, and these networks acted as “engines of social change and cultural invention” and stimulated “the very processes by which individuals encounter ideas about identity and then articulate their own.”²

Both organizations offered lesbians in the international network a platform to shape their lesbian identity, which involved challenging harmful narratives about lesbianism and holding debates about how to best improve lesbian representation in media. More often than not, leaders of *The Ladder* and *Arena Three* could not agree on what was “best” for lesbians, and these disagreements strengthened their resistance by forcing them to consider the diverse experiences of lesbians. My thesis defines resistance as a lesbian creating a safe space to explore her sexual

² Martin Meeker, *Contacts Desire: Gay and Lesbian Communications and Community, 1940s-1970s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 11-15.

identity, and for many in the international network, this safe space meant consuming *The Ladder* and *Arena Three* in the privacy of their own homes. Some lesbians read letters from other countries and believed life for their sisters was better in another land. Women on the European continent read *The Ladder* and *Arena Three* and wondered just how Americans and Britons were able to establish lesbian rights organizations. Many shared the same ambitions in literature and politics, and turned to others in the network to make these ambitions reality. This international interaction was also vital to lesbians' everyday resistance by providing discussions and examples of happy lesbians who prospered in societies that marked them as mentally-ill and immoral.

Chapter One of my thesis focuses on the origins of the Daughters of Bilitis and their establishment of the first widely-circulated American lesbian magazine, *The Ladder*. The DOB faced much turmoil over the direction of *The Ladder*, and the chapter follows the editorial power struggles and finally the magazine's end in the early 1970s. Chapter Two examines the formation of Minorities Research Group and the establishment of their own magazine, *Arena Three*. The chapter also explores how class tensions of the lesbian bar scene in London shaped much of MRG's early life and drove much of *Arena Three*'s content. Chapter Three studies the links between DOB and MRG; while both organizations exchanged correspondence with many women throughout Europe and North America, the DOB and MRG seemed to have a closer relationship since they frequently provided a platform to advertise and support one another's magazines. Furthermore, many of their discussions involved literature, and the chapter explores how disagreements about literary representations of lesbians shaped members' understandings of themselves and their place in a homophobic society.

Historiography

My thesis intends to add to the discussion of homophile internationalism and give an international perspective to three bodies of literature: American lesbian history, British lesbian history, and postwar gender history. Much of the scholarship on Daughters of Bilitis and Minorities Research Group focus on the groups in isolation. While this method promotes the oral histories of community leaders, it also limits the scope in which scholars analyze lesbian resistance. By examining the DOB and MRG in relation to each other, this thesis supports a new way of approaching homophile organizations, for their impact did not stop at city, state, or country borders. Additionally, there was much communication between American and British lesbians in the international network during the 1960s. Many British lesbians subscribed to American homophile magazines and exchanged correspondence with members in American homophile organizations, and many American lesbians read about their British sisters in letters to the editor in *The Ladder* and in the pages of *Arena Three*.

In the past decade or so, scholars have focused more on internationalism in gay and lesbian history. As historian Marc Stein argues, most historical studies “tended to treat the United States in isolation, ignoring international influences, impacts, intersections, and interdependencies.”³ Furthermore, many scholars have focused solely on the U.S. and Western Europe, which inadvertently suggested that homophile activity did not exist elsewhere in the world. Stein sought to broaden this picture by organizing an online archive/exhibit on Outhistory.org about homophile internationalism. This resource makes available magazine items from all across the world including Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, which highlights the reach of homophile publications. Gays and lesbians did not establish communication networks only in

³ Marc Stein, “Introduction: U.S. Homophile Internationalism,” *Journal of Homosexuality* (January 20, 2017), 2. Downloaded manuscript.

North America and Europe, and more scholarship needs to be done to examine the work of these overlooked publications.

Historian David S. Churchill argues that 1950s homophile organizations took part in “liberal internationalism” from which identity politics later emerged. He points out many similarities between gay and lesbian communities in Europe and North America such as the increase of police crackdowns on gay and lesbian nightlife following the end of World War II. He also argues that many homophile magazines were aware of this internationalism and aimed to familiarize readers about other gay and lesbian communities across the Atlantic.⁴ Leila J. Rupp explores how the International Committee for Sexual Equality acted as a “middle position, linking activism around same-sex sexuality” to the birth of a “transnational gay and lesbian movement in the 1970s.”⁵ In his 2014 dissertation, David Minto reframes transnational homophile activism by linking it to a broader cultural exchange between the United States and Britain. Focusing primarily on the Kinsey study and the Wolfenden Committee Report, Minto is the most interested in the transmission of ideas between male homophile leaders.⁶

Martin Meeker adds to the discussion of homophile internationalism by emphasizing communication in the gay and lesbian network. He argues that a revolution occurred in gay and lesbian communication between the 1940s and the early 1970s. He describes this revolution in three stages, with the first stage focusing mostly on the emergence of homophile organizations such as The Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis in the 1950s. The second stage consists of gays and lesbians slowly breaking through to the mainstream due to publicity from writers

⁴ David S. Churchill, “Transnationalism and Homophile Political Culture in the Postwar Decades,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 15, no. 1 (December 5, 2008): 31-65.

⁵ Leila J. Rupp, “The Persistence of Transnational Organizing: The Case of the Homophile Movement,” *The American Historical Review* 116, no. 4 (2011), 1014-5.

⁶ David Minto, “Special Relationships: Transnational Homophile Activism and Anglo-American Sexual Politics,” (dissertation, Yale University, 2014).

like Jess Stearn during the 1960s. The third stage examines communication in the era of gay liberation and the second wave feminist movement. Much of my argument about the DOB/MRG draws from Meeker's exploration of the gay and lesbian international network and the language he employs to describe their achievements.

While lesbian history plays a significant role in Meeker's work, other authors also played a more important role in American lesbian historiography. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Lillian Faderman, Martha Vicinus, Rachel Hope Cleves trace American lesbianism through the centuries and pinpoint the emergence of the modern identity in the late nineteenth century.⁷ John D'Emilio, Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy, Madeleine Davis, Nan Alamilla Boyd, and Marcia M. Gallo explore lesbians in postwar America (1945-1979).⁸ Gallo examines the DOB's network of chapters and the organization's legacy in her 2006 book, *Different Daughters: A History of the Daughters of Bilitis and the Rise of the Lesbian Rights Movement*, in addition to her articles and book chapters.⁹ Kennedy and Davis challenge the notion that many lesbians were not political before the 1960s by arguing that lesbians who frequented bars in Buffalo, New York, were "prepolitical."¹⁰ Nan Alamilla Boyd also questions whether Stonewall was a watershed moment for lesbian visibility by showcasing the stories of lesbians in San Francisco during the first half of the twentieth century.¹¹

⁷ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," *Signs* 1, no. 1 (1975): 1-29; Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Martha Vicinus, *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778-1928* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2004); Rachel Hope Cleves, *Charity and Sylvia: A Same-Sex Marriage in Early America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁸ John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1983).

⁹ Marcia M. Gallo, *Different Daughters: A History of the Daughters of Bilitis and the Rise of the Lesbian Rights Movement* (Emeryville: Seal Press, 2006); Marcia M. Gallo, "Celebrating the Years of *The Ladder*," *Off Our Backs* 35, no. 5/6 (June 5, 2005): 34-36; Marcia M. Gallo, "'I'm Glad as Heck That You Exist': Feminist Lesbian Organizing in the 1950s" in *Breaking the Wave: Women, Their Organizations, and Feminism, 1945-1985*, Kathleen A. Laughlin and Jacqueline Castledine, eds. Routledge 2010: 47-62.

¹⁰ Madeline D. Davis and Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

¹¹ Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide Open Town* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

Jeffrey Weeks, Lesley A. Hall, Deborah Cohler, and Rebecca Jennings trace lesbianism in Britain. Weeks and Hall explore how medical “experts” shaped the British lesbian identity in the early twentieth century.¹² Weeks also examines how Radclyffe Hall, author of *The Well of Loneliness*, revolutionized public expression of lesbianism and shaped many Britons’ understanding of lesbians for decades.¹³ Cohler examines public discourse of lesbianism during the first half of the twentieth century and links the lesbian identity to “imperialist nationalism.” She correctly acknowledges that citizenship under the British Empire shaped many British lesbians’ identities.¹⁴ Jennings has done the most in regards to scholarship on MRG and A3. Her work tracks lesbianism in Britain since the sixteen century and examines the social life and politics of postwar lesbians. While her main concern is to reveal the overlooked history of British lesbians, her discussion does briefly link MRG to DOB by acknowledging interesting evidence of their connection.¹⁵

Concerning postwar gender history, while some narratives published in the 1980s and 1990s positioned middle-class women within suburban domesticity almost exclusively, other scholars challenged the universality of strict gender roles during the era.¹⁶ Historian Joanne Meyerowitz points out that domesticity was just one of many “feminine” values that were popularized during the early Cold War: “Domestic ideals coexisted in ongoing tension with an

¹² Lesley A. Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change in Britain since 1880* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

¹³ Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present* (London: Quartet Books, 1979). Also see *Sex, Politics, and Society: the Regulation of Sexuality since 1800* (London: Longman House, 1981).

¹⁴ Deborah Cohler, *Citizen, Invert, Queer: Lesbianism and War in Early Twentieth-Century Britain* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

¹⁵ Rebecca Jennings, *Tomboys and Bachelor Girls: A Lesbian History of Post-War Britain 1945-71* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013). Also see *A Lesbian History of Britain: Love and Sex between Women since 1500* (Westport: Praeger, 2007).

¹⁶ The most regarded text that propagates strict Cold War gender roles and domesticity is Elaine Tyler May’s *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (1988). Also see Nancy Woloch’s *Women in War and in Peace, 1941-1960* (1988).

ethos of individual achievement that celebrated nondomestic activity, individual striving, public service, and public access.”¹⁷ Historian Stephanie Coontz, on the other hand, concedes that narratives that solely focus on the middle-class female overlook important aspects about women of color and working-class white women, but she also argues that there is still worth in narratives that explore the well-off during the 1950s: “Despite its silence about the specific needs of working-class and minority women, and despite its occasional lapses into elitism, *The Feminine Mystique*’s assault on stereotypes about femininity and its defense of women’s right to work were certainly in the interests of working women, black and white.”¹⁸

Alice Echols and Anne Enke extend this focus on gender to the feminist movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. Echols examines the political and cultural tensions of radical feminism, highlighting how liberal feminists laid the groundwork for radicalism and how cultural feminists tried to address the problems of radicalism. She also questions the notion that the 1950s was a “dark ages” for feminism since there were many women fighting for gender equality during the decade.¹⁹ Enke seeks to diversify scholars’ understanding of feminism and the spaces that feminist activism occurred. She argues that feminism was more widespread than the historiography depicts, and she believes that scholars need to include spaces such as bars and sports teams as places of feminism. Enke’s approach to spatial activism acts as a bridge between feminism and gay and lesbian scholarship since many historians of gay and lesbian history have

¹⁷ Joanne Meyerowitz, "Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958," *The Journal of American History* 79, no. 4 (1993), 1458.

¹⁸ Stephanie Coontz, *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s* (Philadelphia: Basic Books, 2011), 137-138. Written by Betty Friedan in 1963, *The Feminine Mystique* critiqued the notion that domesticity fulfilled women in 1950s America. Friedan also explored how media and companies aimed to attract women to domesticity through advertising and products. Many gender historians argued that Friedan’s narrative does not apply to all women during this era, but others, such as Coontz, point out where Friedan’s work succeeds.

¹⁹ Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

acknowledged that activism and resistance occur in environments not conventionally seen as political.²⁰

During the 1960s, the Daughters of Bilitis and Minorities Research Group had a major impact on lesbian rights in the United States and Europe, but this would not have occurred if in 1955 a handful of women had not jeopardized their professional and familial lives to form a lesbian group in San Francisco.

²⁰Anne Enke, *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

Chapter One: “Our Need Was Greater than Our Shame”²¹
Daughters of Bilitis and *The Ladder*

The Gay Bay: World War Two and Lesbian Bars in San Francisco

They arrived by the thousands from all across the country. They walked the piers, the brush of ocean breeze in their hair. Along the winding, elevated streets, the cityscape leered down at them, its looming art deco buildings casting vast shadows. For GIs used to the flat plains of the Midwest or rural towns dotting the American South, San Francisco must have felt like a concrete beehive, its hidden alleyways and smoky bars buzzing with tantalizing anonymity.

For many gay and lesbian military personnel, San Francisco represented a turning point for their self-respect and public visibility. The gay bars that flourished among the wave of newcomers offered the chance to sip a drink with likeminded people or slow-dance with someone of the same gender. Few had ever left their hometowns, and with miles and miles between them and their families, they expressed homosexual desires in public for the first time. Inside these bars, they hoped to catch someone’s eye or spot the glint of a smile from across the room.

World War II was not just a turning point in queer history; it was also a turning point for San Francisco. “World War II transformed San Francisco, at least for the duration, in that it sparked new industries, created jobs, stimulated migrations, and transformed neighborhoods, but the increased military presence had a profound impact on city policy and policing,” writes historian Nan Alamilla Boyd.²² San Francisco was perfect for mid-century gays and lesbians seeking a community because it has a “queerness is sewn into the city’s social fabric. From its earliest days, sex and lawlessness have been fundamental to San Francisco’s character. The Gold

²¹ Joan Nestle, *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader* (New York: Alyson Publications, 1992) 2.

²² Boyd, 94.

Rush of 1849, for instance, transformed San Francisco into a vibrant and opulent city with a reputation for licentious entertainment and vigilante government.”²³ Although the city might have offered better opportunities for gays and lesbians, there was push back from city officials. Many times the police tried to crack down on the gay and lesbian bars and politicians declared the need to end these public displays of homosexuality. The Daughters of Bilitis emerged in this contradictory atmosphere of Cold War paranoia and a flourishing gay and lesbian subculture.

“The New Gay Divorcee”²⁴: The Relationship of Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon

Though her large glasses often caught the lights, shielding her eyes from view, Phyllis Lyon remained open and readable: her smile took up about three quarters of her face and her hoarse laughs were contagious. Del Martin was more reserved; she watched from beneath her heavy brow and gave off an air of amused impatience. They were comfortable with one another in ways that spoke to their decades together: their eyes searched each other out in mid-sentences; their fingers brushed when sharing a Black & Mild; their narratives intertwined so often that the wording would be the same no matter who was speaking. The first question was “How did you meet?” because everyone in the room understood that “Who were you before this relationship?” was not as important.

Lyon was working at a trade magazine in Seattle when she met Martin in 1954. She was around thirty then and had spent the better part of a decade putting her journalism degree from Berkeley to use as a newspaper reporter. Martin created a splash when she was hired at the magazine: “We heard that the boss had hired a divorced woman from San Francisco . . . So all of

²³ Boyd, 1-2.

²⁴ Manuela Soares [interviewer]; Del Martin & Phyllis Lyon [interviewee], “Del Martin & Phyllis Lyon, Tape 1 of 4, May 9, 1987,” Herstories: Audio/Visual Collections of the LHA, accessed January 5, 2017, 2:00-2:30 mins.

us girls were really excited about this new person—this new gay divorcee.”²⁵ Lyon held a welcoming party for Martin and remembers that Martin “sat at the kitchenette with all the men, smoking cigars and trying to learn how to tie a tie.”²⁶ Although Lyon knew “lesbians from nothing,” she was intrigued when Martin showed up to work carrying a briefcase.²⁷ They became fast friends and had the Bay Area in common: Martin grew up in San Francisco and Lyon—being the daughter of a traveling salesman—had jumped around Northern California during her childhood.²⁸

Martin, born Dorothy Erma Corn, was thirty-three at the time. Her road to Seattle had been rockier: At nineteen, she’d married a fellow classmate at San Francisco State University, James Martin, and had a girl named Kendra. The marriage was unsuccessful because Martin couldn’t ignore her desire for other women. The couple divorced and Martin became a single mother. To support her family of two, she worked numerous jobs and gained some experience as a reporter, which helped her later on when writing for *The Ladder*. Lyon remembered when she found out that Martin was a lesbian: “She came out to me and another woman when we worked at the same place . . . I was so excited! I called everyone I knew!”²⁹

Despite Lyon’s excitement, they remained just friends for years before Martin made a “half move.” A year later they lived in San Francisco together in an apartment on Castro Street.³⁰ Martin and Lyon never told their parents about their relationship, and Martin didn’t see any reason to do so: “Our families must’ve had some idea . . . they chose not to speak about it. I doubt very much if they could’ve ever understood so we didn’t see any point in it.”³¹ Lyon

²⁵ Martin and Lyon interview, 1:00-2:00 mins.

²⁶ Martin and Lyon interview, 1:00-2:30 mins.

²⁷ Gallo, xliii.

²⁸ Gallo, xli-xlii.

²⁹ Martin and Lyon interview, 3:00-3:40 mins.

³⁰ Gallo, xliii.

³¹ Martin and Lyon interview, 7:45-8:15 mins.

remembered that her mother said outright that she did not like lesbians: “My mother said she could think of nothing more awful . . . it made her want to throw up.”³²

When they first arrived in San Francisco, Martin and Lyon were quite lonely for other lesbians. They asked around, but, as Martin recalled, it took a few months for them to make significant progress: “We really didn’t know any other lesbians and we had met a couple of men who lived around the corner from us . . . and they introduced us to a couple of lesbians and several months later one of them called and asked if we wanted to join a lesbian club. I said ‘YES!’”³³

Not Part of the Floor Show: The Founding of DOB

The idea for a lesbian social group came from a friend of Martin and Lyon’s who wanted a safe place to dance.³⁴ Martin remembered that “Daughters of Bilitis was really founded as a very secret, secret social club and a means of getting together without going to the bars which were frequently raided and to meet in each other’s homes and to have socials and to dance.”³⁵ Lyon also wanted to meet with lesbians without the prying eyes of strangers: “The bars for women that were here in those days were also tourist bars and so they would let us in without a cover charge because we were really part of the floor show.”³⁶ The founders decided on Daughters of Bilitis for the name of their new group because, as Martin explained, it was vague enough that it protected members’ privacy: “You could be fairly anonymous when asked about it. You could say it was an organization interested in Greek poetry or whatever.”³⁷ Moreover,

³² Martin and Lyon interview, 8:15-8:30 mins.

³³ Martin and Lyon interview, 9:00-10:00 mins.

³⁴ Martin and Lyon interview, 11:00-11:40 mins.

³⁵ Martin and Lyon interview, 10:15-10:45 mins.

³⁶ Martin and Lyon interview, 10:45-10:56 mins.

³⁷ Martin and Lyon interview, 12:30-12:42 mins.

founders hoped ‘Daughters of Bilitis’ would remind people of the ‘Daughters of the American Revolution’ and they would assume the group was about patriotism. But the name went beyond privacy: it derived from a nineteenth century book of lesbian poetry *the Songs of Bilitis* by Pierre Louys.³⁸

Martin wrote in the October 1957 issue of *The Ladder* that DOB came into existence when “eight women gathered together with a vague idea that something should be done about the problems of Lesbians, both within their own group and with the public.” Martin went on to explain that the establishment of DOB was due to the founders’ wish for a “social outlet” and their quest for “some answers to a few of the problems which Lesbians face.”³⁹ She explained that “we never took a bed check of any of our members. We didn’t ask them even, ‘Are you a lesbian?’ to join our organization. Anybody who was interested in what we were doing was welcome.”⁴⁰

Although Martin insisted that anybody interested in lesbian rights was welcome, this description is not the whole story. Martin wanted future generations to remember DOB as a sanctuary for all lesbians, but her contemporary opinions show someone who was very concerned about lesbians being respectable in the eyes of heterosexuals. She disliked butch representations and “trash” lesbian pulps because she wanted to fight Cold War narratives that villainized homosexuality, but some of her actions alienated women who did not fit her “ladylike” image of the DOB. Speaking to the journalist Jess Stearn, a heterosexual male in the early 1960s, Martin emphasized DOB’s project of “saving” lost lesbians from masculine representation. Stearn recalled a story Martin told him about a successful example:

³⁸ Passet, 26.

³⁹ Del Martin, “Growing Pains Don’t Hurt!,” *The Ladder*, October 1957, 4.

⁴⁰ Martin and Lyon interview, 1:53:47-1:54:00 mins.

One of the most striking converts to normalcy was a young butch from out of state who had journeyed to San Francisco to learn more about the D.O.B. “When she first came to town and met us,” Del recalled, “she was in full drag—men’s clothes entirely. About a year and a half later, Phyllis and I made a date with her to go to the theater. She was to meet us for dinner first. Well, she arrived in a dress, hat, gloves, and the works.” The transformation was more than superficial. “She was indeed proud of herself, but, above all, she was comfortable with herself. She had learned to accept herself as a woman, though gay.”⁴¹

Martin implied that women who dress masculine could never be fully happy because to be truly “at peace” with herself and her sexuality, she had to welcome and accept her femininity. She extended this narrative when describing her early life to Stearn:

It was in the bars, of course, that [Martin] found the swaggering, rough-talking butch whose prototype the D.O.B. is now trying to change. ‘There was not only a complete depreciation of femininity in those situations,’ she said, ‘which made the gay bars demeaning as a way of life, but they were making conformists out of girls who thought they were being nonconformists.’⁴²

Although Martin could have been performing for Stearn, her descriptions of saving the butch female from the “demeaning” bars were telling. Many sources—including primary like Barbara Grier’s LHA oral history and secondary like *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*—have shown that many lesbians believed butch represented the working-class and femme represented the middle or upper class.

To understand why Martin was determined to gain heterosexual allies in her fight for lesbian rights, scholars must remember the intense climate of homophobia during the era and the fear gays and lesbians lived with each day. Privacy was very important to DOB members because the label of lesbian could damage a woman’s life in the 1950s. Martin described the atmosphere of fear:

It’s hard in terms of today to really understand what was going on in the 50s. There’d been the McCarthy hearings. There was the State Department purge of homosexuals. There was so much going on in the armed services to oust lesbians and gays . . . There

⁴¹ Stearn, 275.

⁴² Stearn, 276-277.

was fear of losing your job. And some people did and committed suicide. You know, they lost their careers. There was fear of telling your parents; there were many young people who I remembered who'd been thrown out of their families The DOB really became a self-help group. We never dreamed we would get into peer counseling People will ask us today what we were thinking politically and we were just trying to build up the self-esteem of lesbians.⁴³

At times Martin and Lyon struggled while navigating the fear of potential recruits. There were discussions about which club activities were too overt or put members at risk. Lyon remembered a funny moment at one of the first meetings that concerned navigating the risk:

Del and I got stuck in the living with these three strangers who were dressed pretty butch. I mean they had on men's jackets and men's shoes and they looked pretty obvious. So they said to us, 'Well, we wouldn't want to be carrying a card that said we were members—people might think we were lesbians!' And I'm going, 'Huh? [Because it was like] they had a neon sign above them that said 'LESBIAN.'

Despite the light tone, Lyon understood that the stakes were high for many lesbians who were afraid that their sexuality could hinder their personal and professional ties. Many people were “terrified” to be on a mailing list that would fall into the wrong hands.⁴⁴

To combat this fear, Martin and Lyon realized that DOB needed to address some of the internalized homophobia in the lesbian community. As Martin recalled, they took up “self-acceptance” as the main goal of the group: “Phyllis and I finally came to the realization that our biggest problem was self-acceptance. Because once you got yourself together than you can begin to cope with society and so on. So that's what we preached in those days To see that there was an advantage of a group and [that] we can help each other.”⁴⁵ The betterment of lesbians was important to Martin and Lyon. One of the main events for the DOB involved inviting “professionals” to speak to members about their rights. Martin explained why this was necessary for the time period, even though people have questioned the practice of including oppressors in

⁴³ Martin and Lyon interview, 38:48-41:40 mins.

⁴⁴ Martin and Lyon interview, 20:50-21:55 mins.

⁴⁵ Martin and Lyon interview, 44:09-44:50 mins.

DOB affairs: “We are criticized today for having so many quote on quote professionals to come and speak but at that point we needed validation by a lot of people and we needed lawyers to come and tell us what our rights were. None of us knew.”⁴⁶

By creating ties with professionals outside the lesbian community and providing lesbians information to protect themselves, DOB were establishing “activist networks for women who loved women in key American cities,” writes historian Marcia M. Gallo. They affected the lives of members in both the private and public sphere, since in “the private sphere, they effectively utilized personal discussions in members’ homes to break through the isolation so identified with lesbianism at that time. In the public sphere, the gendered educational and advocacy programs organized by their chapters in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York opened up traditional civic spaces and public accommodations to women.”⁴⁷

Members also encountered many conflicts in these networks, because what worked for the chapter in San Francisco did not necessarily work for chapters elsewhere. According to Martin, “everybody was welcome” in the group and in fact: “We were so starved for finding others that when we started to expand some, I remember Phyllis and I picking them up and getting them to meetings, any member was the least bit disgruntled, you went out there to smooth it out, because we couldn’t dare lose a member.”⁴⁸ At one point the group implemented a dress code because some members did not think butch and femme gender representation was respectable. Martin remembered that the dress code came about because there was “the fear that if you were so obvious than you’re guilty by association . . . [the dress code] came from the members and how they felt and what was going on with them.” Furthermore, Lyon explained

⁴⁶ Martin and Lyon interview, 19:56-20:20 mins.

⁴⁷ Gallo, “‘I’m Glad as Heck That You Exist:’ Feminist Lesbian Organizing in the 1950s,” 48.

⁴⁸ Martin and Lyon interview, 14:07-14:30 mins.

that “Nobody was thrown out for having their buttons on the wrong side or their zippers on the wrong side or wearing boys’ jeans.”⁴⁹ These conflicts were not unique to the Daughters and they reflect many tensions that occurred in lesbian communities throughout the world.

Inside the Brown Wrapper: The Birth of *The Ladder*

Martin and Lyon soon realized that they needed another avenue to publicize DOB and to inform Bay Area lesbians about community events. *The Ladder* was not meticulously planned out and the magazine received its name just because the artist drew a ladder for its first cover.⁵⁰ It was around the time that DOB began publishing *The Ladder* that the first four who wanted to start the group dropped out because they wanted to keep it “strictly secret social.”⁵¹ According to Lyon, the group was not initially thinking about producing a magazine: “We were thinking of doing a newsletter but we decided to fold it over instead of how newsletters usually are.”⁵² When the first issue arrived, Lyon and Martin “mailed it everybody [they] knew.”⁵³ Still seeking out professionals, Martin remembers when they took a risk in reaching out to female lawyers: “We decided to send it to every woman attorney listed in the phone book . . . We got a lot of protest. ‘Take me off your mailing list or I will sue you!’”⁵⁴

The Ladder was not an immediate hit; it took years for the magazine to build up a large following because many lesbians were afraid to be caught with it in their possession. Lyon recalled the persisting secrecy that surrounded the magazine: “People were terrified that their name would be on a mailing list that someone would find . . . We had some straight friends . . .

⁴⁹ Martin and Lyon interview, 45:49-46:48 mins.

⁵⁰ Martin and Lyon interview, 52:20-52:30 mins.

⁵¹ Martin and Lyon interview, 16:00-16:20 mins.

⁵² Martin and Lyon interview, 52:44-53:00 mins.

⁵³ Martin and Lyon interview, 54:20-54:28 mins.

⁵⁴ Martin and Lyon interview, 54:50-55:50 mins.

that wouldn't subscribe to *The Ladder* even though it came in a plain brown wrapper because they were afraid their neighbors would find out. And that was in the late 1960s."⁵⁵ The DOB had to be careful in its distribution of the magazine. Lyon believed that "nobody who wasn't a lesbian saw *The Ladder*" because it was not "a big seller on the newsstands." Martin explained that "lesbians would not go to the newsstands and buy it. Occasionally they would get it from gay men who went and bought it for them. It was very difficult. In those times we didn't have feminist bookstores. Newsstands were the only place."⁵⁶

While producing the first variations of the magazine, Martin and Lyon were committed to informing their readers of events happening in their community. During the mid-fifties, there was no central resource for gays and lesbians to find out about what others in the community were doing to resist heteronormativity. As editor of *The Ladder*, Lyon didn't know if she had a focus, but she remembers that she and Martin developed a "theory of reporting information" because "that was the only way anyone would find out about anything. There was no other way, not just for lesbians but for gay men, to find out what was going on in this tiny movement without reading it in *The Ladder*."⁵⁷ Martin pinpointed their mutual experience in reporting as a driving force in their work with the magazine; when attending conventions, they "told what people said and what were the issues," which is something Martin believed was unique to the time period: [In] "today's reports in the lesbian press. . . all you know that the convention happened, not what went on there."⁵⁸

Little Magazines

⁵⁵ Martin and Lyon interview, 20:00-22:00 mins.

⁵⁶ Martin and Lyon interview, 56:40-57:30 mins.

⁵⁷ Martin and Lyon interview, 1:57:27-1:58:17 mins.

⁵⁸ Martin and Lyon interview, 1:58:24-1:59:20 mins.

With a rise in popularity during the nineteenth century, little magazines set the groundwork for mid-twentieth century homophile publications like *The Ladder* by shaping what it meant to be a literary intellectual in the United States and Europe. They published many great writers such as T. S. Eliot and Gertrude Stein, and some early examples of these magazines included Ralph Waldo Emerson's *The Dial* and Arthur Symons' *The Savoy*. Inspiring authors also looked to these magazines for initial exposure, and many lesbian authors saw *The Ladder* and *Arena Three* as offering a similar opportunity. Most importantly, advertisements did not drive the content of little magazines, which was the same for homophile magazines. Many producers of homophile publications were aware of these little magazines and their attempts to elevate the homophile discourse mimicked similar attempts by little magazines to bring intellectually vigorous content to their readers.

Little magazines found their stride in the 1920s and 1930s and often published experimental works from authors. The amount of political content in these magazines varied through the decades, but many readers used the magazines' literary work to make sense of their lives after World War I and during the Great Depression. Many little magazines were short-lived, but they laid the groundwork for the literary magazines such as *Ploughshares* and *Glimmer Train* that flourished during the late twentieth century.⁵⁹ *The Ladder* and *Arena Three* paved the way for lesbian literature in a similar fashion; Barbara Grier, an editor of *The Ladder* and contributor to *Arena Three*, founded Naiad Press, which later became part of Bella Books publishing company.

⁵⁹ Simon G. Bernabas, "American Little Magazines of the 1920s and 1930s – An Introduction," *Language in India*, January 2012, Vol. 12, Issue 1, 589-607.

Taking Over the World through Literature: Barbara Grier and *The Ladder*

Barbara Grier was one of *The Ladder*'s first obsessive fans. She learned about *The Ladder* through word of mouth and sent for copies from Kansas City. After consuming multiple issues of the magazine, she remembered quite clearly thinking that "this is what I want to do for the rest of my life."⁶⁰ Although she lived far away from cities commonly considered as gay hubs, Grier had appreciated her homosexuality from a very early age.

Grier knew the word homosexuality because she had come across it in one of her father's medical books. Her father was out of the picture by then, but he'd left much of his "library type things" behind. Grier "had an inkling" about her sexuality and went to the library to find out more. She thought it was perfectly accepted to ask the librarian about more books on homosexuality: "I do remember that I spoke to a librarian and asked for information, but I can't see her . . . I can't bring her face back, so I don't know what reaction she had. But my guess is she probably dropped dead and I just didn't notice the body."⁶¹

The realization that she was not heterosexual made Grier "high-keyed" and "excited." To her, the only logical next step was to run home to tell her mother about her discovery, since, as Grier explained, she had no reason to be afraid of her mother's reaction: "I got along fine with her and I had no reason not to trust her, so I told my mother that I thought I was homosexual." Her mother corrected her word choice and explained that she should call herself a lesbian because she was female; she also believed that Grier was "too young to make a decision like that" and joked that they should wait six months before announcing Grier's sexuality to the

⁶⁰ Manuela Soares, "LHA Daughters of Bilitis Video Project: Barbara Grier, Tape 1 of 4, November 27, 1987," Herstories: Audio/Visual Collections of the LHA, accessed January 14, 2017, 25:08-25:28 mins.

⁶¹ Barbara Grier interview, Tape 1, 8:50-9:28 mins.

newspapers.⁶² Grier believed her mother truly wasn't startled that she was a lesbian and she remembered her mother always being incredibly supportive.⁶³

Grier was drawn to literature early in life and began collecting lesbian novels in high school. She was also drawn to the female authors responsible for the books in her collection: "I always wanted to be a writer and I recognized early on, being a much better critic and editor than writer, that I was rotten at it. So I decided instead to attach myself to famous writers because I figured when all those famous writer were written up I'd get a footnote or two in history."⁶⁴ She had the habit of writing letters to any producers of lesbian literature that she admired, and the magazine was no different. She overflows with compliments in her first letter to the magazine in August 1957: "I Wave [sic] now receive and thoroughly read (and reread) five issues of THE LADDER, and I feel I must write and congratulate you on your magnificent work for us all. I enjoyed your attempt to list and annotate literature in your feature 'Lesbiana' most of all, as I know the years of frustration and work involved in collecting a library of gay literature."⁶⁵ Grier backed up her gushing with meaningful action: She soon volunteered to write reviews and to answer DOB correspondence from Kansas City. In addition, she wanted to be considered a "serious" writer of lesbian literature and saw *The Ladder* as a place to publish her fiction. Her first short story for the magazine, *Chance*, appeared in November 1957. She chose the penname "Gene Damon" because she associated "Gene" with her middle name and she liked "Damon" because it was close to the German word for devil. She recalled that she was literally "Gene, the Devil."⁶⁶

⁶² Barbara Grier interview, Tape 1, 9:30-10:22 mins.

⁶³ Barbara Grier interview, Tape 1, 11:00-11:12 mins.

⁶⁴ "Barbara Grier, Tape 5 of 7, November 27, 1987," Herstories: Audio/Visual Collections of the LHA, accessed January 14, 2017, 1:51:40-1:52:44 mins.

⁶⁵ G.D. (Gene Damon), "Reader Respond," *The Ladder*, August 1957, 25-26.

⁶⁶ Barbara Grier interview, Tape 1, 33:43-35:00 mins. She used many other pennames as well: Vern Niven, Lennox Strang, and others.

According to Grier, Martin and Lyon had incredible magmatism, particularly Martin because she used as a figurehead and a God-figure: “Del might have been the Jesus Christ of lesbians at the time and not just in person but by mail.”⁶⁷ This observation was not entirely a compliment; Grier resented the control Martin and Lyon had over the organization and her recounting of the DOB’s origins reflected this resentment:

I’ve heard [Martin and Lyon] say, both to me and other people, [how] they envisioned the DOB in the beginning was a place women could come on a transitional basis and go through DOB, coming in one door and out the other . . . but as a matter in fact, I truly do not believe that. I honestly believe that in the beginning [DOB] was built like a medieval kingdom with Del Martin as the king and Phyllis Lyon as the queen.

She especially resented the control they had over *The Ladder* since she believed they neglected the magazine: “The emphasis for them was always the organization. *The Ladder* was simply the tail of the dog; it was a tool that was used and often ignored.” She described how correspondence would “pile up in the office” and it was up to her to answer most of it when there weren’t enough volunteers. She blamed Martin and Lyon’s political ambitions for their neglect: “I know both of them . . . were political women who wanted to be part of the political machine in San Francisco . . . and I think in a sense the DOB was a small political kingdom.”⁶⁸

Immoral Books and Choral Groups: The Early Life of Barbara Gittings

Grier was not the only member to conflict with Lyon and Martin. Barbara Gittings, a member of the New York chapter, rattled many during her time as editor of *The Ladder* in the early 1960s. Although Gittings came from an affluent family, her childhood was not easy. As a teenager, she clashed frequently with her father because of her sexuality. One day he found her copy of *The Well of Loneliness* when rummaging through her room; his distress over this finding

⁶⁷ Barbara Grier interview, Tape 1, 25:08-25:58 mins.

⁶⁸ Barbara Grier interview, Tape 1, 27:18-28:55 mins.

prompted him to write Gittings a letter, which she found peculiar because they lived in the same house. He demanded that she “destroy this immoral book” but she “just hid it better” and told him it was destroyed.⁶⁹ She ran away from home when she was eighteen “partly from the pressure of having to come to terms with my homosexuality” but also because she could not come to terms with her homosexuality in “the setting of living in my parents’ home.” She remembered this as a difficult time in her life: “At that time—1950 or 1951—girls of eighteen simply did not run away from home, so I had a very scary time. I ran away to Philadelphia with the help of a lesbian friend I was . . . essentially alone in the city.”⁷⁰ When she was starting out in Philadelphia, she identified what was essential to her survival: she got a job so that she had money to feed herself, she found a place to live, and she joined a choral group for the “stability” because “there was always music to keep [her] going.”⁷¹

This tension between Gittings and her parents lasted for decades. After she had established herself in Philadelphia, her father wrote her condescending letter about forgiving her for living home:

My father did not cotton-well to the idea of homosexuality and my leaving home was another major bad thing that I did but he did finally forgive me for having left home. He wrote me a letter several months afterward What was his phrase? He relieved me of ‘the ownness of my disobedience’ for leaving home.⁷²

While Gittings never came out to her mother, she remembered that she felt like she had “very little to lose going public [concerning lesbian rights] compared to some of the other people in the moment.” She was amazed that her mother never got word of her media appearances because for

⁶⁹ Manuela Soares [interviewer]; Barbara Gittings & Kay Tobin [interviewees], “Barbara Gittings & Kay Tobin, Tape 2 of 3, February 20, 1988,” *Herstories: Audio/Visual Collections of the LHA*, accessed January 6, 2017, 43:07-44:00 mins.

⁷⁰ Gittings and Tobin interview, 41:21-42:40 mins.

⁷¹ Gittings and Tobin interview, 42:42-42:57 mins.

⁷² Gittings and Tobin interview, 44:00-44:14 mins.

years she used her real name for the masthead of *The Ladder* and she appeared on radio and television shows.⁷³

Running a Tight Ship: Barbara Gittings as Editor of *The Ladder*

In 1963, Gittings became editor of *The Ladder* and aimed to elevate the magazine beyond the salaciousness of lesbian pulp novels since many—readers and contributors alike—still associated the publication with pornography merely because it contained content about lesbians. Writing to Grier, Gittings characterized the group as “this loser named DOB” and she hoped that the magazine “gets into the places where the right people will see it, [which might mean] more right people will start coming to DOB.” She further states that “if readers are not completely deterred by the stodginess they’d see now—soon the balance of the membership would start to shift.”⁷⁴ Gittings felt that many changes needed to be implemented at *The Ladder*, which ruffled feathers throughout DOB. Distance escalated tensions since Gittings was in New York when her production staff was in San Francisco. This meant that she had little ability in preventing frequent production mistakes and she often blamed the staff for failing to forward important items to her and mailing issues late to readers. She was also a stickler for grammar and proofreading, which irritated many members, especially Grier.⁷⁵ While Gittings and Grier saw each other as allies and traded much correspondence, on many occasions Grier felt attacked by Gittings for criticizing the punctuation and grammar in her book reviews and short stories. On the other hand, Grier was quite demanding when it came to her involvement with the magazine and believed that her book reviews were entitled to page space in each issue.⁷⁶

⁷³ Gittings and Tobin interview, 44:27-44:48 mins.

⁷⁴ Letter from Gittings to Grier, quoted from Passet, 77.

⁷⁵ Passet, 40.

⁷⁶ Passet, 38-40.

Grier's desire for respectable and intellectual content in *The Ladder* drove much of these disagreements between her and other DOB members. She wanted the magazine to be for professionals and "thinking people," and she doubled-down on its quality of writing because it was "absolutely essential to the reputation and the intellectual level of the magazine."⁷⁷ Martin, Lyon, and other San Francisco DOB members challenged Gittings' modifications to the magazine and Gittings wrote to Grier that Martin was "still geared to thinking largely in terms of the poor little bar-fly who's going to learn to wear a skirt and climb the ladder and be forever grateful to Den Mother Del."⁷⁸ Gittings resented Martin's influence over DOB and she believed the lesbians who frequented bars would not read a more cultured magazine.

These resentments appeared in Gittings' letter to DOB President Cleo Bonner (known as Cleo Glenn) in January 1964:

Due to these and lesser flaws in the January LADDER—which by its content deserved to have been a first-rate issue—I am deeply concerned about February and succeeding issues. Yes, I do realize that January was produced under extreme time pressure. But it's not the first disappointment. I won't put my heart and soul into something that may turn out to be a surprise package of mediocrity. DOB invests a lot of time and money each month in THE LADDER and can't afford indefinitely a product of careless appearance. We can't surround good content with junk headlines!

Gittings' dealings with the production staff caused much inner-group turmoil. She followed this condescending lecture by promising that she posed no threat to the production staff:

I don't like to feel I'm stepping on anyone's toes and I know you can handle this tactfully. It's not my intention to rob devoted San Francisco members of a LADDER job they may enjoy! On the other hand, I can't stand by and watch the mag being robbed of potential quality.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Letter from Gittings to Martin, quoted from Passet, 39.

⁷⁸ Letter from Gittings to Grier, quoted from Passet, 45.

⁷⁹ Letter from Gittings to Cleo Bonner, January 22, 1964; Phyllis Lyon, Del Martin and the Daughters of Bilitis Box 12, Folder 6. Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Historical Society. Archives of Sexuality & Gender, tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/4DgdP6. Accessed 13 Jan. 2017.

It was not just her ambitions for the magazine that offended DOB members. There were many contributors who did not appreciate the way she spoke to them in letters. Moreover, she was impatient when contributors failed to correspond in a timely manner. D. Jean, a member of the Chicago Chapter of DOB, reprimanded Gittings for her rudeness and desire to “play God”:

I was very tempted to resign when you became editor but refrained at that time. I am aware that you work very hard for the Ladder and you have some excellent ideas. You also like to play God. This was quite evident from meeting you last summer and my opinion has not changed I am aware that to a person like you, someone like myself who has no sense of scheudles [sic] or time in regard to correspondence must seem terrible indeed. However if you are going to be a successs-ful [sic] editor you had better realize that not everyone thinks like you.⁸⁰

It is apparent from many letters, including the ones above, that Gittings’ style of leadership angered many DOB members. Her unforgiving nature made members feel like they could do nothing right and her stubbornness made many in the San Francisco chapter feel like they were losing control of the magazine. Eventually, Martin and Lyon had to step in and they fired Gittings from her position as editor.

Grier as Editor of *The Ladder*

When Grier became editor of *The Ladder* in August 1968, she believed her job was to save the magazine from the indifference of Martin and Lyon: “They didn’t want it. They kept it two or three issues and dropped it into Helen Sandoz’ lap During the time Sandoz had it, there was very little in it except fiction and poetry It was a very weak magazine during that period. So when I became editor I was determined to make it strong.”⁸¹ Grier’s biggest problem

⁸⁰ Letter from D. Jean to Gittings, March 9, 1964; Phyllis Lyon, Del Martin and the Daughters of Bilitis Box 12, Folder 6. Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Historical Society. Archives of Sexuality & Gender. Accessed 13 Jan. 2017.

⁸¹ Barbara Grier interview, Tape 1, 49:45-50:00 mins.

was navigating the politics of DOB because many disagreed with the direction the organization should take:

I discovered that the function of the editor was to make peace between the warring factions in the DOB. . . . It all had to do with power and control of a small body of women spread around the country. . . . Each of the groups wanted to argue over anything and everything. It involved conference telephone calls and we'd be on the phone with four or five people at once and we'd debate over miniscule amounts of Mickey Mouse endlessly, which I found daunting and also mildly unnecessary.⁸²

Grier distanced herself from these political disagreements by describing herself as someone whose sole focus was on the success of the magazine: "My attitude toward the political stuff was 'Oh, God, take it away! I don't want anything to do with this! What I want to do is turn this into the most important magazine in the world.'"⁸³ There were times, however, that Grier benefited from political disagreements, especially if they involved the magazine's literature content.

A Changing Scene: The End of DOB and *The Ladder*

Many DOB members believed that the women's movement was an adequate replacement for the group in the early 1970s. Gittings believed "the [DOB and its magazine] had served its time. Other magazines started coming along and most of them had been short-lived, even the better ones."⁸⁴ Furthermore, Gittings explained that she didn't "think [*The Ladder*] was meant to continue" because "it was time in the ferment of the 70s for new kinds of publications."⁸⁵ Martin recalled that "it was very easy for us to get involved in the Women's Movement because it was the thing."⁸⁶ Lyon further explained that "a lot of lesbians left the Gay Movement for the

⁸² Barbara Grier interview, Tape 1, 48:20-49:20 mins.

⁸³ Barbara Grier interview, Tape 1, 54:18-54:28 mins.

⁸⁴ Manuela Soares [interviewer]; Barbara Gittings & Kay Tobin [interviewees], "Barbara Gittings & Kay Tobin, Tape 2 of 3, February 20, 1988," *Herstories: Audio/Visual Collections of the LHA*, accessed January 6, 2017, 17:20-18:10 mins.

⁸⁵ Gittings and Tobin interview, 18:16-18:30 mins.

⁸⁶ Martin and Lyon interview, 1:37:48-1:37:57 mins.

Women's Movement. Whatever involvement they had with the DOB they just—whooped—to join the Women's Movement."⁸⁷

On the other hand, Grier described how DOB tried working with the women's movement, but they were too unorganized for the union to succeed:

We really worked very hard to make the political organization work but it became increasingly clear that with the burgeoning feminist movement that it wasn't going to work The feminist organizations were not only loosely structured, nobody was in charge of anything. You weren't even allowed to flush the john without five people coming to help you.⁸⁸

Grier argued that the structure of DOB was becoming the antithesis of the feminist movement and she describes *The Ladder's* end as "plateauing out and dying," implying that her leadership made *The Ladder* so successful that there was no point for its continued existence.⁸⁹

Despite ending publication at the beginning of the women's movement, *The Ladder* paved the way for much of the movement's publishing endeavors during the 1970s. "*The Ladder's* demise came about during the groundswell of lesbian and feminist publications in the early 1970s: one of the most significant and long-lasting actions taken by lesbians and feminists was the proliferation of writings and images expressing their new worldviews," writes Gallo. "Lesbians and feminists had learned the lesson that 'the power of the press' belonged to the person who owned one."⁹⁰ Although DOB members' relationship to the women's movement was rocky at times, their work on *The Ladder* showed many feminists how the distribution of intellectual thought could further an organization's goals.

Disputes over leadership and the changing political scene resulted in the end of DOB and *The Ladder*. The group's British sister, Minorities Research Group, followed a similar path, but

⁸⁷ Martin and Lyon interview, 1:37:57-1:38:10 mins.

⁸⁸ Barbara Grier interview, Tape 1, 58:37-59:06 mins.

⁸⁹ Barbara Grier interview, Tape 1, 1:01:10-1:01:13 mins.

⁹⁰ Gallo, *Different Daughters*, 183.

it lacked DOB's breadth of influence since core members left to form their own organization early on in MRG's life. Sometime before 1963, MRG founder Esme Langley became a subscriber to *The Ladder* and her correspondence with Gittings and Grier showed how much the magazine influenced her establishment of MRG and *Arena Three*.

Chapter Two: Headshrinkers and Terribly Brainy Women
Minorities Research Group and *Arena Three*

“Unique in a Heterosexual Desert”⁹¹: Lesbianism in Twentieth-Century England

In February 1967, Esme Langley described the peculiar existence of the mid-twentieth century lesbian. Although she was villainized by the newspapers and sexualized by the pulps, the lesbian remained invisible, overshadowed by her male equivalent:

The English woman homosexual has for long been in a queer, perhaps unique position. The male homosexual, as we all know, is pestered by the police, hauled into court and publicly shamed. The Lesbian is not—because ‘officially’ she ‘does not exist’. She lives out her life in a kind of No-Woman’s-Land. And it is just because she is not dragged through the courts, argued over by Wolfenden’s Committee, talked about in the press and on the radio, that she is bedeviled by difficulties that do not harass her male counterpart. . . . So if she wants urgently to know who she is, what she is, whether she is really unique in a heterosexual desert, she will probably battle on for years, decades even, through fog, mystery and confusion. She ‘doesn’t exist’.⁹²

While Langley’s focus is on England, American lesbians could relate to many of her points since it seemed that lesbians only had value to society when they were publically condemned. There was a long history of lesbian invisibility, for “even ‘science’, which in the early twentieth century strove to classify and label every social phenomenon, stopped short at female homosexuality Where efforts were made to ‘explain’ lesbianism, it was assimilated all too easily into a more (for males) comprehensive activity, prostitution.” Langley was right to pinpoint lack of police attention as a reason for being overlooked since the court system generally ignored lesbianism and therefore “no pillorying scandals” flamed people’s interest during the mid-twentieth century.⁹³

⁹¹ Esme Langley, “The Lesbians of England,” *Arena Three*, February 1967, 3.

⁹² Langley, “The Lesbians of England,” 3.

⁹³ Weeks, 88.

World War II disrupted sexual lives in Britain since the war effort complicated existing relationships and created new sexual opportunities.⁹⁴ With the increase of military personnel in the area, tensions arose when enlisted women became more frequent in public. “Women actually in uniform came in for a good deal of gendered sexual hostility, the ATS (Auxiliary Transport Service) in particular bearing a stigmatized identity, with parents and husbands refusing to let their daughters or wives become ‘some officer’s groundsheet’. Uniforms in general aroused ‘deep-rooted prejudice’, perhaps traceable to long-standing negative images of a ‘brutal and licentious soldiery’, exacerbated by the gender transgression of women stepping outside a ‘natural’ role,” writes scholar Lesley A. Hall.⁹⁵ These clothing transgressions did not always induce fear of lesbianism, which falls in line with the theme of invisibly: “Lesbianism, considered among other issues of social and moral welfare within the ATS, was deemed rare and dealt with discreetly by posting women involved to different locations.”⁹⁶

Britain saw a major shift in its criminalization of homosexuality with the publication of the Wolfenden Committee Report in 1957. The report was a “crucial moment in the evolution of liberal moral attitudes” for Britons because it “concluded that homosexuality in private could be decriminalized But the logic of their position was that penalties for public displays of sexuality should be strengthened.”⁹⁷ For centuries, London had been a metropolitan refuge for rich (mostly male) homosexuals since it was “an imagined space, exercising a profound influence on the ways that contemporaries thought about sexual different. In this sense, London was never isolated or distinct but instead occupied a nodal position in national and international

⁹⁴ Hall, 133.

⁹⁵ Hall, 143.

⁹⁶ Hall, 144.

⁹⁷ Weeks, 164-165.

networks of sociability and knowledge.”⁹⁸ Beginning in the early twentieth-century, London Lesbians had an increasing number of public spaces to enjoy a night out. Clubs such as the Cave of Harmony, the Orange Tree, and the Hambone catered to affluent British lesbians during the 1920s.⁹⁹ These public spaces for lesbians increased over the decades, and by the time of the Wolfenden Committee Report, many lesbian bars dotted the streets of London.

White women were not the only ones who participated in lesbian nightlife. “London was an imperial metropolis, and its queer cultures reflected the influence of immigration and racial difference upon metropolitan life,” writes historian Matt Houlbrook.¹⁰⁰ The women who frequented lesbian clubs “[came] to London from the provinces and from all over the world. The Commonwealth provide[d] a generous quota, principally of Australians and South Africans, who [were] looking for freedom from a basically pioneering culture where men [were] still men and women stay[ed] home and rock[ed] the cradle. . . There [were] Indians and Africans, girls from America and Italy, and there [was] a constant to and from between the clubs and Paris.”¹⁰¹

By the 1960s, the Gateways was the most popular lesbian club in London. It was not the only option for people looking for lesbian spaces, however, and its “only serious rival ha[d] been a club which . . . moved to new premises in Westbourne Park.” The other bar welcomed a “slightly different” crowd: “there are more tourists and more of the extreme transvestites, many of them from the women’s barracks. There are also one or two after-hours drinking and coffee clubs in this district, mostly patronized by prostitutes and their girlfriends, who live on the

⁹⁸ Matt Houlbrook, *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918—1957* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005), 8-9.

⁹⁹ Weeks, 87.

¹⁰⁰ Houlbrook, 9.

¹⁰¹ Maureen Duffy, “Lesbian London,” in *The New London Spy: a Discreet Guide to the City’s Pleasures*, ed. H. Davies (London: Anthony Bond, 1966), 235.

fringes of the criminal world and are therefore more likely to be involved in fights or drug-taking.”¹⁰²

The Gateways Club: The Battle over “Proper” Lesbian Representation

The Gateways Club stood as a safe haven for many English lesbians during the three decades it was in business. Clientele passed through a green door and slipped down some basement steps to talk up a girl or two and shimmy to pop songs on a jukebox. The look of the club and its patrons changed throughout the years, with World War II producing a “class revolution in lesbianism.” Before the war, the women attracted to the Gateways Club had been Radclyffe Hall-types that dressed in “white flannels and blazers” and looked down their noses at girls who preferred the jukebox over the piano. In 1966, the owners had recently repainted the walls with images of a new generation who refused “baggy trousered suits” and “afternoon tea.”¹⁰³

A frequently cited primary account of the Gateways is Maureen Duffy’s “Lesbian London,” which recounted the history of the club from an insider’s perspective. During the 1960s, Duffy was a well-known figure in the lesbian community and wrote many novels on lesbians in England. Since Duffy visited the Gateways, her work acts as an eyewitness account of a community still shunned by mainstream society. According to Duffy, the club had “thousands of members—membership is cheap at ten shillings a head—but fortunately they don’t all try to get in at once.” She remembered that “Friday and Sunday are usually full house with Saturday an unbelievable crush, Thursday and Wednesday have their following and a few

¹⁰² Duffy, 236.

¹⁰³ Duffy, 231-2.

people drop in at lunchtime for a quiet drink and talk.”¹⁰⁴ Duffy recounted the beginning of a popular night at the club:

It is half-past-eight. There are already between twenty and thirty people sitting on the padded benches along the walls, usually talking gossip about friends not yet arrived or detailed accounts of the progress of the current affair, stretching out their hands to the glasses on the small round tables, waiting. The juke-box is kept constantly fed but hardly anyone is ready to dance yet. The two fruit machines swallow their quota sixpences. Each new arrival peers round defensively for her group though there are a few walkers by themselves who stand on the edge of the dancefloor, coolly appraising. Soon the numbers will grow to fifty and then a hundred and the serious enjoyment of the evening will begin.¹⁰⁵

For the women waiting for friends on the benches or the ones brave enough to go it alone, Gateways offered the opportunity to publicly express their desire for women, which was quite powerful during a time when women were harassed for just suggesting nonconformity by wearing slacks. Duffy continued her description, but now it was later on in the night:

By now the floor is rocking under the dancers’ feet. The tunes are those popular in the charts at the moment but there is a distinct preference for songs to and about girls. . . . The floor becomes so crowded that it is impossible to do anything more than gyrate on the spot and by half-past-ten nearly two hundred people will be packed between the bulging walls. Eyes smart and water in the smoke and a trip to the bar and back is an obstacle race with the price a full glass.¹⁰⁶

The London Lesbian community was a healthy size, and even though many lesbians outside English metropolitan areas felt as if they were adrift without much representation, the women privileged enough to visit the Gateways could look around the bar and know they were not alone.

The women who crowded the dance floor on Saturday nights came from all walks of life, and many patrons remembered class divisions, especially when it came to prostitutes. Mary McIntosh, a MRG member and *Arena 3* writer, recalled that “there was a lot of class segregation within the Gateways . . . You were always watching the working-class people, whose parties you

¹⁰⁴ Duffy, 235-6.

¹⁰⁵ Duffy, 232.

¹⁰⁶ Duffy, 232.

sometimes got invited to, and the upper-class, whose parties you hoped to get invited to.”¹⁰⁷

Many at the club envied upper-class women who, according to a patron named Jessie, took steps to alienate the working-class crowd:

Some of the rich kids were very pompous. We had to work for our money but they were daddy’s girls and didn’t have to worry. We [were] down to earth: rough diamonds they called us. They mostly used to keep to their own class. They [were] too stuck up for us, we weren’t good enough for them. Some used to take the piss. I can read lips and I used to go over and say, “[Excuse] me, you’re talking about us.” They used to say, “Come along, dear, let’s go.”¹⁰⁸

Although class tensions occur in gay and lesbian communities throughout the world, the lesbians who frequented the Gateways seem more aware of these divisions. Class decided who you primarily socialized with or who you wanted to dance with, and though some oral histories talk about the blurring of class lines, there remains a preference for middle and upper class women. Furthermore, many women feared being associated with the criminal side of the gay and lesbian bar community.

Regulars at the Gateways knew how to spot prostitutes because they were hesitant about strangers: “The newcomer may find it difficult to get herself accepted into a group until she has been there two or three times and found people with similar interests or jobs. [Regulars] will want to know if she is a scrounger or mixed up with the criminal world in which case she will probably drift away to one of the seedier little clubs in Notting Hill.”¹⁰⁹ Middle-class patrons were not always accepting of prostitutes who frequented the club while many recall that women from the lower-class were more accepting:

It was very mixed socially: you got everything from lady bank managers to school teachers and prostitutes all mixing. Among the higher echelons they used to say, “Don’t

¹⁰⁷ Jill Gardiner, *From the Closet to the Screen: Women at the Gateways Club 1945-1985* (Ontario: Pandora Press, 2003), 81.

¹⁰⁸ Gardiner, 82. I altered the grammar in Jessie’s oral history because *From the Closet to the Screen* has class divisions of its own. Spelling and grammar reflect accents only in working-class oral histories.

¹⁰⁹ Duffy, 234.

go near her, she's a prostitute," whereas us lower echelons used to say, "Oh, great, okay then," because if she was on the game she had to be essentially feminine and would, of course, appeal to the butches.¹¹⁰

Women from the "higher echelons" were nervous about associating with prostitutes because many in British society, including the media, linked prostitution with gays and lesbians since they often shared public spaces and both participated in "sexual perversion."¹¹¹ This link was not unique to British gays and lesbians, and scholars have shown that many prostitutes were in fact LGBT themselves.¹¹² This overlapping complicates narratives about LGBT spaces since many oral histories about the Gateways depict prostitutes as separate from other lesbians because they did not have respectable backgrounds or because they frequented lesbian clubs to find women to protect them: "Some of the butches were being kept by working girls. If they got fined, we used to go and pay their fine for them . . . they liked to have a bitch for protection because we used to look after them."¹¹³

This intermixing of prostitution and lesbian nightlife is significant when considering that one of the goals of MRG was to represent lesbianism as respectable. Many strived to eliminate aspects of the working-class from the group and *Arena Three*, but they were not the only ones who wanted to silence this "unrespectable" element in the community. While some middle-class lesbians point out that they did not care about prostitutes at the Gateways, many more recall an unease at associating with people involved in sex work, like Sheila who remembers being mortified that women who were known prostitutes called out to her in public: "The prostitutes

¹¹⁰ From "Jo," in Gardiner, 17.

¹¹¹ Jeffrey Weeks traces this association between prostitution and homosexuality in Britain through multiple centuries in *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain, from the Nineteenth Century to the Present*. He argues that the 1957 Wolfenden Report's conclusion "by applying a single pragmatic criterion, finally separated [prostitution and homosexuality], both emotionally and legislatively" (165).

¹¹² See Nan Alamilla Boyd's *Wide-Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* and Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis' *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community*, particularly pgs. 96-104. (Just to name a few.)

¹¹³ Anonymous interviewee, Gardiner, 17.

were a nice crowd but it could be embarrassing. We might be walking along to the cinema in Victoria, and one of them would call out, ‘Hello, Sheila! Hello, Vera!’ and we’d think, Oh, God! Who’s that? And we’d realise it was so-and-so from the Gates.”¹¹⁴ Although MRG faced many critiques of being too “middle-class,” the group and its magazine reflected a bias in the lesbian community as a whole: The ones who truly belonged in lesbian spaces did not participate in sex work and preferred the company of women from the middle and upper classes.

A few MRG members disliked the Gateways because they believed it was time for London lesbians to emerge from smoky clubs in basements. Members such as Jackie Forster, who later went on to found *Sappho* magazine, became frustrated when the personal overruled the political:

We went down to the Gates to introduce *Arena 3* to people there . . . I was going around saying, “Would you like to change the quality of your life and buy *Arena 3*?” Some of them would look at it and say, “Yeah,” and [take] a copy. I was talking to one woman by the jukebox, and this enormous butch came up and said, “What are you doing chatting up my bird, then?” I thought, Oh, my God! I said, “I’m only trying to change the quality of your life by buying *Arena 3*.”¹¹⁵

MRG was deemed by many to be too middle-class because members judged other lesbians who did not fit their middle-class goals for the community. For example, MRG member Anne Hughes believed that lesbians should have used safe spaces such as the Gateways to share ideas and not just for hookups:

When MRG . . . [was] first starting, I’d met this group of women [including] Elizabeth Wilson and Mary McIntosh. We were left-wing, middle-class professional and gay, and we thought we were the in-crowd at the Gates. We were all in some form of trafficking in ideas: psychiatry, social work, university lecturing, Sociology, senior nursing, head teachers. We didn’t just go down to booze and pick up girls.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Gardiner, 17.

¹¹⁵ Gardiner, 122.

¹¹⁶ Gardiner, 122-23.

Although Hughes explained that her group was not “cliquish,” this excerpt from her oral history contains judgmental tones concerning the “right” way to spend time at the Gateways. Hughes and other MRG members strived to advance the intellect of London lesbians, and the ones who expressed no interest in this advancement struggled to find a voice in groups such as MRG that argued they supported broader lesbian representation. More often than not, however, this representation reflected their middle-class ideas of what lesbianism should look and act like.

Along with class strife, tensions over gender representation also tinted many MRG members’ feelings about the Gateways. Middle-class lesbians tended to be more anxious about passing as professionals in public, and gender expressions that veered too butch or too femme caused them anxiety. Diana Chapman, a founding member of MRG, recalled that many community group meetings involved arguments over dress:

I remember we had a very bitter debate on whether women should come dressed as men. A lot of women would dash home, chuck off their step-ins and Brylcreem their hair and get into gents’ natty suitings, but their friends would dress in an exaggeratedly female way. But then there were always people like me . . . who just dressed in slacks and a shirt. I said I certainly didn’t think everybody’s got to come looking like a ‘normal’ woman, but I preferred people not to look too extremely masculine because we had to go through the public bar. We couldn’t say we were a group of lesbians, we used to make out we were a group of businesswomen out on the town.¹¹⁷

The unease surrounding gender representation also linked back to dynamics between butch women and prostitutes. Many lesbians recalled that lower-class butch women pursued prostitutes because they were almost always femme. This butch-femme dynamic among prostitutes must have partially inspired members of MRG and Keneric to consider such gender representations in dress as “unrespectable.”

¹¹⁷ Diana Chapman, interviewed by Margot Farnham, in *Inventing Ourselves: Lesbian Life Stories*, ed. Hall Carpenter Lesbian Oral History Group (London: Routledge, 1989), 55.

Additionally, Maureen Duffy explained further why many lesbians avoided “extreme” gender representation and highlights the influence of class in their fear of being discriminated against due to their appearance: “A lot of lesbians are professional women struggling against antifeminist discrimination and they are unlikely to visit the [Gateways] club, very often because their own difficulties make them intolerant of people whose intelligence does not match up to their own. Select dinner parties, evenings at the theatre are their social outlet.” Here Duffy suggested that professional lesbians i.e. middle-class lesbians do not like to associate with working class lesbians because women who came from lower classes were not intelligent enough to participate in a fulfilling conversation. Significantly, Duffy pointed out that why middle to upper class lesbians disliked working-class lesbians because “they [were] closer to social acceptance . . . they [did] not want to be regarded as second-class citizens themselves and so avoid[ed] contact with people who [were] obviously this.”¹¹⁸

Historian Jeffrey Weeks connected this fear of being regarded as second-class citizens to the gender expression restrictions that society placed on women: the “concern with maleness in asserting an identity is only explicable in terms of the overwhelming weight of assumptions concerning female sexuality, which acted as a barrier both to ‘science’ understanding lesbianism and women taking control of their own sexuality. If the taboos against male sexuality can only be understood by reference to assumptions regarding the male social role, so attitudes to lesbianism are only understandable by reference to the position of women.”¹¹⁹ Many lesbians understood that they had to dress in ways that the greater society accepted because they could not risk challenging widely-held assumptions about womanhood since they could lose their jobs, their housing, and even their children if they were labeled a lesbian.

¹¹⁸ Duffy, 234.

¹¹⁹ Weeks, 89.

These tensions about class and gender representation spilled over into the pages of *Arena Three*. In October 1965, a reader named M.S. created quite a stir when she wrote that “the ‘public image’ of the lesbian is so often a warped, unbalanced woman whose only interest, outside the minimal hours spent earning a living, is in gratifying an immoderate and irregular sexual lust.” Class tension molded much of M.S.’s description of the lesbian’s public image since the need for women to earn a living was more associated with the working class during this time period. Furthermore, M.S. implied that the “real” lesbian is one who is “normal” and does a “useful” job: “The thousands of other lesbians, who are probably no more highly sexed than their heterosexual counterparts, are just too normal and unremarkable in their habits and activities to be picked out by any chance acquaintances or colleagues, and are doing perfectly normal and useful jobs for the community.” It is interesting that M.S. believed that “normal” lesbians undertake jobs that are “useful” and are not employed solely because they need to support themselves. M.S. went on to critique the London bar scene: “It is the image of these lesbians which needs to be put over. I don’t believe that the lesbians who gravitate to London’s square mile or two of vice are typical of the breed—they certainly aren’t in need of being rescued from loneliness. It seems to me that they are already very well catered for compared with the rest of us who are scattered throughout the country.”¹²⁰

A reader named P.C. challenged M.S.’s disdain for the “warped” lesbian and her influence over the community:

It is obvious that MS (October Mailbag) has never been tempted to ‘gravitate to London’s square mile or two of vice.’ If she had allowed herself an occasional adventure into the lesbian ‘underworld,’ she would, perhaps, not be so ignorant of the ‘regulars.’ Her statement that ‘they certainly aren’t in need of being rescued from loneliness’ fairly sends shivers down my spine. What are they, this frightening mass of lustful, sinful, self-dependent individuals? I have never seen lonelier people. . . . We know what damaging effects fear of the unknown can create. Society’s image of the lesbian is one primary

¹²⁰ M.S., “October Mailbag,” *Arena Three*, October 1965, 13.

example of this. I suggest, then, that M.S. stop to study her ‘warped, unbalanced woman’ before she makes further public pronouncements. If lesbianism is for her ‘just one facet of an otherwise normal, balanced, useful life’, it would be well for her to consider this her good fortune, rather than use it as evidence of her moral superiority.¹²¹

P.C. picked up on the class tension in M.S.’s letter by suggesting she should feel fortunate for having opportunities that lower class lesbians do not. P.C. believed that M.S. had little exposure to lesbians unlike herself because, by opposing the “warped” image of the lesbian, she furthered misconceptions about lower class lesbians. Moreover, M.S. believed that lesbians involved in vice could not be lonely, which was an opinion that P.S. thought was harmful since it damaged the self-esteem of many non-affluent lesbians.

Emerging from the Basement: The Origins of the Minority Research Group

Compared to other prominent MRG members, Esme Langley left little in terms of oral history. She bewildered other members, especially later on when she attempted to reject certain aspects about her legacy in the lesbian community.¹²² She was a mother of three children and lived in West London during the 1960s; her appearance tended to shock other lesbians because it veered too masculine at times. Diana Chapman recalled that, when meeting Langley in person for the first, she was “quite appalled by her appearance—she was wearing motor-cycle gear because she came on a motor cycle.”¹²³

Langley worked as a journalist and, like many lesbians of her generation, sought out Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness*. She described in *Arena Three* how she traveled all the way to Paris to purchase a copy of the book:

I bided my time till I saved enough for a cheap weekend return to Paris. No trouble getting a copy there—but it was in French. My friend in Paris made it a new dust-jacket

¹²¹ P.C., “November Mailbag,” *Arena Three*, November 1965, 21.

¹²² Gardiner, 97. In 1990, Langley denied having sex with other women, despite other MRG members saying otherwise.

¹²³ Chapman, 53.

of blue sugar-bag paper and advised me to tuck it under my arm as I checked my suitcase through Customs. My scarlet face and shifty look no doubt accounted for the thorough inspection of my innocent suitcase—but the officer didn't think of asking to see the book I was reading on the journey!¹²⁴

Langley disagreed with lesbian representation in the media, and she aimed to challenge misconceptions about lesbianism by establishing a magazine that focused on using scientific research to prove that lesbians were not overtly sexual or deviant. Ultimately, it was an article from the current affairs publication *Twentieth Century* that helped Langley make the necessary contacts to establish *Arena Three*. According to Langley, “A Quick Look at Lesbians” made “hackles [rise] all over town and as far afield as Connecticut, USA and Sydney, N.S.W.” because author Dilys Rowe gave Britain’s lesbians a “quick, slant-eyed look” and concluded that they were in company of “drug addicts, thalidomide babies and moral welfare customers.” Diana Chapman wrote the magazine a rebuttal to Rowe’s findings and Langley recalled that “it was a pleasurable relief, then, to turn to the eminently sensible, self-respecting retort by ‘A Lesbian’ in the following issue.”¹²⁵

Chapman’s “self-respecting retort” inspired Langley to contact Chapman regarding her desire to start a lesbian magazine. Chapman remembered that Langley was eager to get to know her:

I received a letter in Australia from a woman called Esme Langley. She made it sound as though she was halfway through preparing a magazine for lesbians and would I like to go and lick a few envelopes. Of course she was just *thinking* about it. And she met me at the airport when I came back . . . I was very cross that she'd come to meet me . . . I was a perfect stranger.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Esme Langley, *Arena Three*, September 1967, 14.

¹²⁵ Esme Langley, “Quick Look – Dead Loss,” *Arena Three*, January 1964, 6.

¹²⁶ Chapman, 51, 52.

A possible reason for Langley's eagerness was due to the fact that she'd faced much rejection concerning her desire to create a lesbian magazine. She had previously turned to the Gateways and homosexual supporters with little result:

“My first publicity was given to me by the Gateways in 1963 when Smithy and Gina kindly posted up my flysheet, inviting contributions to a new magazine . . . but nobody had come forward to help. I'd approached all the names in Britain that I'd been given but again, zilch . . . Women supporters of HLRS [Homosexual Law Reform Society] to whom I'd written flew into a panic . . . They would go so far as to support male homosexuals but as for other women, o dear me, no.”¹²⁷

Soon with Chapman's help, Langley was able to generate interest in her new lesbian rights group and magazine.

Diana Chapman was born in Bristol in 1928 and experienced the Bristol Blitz as a school girl: “We were bombed frequently. The school was hit and the staff had to do a certain amount of fire watching.” She endured depression during her adolescence and lost both of her parents by 19. At the time of her parents' death she was “madly in love with a girl” even though she had limited understanding of lesbianism: “It's a funny thing about being homosexual or lesbian. I sort of knew I was without knowing anything about it, because the word was never mentioned. I'd heard that there was a book called *The Well of Loneliness*, and thought, I must read it.”¹²⁸

After attending art school, Chapman went to King's College and then Sydney University for dentistry. When she completed her coursework, she returned to England and became involved with Langley: “Esme and I did have a sexual relationship; once again nothing was happening to me, but we were ‘lovers’. I think in retrospect it was a pretty one-sided relationship.”¹²⁹ She recalled their intentions for the magazine: “We were very concerned that it should be a proper, decent magazine and that there should be no overt sex, nothing that could be

¹²⁷ Gardiner, 96.

¹²⁸ Chapman, 47.

¹²⁹ Chapman, 53.

remotely described as titillating.” Many warned Chapman and Langley to be careful because they might be harassed by people outside the community:

We hadn't realized that there was this interest in lesbianism as pornography and that we found quite shocking. We'd have men knocking at the door or ringing up. . . . Just up the road from Broadhurst Gardens, our flat, lived Anthony Grey and he used to appear, uttering terrible warnings that we might be prosecuted for 'uttering an obscene libel', so we had to be very careful in the climate of the time that it was fearfully respectable. I think we wouldn't send it out to any married woman who didn't have her husband's approval because I think we had one or two letters from raving husbands more or less threatening to sue us for alienation of affection.¹³⁰

Anthony Grey introduced Langley to Cynthia Reid and Julie Switsur, who joined her and Chapman to form a lesbian organization along with establishing a magazine. They decided to call themselves Minorities Research Group because it was vague enough to avoid harassment and was “not specific enough to offend anyone . . . [and] it didn't reveal itself as a homosexual organization or as a specifically female homosexual organization and the term 'research' lent a certain air of respectability.”¹³¹ Furthermore, Chapman explained the group's desire to address the loneliness in the community: “We were simply trying to put across that we were here for other lesbians to try and help combat the feeling of isolation, and that there was nothing peculiar, nasty, abnormal about us. We were simply women who preferred other women to men.”¹³²

They named the magazine *Arena Three* because it indicated their commitment to giving readers “a special forum, platform, or 'arena' in which to meet a dozen times a year.”¹³³ The first issue of *Arena Three* explained their goal to utilize research and expertise to alter perceptions about lesbianism:

MRG was founded . . . to conduct and to collaborate in research into the homosexual condition, especially as it concerns women; and to disseminate information and items of interest to universities, institutes, social and educational workers, writers, poets, editors,

¹³⁰ Chapman, 53.

¹³¹ Jennings, *Tomboys and Bachelor Girls: A Lesbian History of Post-War Britain 1945-71*, 136.

¹³² Chapman, 54.

¹³³ Esme Langley, *Arena Three*, July 1967, 13.

employers and, in short, all those genuinely in quest of enlightenment about what has been called “the misty, unmapped world of feminine homosexuality.”¹³⁴

The four founders wrote most of the early articles under different names because the protection of anonymity would help them reach audiences beyond the lesbian community.¹³⁵ They emulated other lesbian groups outside England because, as Chapman recalled, “we thought it would be nice if we could have something like that, that we weren’t always going down into basements.”¹³⁶

The first issue of *Arena Three* arrived in Spring 1964 after a period of publication problems. It was delayed for three months until, as Langley described in her first Editorial Note, the group took matters into their own hands:

At a Group Committee meeting this week, we decided that we would go ahead and get out the first issue ourselves, using the Roneo method of duplicating, even although this meant we would have to drop out artist’s illustration. This issue is, then, an all-female effort, independent of the gentlemen of the printing world. . . .¹³⁷

While Langley had some journalism experience, the initial group were novices when it came to magazine production. Chapman “didn’t mind the journalistic part” but left the networking up to Langley: “I didn’t like the social side I am not a person for meetings or great number of people and I think Esme actually was frightfully good with people who’d arrive on the doorstep, in such dire, distress that being a lesbian was often the least of their problems.”¹³⁸

In January 1965, Langley appeared on the cover of *The Ladder* and published a summary of MRG’s first year in the same issue. She described how exposure in “intelligent press” and “television publicity” led to “a phenomenally rapid growth of membership from the original five

¹³⁴ Esme Langley, “Editorial Note,” *Arena Three*, January 1964, 2.

¹³⁵ According to Rebecca Jennings, there was a fifth member—‘Paddy’ Dunkley—who left the group in the early stages. See *Tomboys and Bachelor Girls*, 136.

¹³⁶ Chapman, 54.

¹³⁷ Langley, 2.

¹³⁸ Chapman, 54.

founder-members. Within a few months there were hundreds of subscribing members, and more than twice as many non-subscribing supporters.” She also clarified that “by no means were all the members of M.R.G. of homosexual makeup. Many people, both men and women, joined from motives of disinterested good will and the desire to see a belated and much-needed improvement in the situation of the considerable homosexual minority.” Not all the attention was positive, however, and the publicity attracted “the inevitable attention of prurient and sexually immature men in search of 'adult literature', who wrote, telephoned or called personally at our office. We had no difficulty in distinguishing between these and the genuine inquirers about our work, and we took various steps to discourage them from plaguing our staff.”¹³⁹ While the DOB encouraged scientists to participate in their conventions and public debates, the commitment to assisting science in discovering the truth about lesbianism was more essential to MRG. Langley and other members believed that research was the key to improving the lesbian reputation and much of their magazine early on was dedicated to the opinions and findings of scientists focusing on gays and lesbians.

Langley took over nearly every aspect of *Arena Three*'s production, which caused friction between her and the other members. Chapman recalled that “people wanted to help and take over a bit and Esme just wanted to keep it all to herself and she made *Arena Three* into a limited company.” She also implied that personal drama led to many members leaving MRG to form another group:

I walked out on Esme [in 1965] and that precipitated a crisis. People who formed the basis of the Kensington and Richmond groups then said, Esme's being difficult about all this and we'll form a new group and call it Kenric There was a meeting in a room at the House of Commons in which all the interested parties were going to thrash out this business of *Arena Three*/Kenric. And Esme didn't come, so everybody was disgusted and went off and formed Kenric.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ Esme Langley, “The Ladder Salutes Arena Three,” *The Ladder*, January 1965, 24.

¹⁴⁰ Chapman, 55.

MRG and *Arena Three* lasted throughout the 1960s, but by the end of the decade, the attention was on Jackie Forster's *Sappho*. According to Chapman, Langley's authoritative leadership of *Arena Three* remained on many people's minds: "From Kenric itself, people wanted a social thing; nobody would have touched a magazine after what happened with *Arena Three*, until Jackie started *Sappho*."¹⁴¹

***Arena Three* and Reclaiming Lesbianism through Literature**

Like with *The Ladder*, literature frequented the pages of *Arena Three*, and readers used poems and short stories to convey the loneliness and absurdity of being a lesbian during a time when popular narratives demonized their everyday existence. In the first issue, contributor Kate Hetherington published, "Sapphics," a poem about the danger and isolation of lesbianism. Readers do not know the gender of the poem's narrator, but the narrator warns their perfumed lover of darkness, and asks the lover to not return: "Leave me, little flow'r, lest the darkness trap you . . . I must wear this loneliness, but in secret; Now must I, companionless, ever wander, Outside this Eden."¹⁴² Judging from the title, the loneliness of Hetherington's narrator must be her secret lesbianism, and she asks her lover to leave her because life as a lesbian is too difficult. These themes of secrecy and alienation occur throughout lesbian literature, especially in the lesbian pulp fiction novels that were popular during this time. However, despite the depressing depictions, many lesbians gobbled up this literature because they were desperate for representation in an era when the general public found homosexuality in media scandalous and immoral.

¹⁴¹ Chapman, 56.

¹⁴² Kate Hetherington, "Sapphics," *Arena Three*, January 1964, 8.

Radclyffe Hall, author of *The Well of Loneliness*, stood as a major literary influence for contributors and readers of *Arena Three* and *The Ladder*. Born in nineteenth century England, Hall came from incredible means, which gave her relative freedom to express her lesbianism in her writings and personal life when sexologists attacked working class lesbians for their immorality more often than their upper-class counterparts. At the turn of the twentieth century, Hall lived openly with her female lover, Una Troubridge, who had been the wife of knighted Admiral Ernest Troubridge. However, once Hall became well-known for her creative work, she faced an immorality trial in 1920 for publishing obscenity and breaking up the Troubridge marriage. When *The Well of Loneliness* was published in 1928, copies were seized and burned due to its lack of blame for the main character's sexuality.¹⁴³ Despite being condemned, Hall's novel went on to inspire many generations of lesbians throughout the world.

By the time of *Arena Three*'s first publication, *The Well of Loneliness* and its infamous author were crucial to lesbian communities because so many had read the novel and knew about Hall's open sexuality. In fact, the novel is mentioned in two out of eight articles in the first issue. In "Bent or Straight Mates?," contributor D.M.C. (Diana Chapman), critiques *The Well of Loneliness* for utilizing harmful theories about the source of lesbianism in childhood: "It is unfortunate that Radclyffe Hall used this theory as a basis for the character-development of 'Stephen Gordon' in *The Well of Loneliness*. [Hall] herself, in fact, hardly knew her own father, and certainly couldn't be said to have 'over-identified' with him in the way attributed to 'Stephen Gordon' in her novel."¹⁴⁴ Chapman did not identify Radclyffe Hall or describe the novel for readers who might not have read it; she trusts that Hall's novel is universal to readers and uses the work to address problems that transcend literature. Furthermore, Chapman spoke of

¹⁴³ Weeks, 108-9.

¹⁴⁴ D.M.C., "Bent or Straight Mates?," *Arena Three*, January 1964, 6.

Hall with authority, and sounded as if she has spent hours familiarizing herself with the drama of Hall's life. Two pages after Chapman's article, the magazine utilized *The Well of Loneliness* to address the evolution of literature containing lesbianism, and how many lost their condemners as the years went by.¹⁴⁵

In addition to publishing readers' creative works and discussing *The Well of Loneliness*, the magazine also printed book news, literary reviews, and advertisements for books with lesbian themes. In issue one under "Book News," the magazine printed simply, "The Desert of the Heart."¹⁴⁶ However, the book was reviewed in the next issue by two reviewers of "differing backgrounds and tastes" who "comment on [the] novel without previously comparing notes."¹⁴⁷ The reviews are casual and critical; one reviewer writing that she was "past caring" at the book's conclusion.¹⁴⁸ Many creative works featuring lesbians were of low quality, especially the lesbian pulps, and readers and contributors of *Arena Three* did not hesitate to call out poor writing when need be. During the 1960s, depictions of lesbianism were frequently unrealistic, fantastical, and bewildering, and lesbian readers were not shy about criticizing novels written by straight men that veered from reality.

Science and the Lesbian Identity in *Arena Three*

Cultivating a stronger community was important to the MRG because lesbians faced an onslaught of misinformation about homosexuality from the medical field. Many contributors of *Arena Three* tackled this misinformation head-on in multiple articles throughout the magazine's publication. By the 1960s, sexologists throughout Europe had controlled the discussion of

¹⁴⁵ --, "Mrs. Grundy through the Ages," *Arena Three*, January 1964, 8.

¹⁴⁶ --, "Book News," *Arena Three*, January 1964, 10.

¹⁴⁷ Esme Langley, "Book Page," *Arena Three*, February 1964, 8.

¹⁴⁸ Doreen Holley, "Doreen Holley Writes," *Arena Three*, February 1964, 8.

lesbianism for nearly a century. They propagated messages of immorality and illness, and believed homosexuality corrupted society. Many heterosexual people considered sexologists as sources of the ultimate truth because they possessed medical degrees and published widely-read books that showcased “revealing” statistics about the state of the modern woman.¹⁴⁹ Contributors and readers of *Arena Three* grew up in this environment, and they were eager to discount falsities popularized by straight male doctors who projected their own preconceived notions about female sexuality and womanhood onto their subjects.

Almost immediately MRG used their magazine to explore what it meant to be a lesbian in the shadow of these sexologists. In issue two, contributor Hilary Benno detailed so-called “cures” for lesbianism that she encounters at a doctor’s house, at the Wolfenden recommendations, and on Harley Street, a well-known area for medical innovation in London. Benno sounds skeptical throughout the piece: “This was a cure to be worn (I gathered) like a splendid rose in the buttonhole of the great healer who performed it. Girls who came striding into the consulting-room shooting their cuffs and twitching at their bow-ties in the butch-heroic manner would, in due course, go tittupping out again in stiletto heels with a bag full of mascara and lipstick, demanding to be led to the altar by the next presentable and eligible male citizen.”¹⁵⁰ Benno poked fun at the strict gender conformity during this time, and pointed out the absurdity in claims that doctors could cure homosexuality.

However, despite beginning the article humorously, the cures Benno detailed were quite serious. “Cure A” deals with girls who are not really lesbians, and will grow out of their homosexuality by their mid-twenties. “Cure B” addresses gay men, and recommends that they over-indulge in sex with men until they can’t stand the interaction any longer. According to

¹⁴⁹ Faderman, 48-54.

¹⁵⁰ Hilary Benno, “Scouting for . . . The Cure,” *Arena Three*, February 1964, 3.

Benno, “Cure C” was “a bit too complex for my simple female brain to follow. People, [Mr. William Shepherd said at the Wolfenden recommendations], must be made to control themselves. I puzzled for some time over this strangely self-canceling proposition.”¹⁵¹ “Cure D” originated with Ian Fleming’s novel *Goldfinger* and sent Benno to Harley Street for more answers: “I learned a lot about all the new, exciting discoveries in the healing of the mentally afflicted: lobotomy, deep insulin coma, electroshock, largactil, lysergic acid . . . I interrupted this saga of success to inquire whether any of these new physical and biochemical treatments had proved useful in the removal of homosexual conditions. Harley Street said no.”¹⁵² By going to Harley Street and asking whether any doctors had found success at treating homosexuality, Benno revealed the lack of proof in the claims of sexologists. Also, by approaching these serious “cures” with flippant sarcasm, she assisted in the dismantling of pseudo-medicine’s power over how homosexuality was viewed in her era.

Arena Three also helped a number of doctors, psychiatrists, etc. by running their questionnaires and calls for volunteers. The arrival of the magazine earned some attention, especially from the medical community, since, as Cynthia Reid described, it offered new opportunities to sexuality researchers:

One of the consequences of the early publicity was, of course, that people in hospitals, academic institutes, who had an interest in sexuality as their own subject, saw this as a possible means of getting subjects for research purposes which is frequently very difficult in that sort of area . . . The idea of being able at last to get a selected sample of admitted homosexuals was something new and so there were research projects from the start.¹⁵³

At times the findings of these medical professionals discounted MRG’s arguments about type-casting the lesbian experience. For instance, the November 1965 issue detailed the research

¹⁵¹ Benno, 3.

¹⁵² Benno, 4.

¹⁵³ Jennings, 141.

paper of Dr. Eva Bene, which included an acknowledgment of MRS's assistance in finding sample lesbians. While the group assisted her, Dr. Bene's paper argued for a theory that D.M.C.'s (Diana Chapman) deemed harmful when critiquing *The Well of Loneliness*: "Dr. Bene's findings 'show a far greater difference between the feelings the lesbians and the married women recalled about their fathers than between those recalled about their mothers. The lesbians were more often hostile towards and afraid of their fathers than were the married women, and they felt more often that their fathers were weak and incompetent.'"¹⁵⁴ No single parental experience created lesbianism, and Dr. Bene's conclusions promoted this misconception.

Moreover, historian Rebecca Jennings explained the importance of reframing medical ideas to MRG: "The intention, 'to conduct and to collaborate in research into the homosexual condition, especially as it concerns women,' as the first states aim of MRG, indicating a belief that the medico-science profession played a central role in shaping understandings of lesbianism and reflecting the concerns of earlier sex reforms groups."¹⁵⁵ Though the outcomes might not have been favorable, participating in medical research gave a voice to many lesbians and allowed them to actively resist harmful heterosexual ideas about their development and identity.

The women of *Arena Three* attacked the erasure of lesbian experience and idealization of heterosexuality in every issue of the magazine. They often united with the DOB in their efforts to attack this erasure, and much of their correspondence reflects a shared goal of furthering lesbian rights and elevating the lesbian reputation. Furthermore, *The Ladder* and *Arena Three* published both original literature about lesbianism and critiques on the works already in print. Much of their discussions about literature challenged its representation of lesbians, and these discussions encouraged the identity formation of many women in the international lesbian network.

¹⁵⁴ --, "Research Paper," *Arena Three*, November 1965, 9.

¹⁵⁵ Jennings, 139.

Chapter Three: Trading Letters across the Atlantic

The Relationship of Daughters of Bilitis and Minorities Research Group

Introduction

In the first issue of *Arena Three*, Esme Langley thanked the DOB for their help in getting the British magazine off the ground:

We would like to take this opportunity of thanking our American friends in DOB for two very generous and friendly acts of encouragement in our work. [F]irst, for the handsome advance publicity for ARENA THREE in the January issues of their magazine . . . and secondly, for the kind invitation to attend the DOB Convention in New York next June.¹⁵⁶

From the very beginning, *Arena Three* was linked to the DOB and its magazine. Writing seven years after *Arena Three*'s inception, Venice Ostwald explained that "nearly half of *Arena Three*'s first subscribers were D.O.B. members from the United States, so there has been a camaraderie from one side of the Atlantic to the other since the very beginning of its publication."¹⁵⁷ This relationship was important to both the DOB and MRG because they relied on each other to help further their goals for lesbian rights. They also shared the unique experience of producing a lesbian magazine during an era when many still shunned lesbians. Without the ties between the two organizations, the DOB would not have reached as many readers in Europe and the MRG would arguably have never been able to sustain the initial printing of *Arena Three* since much of their first subscribers learned about *Arena Three* from "pre-publication notices" in *The Ladder*.¹⁵⁸

Although DOB initially helped *Arena Three* get off the ground, the magazine soon stood on its own in part because, as Langley detailed in the second issue, its arrival created quite a stir

¹⁵⁶ Esme Langley, "Editorial Note," *Arena Three*, January 1964, 1.

¹⁵⁷ Vanderwood, 6.

¹⁵⁸ Jennings, *Tomboys and Bachelor Girls: A Lesbian History of Post-War Britain 1945-71*, 152.

among a few news outlets: “Congratulations and good wishes have come in from television and sound radio producers, from journalists and – especially appreciated – from many people in the medico-social world.”¹⁵⁹ Even though Langley later detailed her frustration over newspapers rejecting advertisements for *Arena Three*, the magazine and the women behind its production were not confined to only American and British readers; many people throughout Europe and the Commonwealth knew of its existence and some of their letters found their way to the magazine’s “Mailbag” section.

Additionally, in their second issue, the magazine reflected on its international appeal in the section, “Mailbag.” Langley wrote, “So many letters of encouragement and support have poured in from all over the world since our first issue was announced that we haven’t room to publish more than a brief selection.”¹⁶⁰ Even though *Arena Three* appeared to be more community newsletter than international publication, readers from all around the world cherished its message and said so in their letters to the editor. Moreover, many of the readers who cherished the magazine were American DOB members. This was reflected in a letter from DOB Public Relations Officer Marion Glass writing as “Meredith Grey” right below Langley’s previously mentioned comment: “We appreciate news of your organization and its activities . . . We would like to be added to your subscription list, starting with the historic January 1964 issue if it is still available.”¹⁶¹ Glass’s letter showed that American lesbian community leaders were aware of the historical and powerful nature of *Arena Three*’s birth, and they were committed to fostering transatlantic support through subscriptions and writings. Though the process of paying

¹⁵⁹ Esme Langley, “Editorial Note,” *Arena Three*, February 1964, 2.

¹⁶⁰ Esme Langley, “Mailbag,” *Arena Three*, February 1964, 11.

¹⁶¹ Meredith Grey, “Letter to Editor,” *Arena Three*, February 1964, 11.

for the British magazine might have been tiresome, American readers understood that ties to *Arena Three* could only strengthen the network.

DOB frequently invited MRG and other lesbians from overseas to their conventions; in doing this, the Daughters expanded their influence in the international lesbian network since the rhetoric in these conventions had the potential to shape how lesbians viewed themselves and their communities. Moreover, MRG supported the expansion of DOB influence by publishing a summary of their convention in the September 1966 issue of A3:

The fourth DOB National Convention was held on August 20, 1966 at the Jack Tar Hotel, Van Ness Avenue and Geary Boulevard, San Francisco, under the guideline: 'San Francisco and its Homophile Community: A Merging Social Conscience'. Speakers included representatives of the American homophile [sic] organisations, clergymen, attorneys, voluntary and professional social workers, and the Director of the San Francisco Health Department. An all-speakers discussion was chaired by Dr. Evelyn Hooker of the University of California.¹⁶²

By distributing information about their convention, DOB set an example for other homophile organizations throughout North America and Europe. If other lesbians did not think it was important to include clergymen and attorneys in their fight for a better quality of life, then they now at least gave the possibility a thought. The influence of these gay and lesbian groups reached far beyond their immediate communities and many of their values were disseminated through the network.

Correspondence played a major role in the lesbian international network, and both *Arena Three* and *The Ladder* devoted much space to reader responses. The content of these published letters ranged from "thank yous" to debates to personal ads.¹⁶³ DOB and MRG leaders also used these correspondence sections to promote and defend their magazines and organizations. They

¹⁶² --, "DOB National Convention," *Arena Three*, September 1966, 4.

¹⁶³ It is important to note that Grier and a few other DOB members wrote letters to the editor under false names. It is unclear whether MRG did this as well.

were concerned about other homophile groups publishing correct information about their magazine; for example, in November 1965, a published letter from then *Ladder* editor Barbara Gittings pointed out that an “American correspondent . . . made a mistake when she wrote about DOB membership costs . . . Do hope you’ll print a correction on DOB membership costs.”¹⁶⁴ Interestingly, Gittings believed *Arena Three* reached too many potential DOB members to let the mistake slip by. Her insistence could prove that *Arena Three* found its way to enough American readers that the DOB believed it was an important format to recruit new members. When considering DOB recruitment, scholars have been the most interested in “word of mouth” network building, though Gittings’ letter suggests that the DOB understood that the international lesbian network was too influential for mistakes to go uncorrected.

Although DOB had built an admirable reputation in the international lesbian network, there were still some American readers who thought lesbian Britons had it better. In 1967, a reader named Barbara L. wrote, “I enjoy reading your publication. I hope that one day the U.S. will be as advanced as England with regard to both homophile organisational acceptance and public reaction to lesbians.” She went on to show how media played a crucial role in challenging harmful narratives about lesbians: “There recently was a program on T.V. (delayed for showing for 1 ½ years), which did a fair job of at least opening the eyes of the public to our social dilemma – unfortunately, some of the alternative sides of our picture were completely misrepresented and prejudiced – but at least it was a start.” According to Barbara L., television was not the only place where lesbians were misrepresented—she believed that many Americans lacked “proper information” about lesbians:

There are too many people here who, because of lack of knowledge and perception, have an attitude of fear, hatred, and mental blockage which has prevented them, and will continue to prevent from, from obtaining proper information regarding “us”. They then

¹⁶⁴ Barbara Gittings, “From the Editor of ‘The Ladder’,” *Arena Three*, November 1965, 19.

formulate their own opinion, regardless of proper knowledge, and pass this information on to others. Many of these instructors on homosexuality are accredited Professors in colleges here!! The misuse of available information is astounding!!¹⁶⁵

Many times, reader letters were meant to “burn off steam” and to discuss homophobia with others who would understand. In addition, the letters revealed readers’ values, short-comings, and their assumptions about lesbians from other countries.

European Readership of *The Ladder* and *Arena Three*

A letter to the editor in the December 1965 issue explored the magazine’s attraction to lesbians outside Britain and the United States. Written by Margaret K., the letter detailed the lack of lesbian community activities in Paris: “I envy your London members this wide range of activities, the enormous possibilities to meet, get to know each other and to be in congenial company. ‘Gay Paris’ attracts too many people who want to gape at things the name of this town evokes in their minds, and they sit in ‘our’ night clubs too, like in a zoo, and you wonder why they don’t have with them bags of peanuts to feed the inmates.”¹⁶⁶ One of the main goals of the MRG was to cultivate a stronger lesbian community in London, and they envisioned that *Arena Three* would attract lesbians not involved in the group to activities and meetups. These activities were so important that the magazine polled their readers as to what events they would prefer to attend. For example, the magazine summed up one of these polls in November 1965: “Miss R.T. (London) prefers small meetings to larger ones and would like to see men admitted to some meetings. Miss D.C. (London) enjoyed the ‘early meetings’ but is ‘not interested in the present social gatherings.’ Miss B.B. agreed with this and wrote she would be interested in social activities ‘provided these were of a higher standard than those so-called ‘meetings’ at Clapham

¹⁶⁵ Barbara L., “Letter from America,” *Arena Three*, June 1967, 11.

¹⁶⁶ Margaret K., “And a Letter from Paris,” *Arena Three*, December 1965, 24.

which are pointless, in sordid surroundings, and a bore.” Also, a reader expressed a desire to include people outside London: “Miss S.L. (Cambridge) would like neighboring county groups to fraternise more.”¹⁶⁷ After the magazine published its readers’ opinions about social events and showcasing its commitment to developing the community, it is not hard to understand why Parisian reader Margaret K. would envy the lesbian mingling happening in London.

Paris was not the only place where MRG sent magazines. Two years after Margaret K.’s letter, A3 published a letter by “Miss G.B.,” a reader from West Germany who had “been inspired by the work of D.O.B./The Ladder in the States and M.R.G./Arena Three.” Miss G.B. recalled how she learned about these magazines in “a new report on D.O.B. and M.R.G. [that] appeared in DIE ZEIT,” a German weekly newspaper that is still in circulation. This report inspired Miss G.B. to form a group similar to DOB and MRG: “I am in contact with a small group of interested women in West Germany and Switzerland. We intend to start a group or to take part in existing groups but as you know it’s difficult to find connections. My opinion about our situation here is not very optimistic. In this country often ‘homosexual’ sounds like ‘criminal’. Most interested women are anxious to visit clubs or to join a homosexual corporation A.3 will be very useful!”¹⁶⁸ Miss G.B.’s letter demonstrated why these magazines were essential to lesbian resistance during the 1950s and 1960s; all that many lesbians needed was proof that public resistance had been successful somewhere in the world for them to begin nurturing their own communities.

Another reader from West Germany named Charlotte explained in her letter to the Daughters that subscribing to their magazine would not help her: “Most heartily I thank you for sending me an exemplar of your magazine . . . After reading I must tell you that I fear my

¹⁶⁷ --, “Readers’ Suggestions,” *Arena Three*, November 1965, 14.

¹⁶⁸ G.B., “Mailbag,” *Arena Three*, March 1968, 14.

English is not sufficient to understand all. Therefore I think there would be no purpose to become member of your very interesting institution and therefore I regret not to be able to buy your magazine.”¹⁶⁹ Charlotte’s letter showed how DOB members actively sought out European readers, even though the amount of mail is mind-boggling. It was not just the organization’s recruitment efforts that introduced readers to *The Ladder*; many European lesbians learn about DOB and their magazine from A3. For instance, a Greek reader named Helena explained that “I am a member of the English Club ‘Arena Three’ and I would like to subscribe myself to your Magazine.” Interestingly, Helena also confirmed how exposure in A3 offered DOB opportunities to earn money: “Also, as I am working at the above Travel Agency I shall be very glad if some of your members comming [sic] to Greece use our services. For the perpose [sic], I would like to put an advertisement in your Magazine. I shall be, therefore, very grateful to you, if by return of mail tell me the rates of this advertisement as well the cost of an annual subscription to the Magazine.”¹⁷⁰

In the Fall of 1963, a letter from Nottingham, England, arrived for Barbara Gittings. The letter’s author described how she came about *The Ladder* in England: “I have just read the April edition of your magazine ‘Ladder’, & found it very stimulating. A friend of mine lent it to me.” Like so many readers, the author learned about TL and A3 through a network of friends. “I was wondering if it would be at all possible to get a copy monthly direct from you? Quite a few of the girls over here are interested in joining your organization & I was elected to write & ask,” she

¹⁶⁹ Letter from Charlotte [redacted], Correspondence – A-D, Membership Files Daughters of Bilitis San Francisco Chapter, January 3 – December 18, 1966 and undated. MS Phyllis Lyon, Del Martin and the Daughters of Bilitis Box 3, Folder 3. Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Historical Society. Archives of Sexuality & Gender. Accessed 14 Jan. 2017.

¹⁷⁰ Letter from Helena [redacted], Correspondence – A-D, Membership Files Daughters of Bilitis San Francisco Chapter, January 3 – December 18, 1966 and undated. MS Phyllis Lyon, Del Martin and the Daughters of Bilitis Box 3, Folder 3. Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Historical Society. Archives of Sexuality & Gender. Accessed 14 Jan. 2017.

continues. This is a great example of how DOB or MRG gained foreign members; through word of mouth and lending copies of the magazines, lesbians became aware of homosexual rights groups an ocean away. The Nottingham author recognized that there was power in this international connect, and she believed that English and American lesbians should unite to better combat homophobia: “I hope you don’t mind me writing, but we all feel that we would like to know more about our sisters overseas, the problems & things they have to face & the way they overcome them. Life in American must be a whole lot different from life in England, judging from some of the letters you get.”¹⁷¹

Communicating with allies outside their immediate community gave lesbians new avenues to learn about resistance techniques and introduced them to more potential friends. This was still the 1960s, however, and mail communication could be cumbersome and slow. Gittings doesn’t respond to the Nottingham author until six months later:

Please forgive the long delay in answering you! I wear two hats as the saying goes, and am on a treadmill, never quite catching up. Under separate cover I’m mailing you several back issues of THE LADDER and more copies of these form letters, so that you can pass them along to your friends. At current exchange rates, a pound equals \$2.80 in American dollars. A bank will figure the amount of your money that you’d need to send us and can provide some kind of bank draft for transfer of funds. Your post office also probably makes money orders available. DOB would be very happy to have you and your friends as members and/or subscribers to the magazine! We welcome enthusiastic support and are grateful for the hands of friendship you offer.¹⁷²

Gittings broke down the many steps lesbians had to go through to subscribe to an international homophile magazine. It was not easy to learn current exchange rates and to visit a local bank to

¹⁷¹ Letter to Barbara Gittings from [redacted], A-C, Correspondence - The Ladder Daughters of Bilitis National. January 25-December, 1963; MS Phyllis Lyon, Del Martin and the Daughters of Bilitis Box 11, Folder 5. Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Historical Society. Archives of Sexuality & Gender. Accessed 14 Jan. 2017.

¹⁷² Letter from Barbara Gittings to [redacted], Correspondence - the Ladder Daughters of Bilitis National. December 10, 1963-February 25, 1965; MS Phyllis Lyon, Del Martin and the Daughters of Bilitis Box 12, Folder 6. Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Historical Society. Archives of Sexuality & Gender. Accessed 14 Jan. 2017.

transfer funds or buy a money order, and readers' willingness to do this showed their commitment to lesbian rights and their need for representation beyond their own communities.

Uniting with the Competition: The Alliance of Barbara Gittings and Esme Langley

As editor of *The Ladder* when *Arena Three* was first published, Gittings feared the magazine would overtake *The Ladder* in popularity. As mentioned in Chapter One, Gittings' time as editor was fraught with leadership disputes. Gittings both extended this rivalry across the Atlantic and identified lesbian Britons as allies in her crusade to elevate lesbian communities worldwide. Moreover, despite her initial fear of the British magazine, Gittings seemed to have established a relationship with Langley early on since she asked Barbara Grier to write for *Arena Three* in a letter dated in March 1964: "Look, you have no idea what it takes to start a magazine . . . Esme is working hard on a dozen fronts at least." Grier had been thinking about extending her writing talents to publications outside *The Ladder* such as *Janus Society Newsletter* but she must have listened to Gittings for *Arena Three* published much work by Grier during the 1960s.¹⁷³ In many cases, Gittings watched out for Langley and A3, and Langley repaid the favor by publishing Gittings' self-publicizing letters and rebuking anti-DOB sentiments.

In addition to forming an alliance with Langley, Gittings also used *Arena Three*'s existence to scare her production staff into following her directions. In a letter to DOB president Cleo Bonner, Gittings warned that "THE LADDER is no longer the only Lesbian magazine in the English-speaking world. We're going to be up against some bright competition from the British magazine ARENA THREE and must begin to look more professional in format." Gittings used many aspects about Langley and her magazine to intimidate a staff that she believed ruined issues with formatting and grammar errors. She called Langley a "highly articulate and well-

¹⁷³ Barbara Gittings to Barbara Grier, March 16, 1964, quoted in *Indomitable*, 48.

educated writer” and described how Langley clarified a misunderstood sentence: “Esme answered with a description of how Cockney-origin words and phrases filter upwards into the language of England’s best-spoken. . . . The average LADDER reader may . . . think this passage an immature or uneducated person’s expression and may well wonder why it was included!” With this explanation, Gittings implied that the staff adds to the immaturity and lack of education of *The Ladder* when they overlook things that the “well-educated” editor of their competition understands. She ended by explaining that she “can’t afford to put so much love and effort into THE LADDER and have it turn out shabby!”¹⁷⁴ Gittings utilized Britons as a symbol of the right level of sophistication and education to convey her requests for the magazine.

Gittings also turned to MRG to inform more women about her activism. A few months after Gittings was fired from *The Ladder*, a letter from her appeared in A3 that promoted her media appearances: “I recently saw the Bryan Magee film in which you were interviewed! It was . . . shown as the opener for the National Council of Churches seminar when I and a homosexual man delivered ‘responses’ to it (having seen it in advance for the purpose). I’ll be sending you a copy of my talk responding to the film shortly.” Gittings’ intentions were not just about self-promotion; she wanted to alert lesbian Britons to a psychiatrist named Irving Bieber who made “unctuous remarks about the good chance of a ‘cure’, and about how the ‘early signs of homosexuality are now known’, and teachers and others who deal with children should be on the lookout and catch ‘em early.” She continued by describing “one serious challenge” to Bieber but also makes sure that A3 readers know that she is an influential person in the American lesbian community: “You recall that I worked very closely with [the challenger] on this paper while still

¹⁷⁴ Letter from Gittings to Cleo Bonner, January 22, 1964; Phyllis Lyon, Del Martin and the Daughters of Bilitis Box 12, Folder 6. Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Historical Society. Archives of Sexuality & Gender, tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/4DgdP6. Accessed 13 Jan. 2017.

Editor of the 'Ladder'. Reprints will soon be available – could you use a few?" Although she was not editor anymore, the success of *The Ladder* was still important to Gittings because reprints increased her notoriety. She ended her letter by reassuring her alliance with Langley: "I feel much indebted to you and if there's anything I could send you from this side of the pond, just let me know."¹⁷⁵ This alliance was essential to Gittings because A3 helped her reach a similar international audience as *The Ladder* while bypassing the inter-group tensions of the DOB.

Langley also understood the significance of alliances with members of foreign lesbian groups, especially with the DOB. Responding graciously to Gittings' letter, she assumed that A3 readers all over the world will appreciate Gittings' contributions: "We'd certainly be very grateful for copies of the reprints you mention, and indeed all else of likely interest to our readers up and down the world." Additionally, she made sure that her readers, especially her American readers, know that she appreciated them: "And 'A3' takes this opportunity of wishing you all the handsomest Compliments of the Season!"¹⁷⁶ The platform that Langley gave to *The Ladder* was telling of both Gittings and Grier's influence over *Arena Three* since both publications were competing for many of the same readers. Moreover, it is surprising that Langley did not fear that publishing so many of Grier's reviews would bore A3 readers since many of them already read monthly reviews from Grier in *The Ladder*. In September 1966, Langley even published a defense the American magazine: "Most 'A3' readers will already know that The Ladder is a perfectly serious, intelligent and responsibly-edited monthly magazine, published by the US Lesbian organization, DOB, INC."¹⁷⁷ Both DOB and MRG understood there was a lot of publicity and influence to gain by uniting with other homophile organizations.

¹⁷⁵ Barbara Gittings, "A Letter from Philadelphia" in "Mailbag," *Arena Three*, December 1966, 15.

¹⁷⁶ Esme Langley in a note to Gittings, "Mailbag," *Arena Three*, December 1966, 15.

¹⁷⁷ --, "Note on *The Ladder*," *Arena Three*, September 1966, 2.

“The Ladder Salutes Arena Three”

DOB was committed to promoting other lesbian organizations in the pages of its magazine, even if Gittings initially characterized A3 as the competition. The group expressed this commitment when they published an article from Langley in celebration of A3’s first anniversary in January 1965. “As many LADDER readers know by now, ARENA THREE is the only other magazine in the English-speaking realm which focuses on the lesbian,” Gittings wrote. Her activism goals overrode her fear of being overshadowed by A3 since she showers the magazine with compliments: “Its present mimeographed form is one of the liveliest and most sophisticated homophile publications.” Gittings suggests that A3 is on the same level as TL, which is significant since few scholars of homophile organizations have acknowledged MRG’s role in the international network.

A lengthy advertisement for M.R.G. followed Gittings’ message wherein Langley described the Group’s background and included an excerpt from an application to the group that explained M.R.G. was “an association of people who are at present concerned about the problems of female homosexuality.” Interestingly, Langley did not limit membership to people who identified as lesbians. She explained that “one of the objects of the Group is to free female homosexuality from the prurience, sensationalism, and vulgar voyeurism with which it is associated in some minds.” Her promotion of M.R.G. continued by describing the group’s successes during their first year: “Our public image has improved in previously ill-informed and prejudiced circles; our monthly magazine has met with an enthusiastic welcome not only in Britain but throughout the world, and the standard of contributions sent in by M.R.G. members has been extremely high.”¹⁷⁸ More than any other members, Langley recognized the effect of A3

¹⁷⁸ Esme Langley, THE LADDER Salutes ARENA THREE, January 1965, 23-27.

beyond Britain and wrote about its international influence frequently. Like Gittings and Grier, Langley understood the power of tapping into a network that stretched far beyond national boundaries.

Correspondence was not the only tool of resistance between DOB and MRG members. As stated previously, literature played a crucial role in lesbian communities since it gave readers the ability to consume lesbian narratives in the privacy of their own homes. Reading and criticizing lesbian literature also served as a bridge between the United States and Britain, and more often than not, Barbara Grier was the driving force behind this transnational literary connection.

Barbara Grier and *Arena Three*

When Grier received word that MRG intended to publish Britain's first lesbian magazine, she "sent an enthusiastic airmail letter to *Arena Three* editor Esme Langley expressing her delight In return correspondence, Langley expressed eagerness to have an American contributor to the magazine and suggested [Grier] write something for an upcoming issue."¹⁷⁹ Grier took Langley's suggestion seriously and quickly sent off her reviews to England. The magazine began publishing her in June 1964, and "by September she had become known as 'Our American contributor.' Her work appeared there off and on throughout the next four years, enhancing her reputation as a lesbian literary critic and expanding her network of contacts in the English-speaking world."¹⁸⁰

Since many aspiring lesbian novelists saw homophile magazines as stepping stones toward a professional writing career, Grier relied on *Arena Three* and other publications to

¹⁷⁹ Passet, 48.

¹⁸⁰ Passet, 48-49.

expose readers to her fiction. Her work “portrayed normalized lesbian life: well-mannered and contented lesbians holding jobs as secretaries and accountants, socializing in bars and restaurants, and living in stable, monogamous relationships. Occasionally, characters wore men’s pants and went by such androgynous names as Lee and Darrell, but overall they appeared happy, responsible and unthreatening.”¹⁸¹

The Grapevine

The Grapevine by Jess Stearn is a great example of lesbians utilizing books as a tool of resistance since its controversial content inspired much debate over what constituted useful lesbian representation, and its popularity among heterosexual readers forced lesbians to rethink their usual modes of communication. An Australian reader of *Arena Three* recalled how the book introduced Customs to *The Ladder*:

I noticed that after the ‘Grapevine’ came out for sale in Australia (giving publicity to DOB and ‘The Ladder’), it was after that time that Customs started to confiscate my copies of ‘The Ladder’ – they didn’t seem to know of its existence before that. ‘The Grapevine’ was reviewed by Customs in late 1965, before it was allowed to be sold to the public’ and in 1966 they confiscated my January and February ‘Ladder’ and have got four more since then. So the publicity for A3 was no good, as far as I am concerned.¹⁸²

Interestingly, this reader believed that the increased notoriety of homophile organizations only hurt the community because more heterosexuals could now identify their modes of resistance. Her letter was also important because it demonstrated how the international network helped lesbians protect themselves from homophobia. Readers might not have known that many “outsiders” knew about *The Ladder* because of *The Grapevine*’s popularity and therefore would not know that they had to take extra precautions to protect their identities when consuming homophile literature.

¹⁸¹ Passet, 73.

¹⁸² G. Mackenzie, “Letter from Australia,” *Arena Three*, September 1966, 2.

Jess Stearn authored books on the “hidden” world of the mid-twentieth century homosexual, and many gays and lesbians found his first book, *The Sixth Man*, to be encouragingly objective about homosexual men. *The Grapevine*, however, angered some readers who considered his depiction of lesbians incorrect and harmful. DOB members were split on whether Stearn’s involvement in the lesbian community was helpful, most notably Martin vs. Grier and Gittings. Martin invited Stearn to speak publically about his research many times; she believed his commentary on lesbians increased DOB visibility and improved opinions about homosexuals in the mainstream media.¹⁸³ In contrast, Grier thought Stearn’s book only hurt the community and she called it a “crass journalistic paste-up.” She thought another book, *The Lesbian in America* by Donald Webster Cory, was more successful at depicting a positive image of the lesbian: “Mr. Cory’s book, despite flaws, is a well-intentioned effort to discuss lesbians and the lesbian minority from an armchair psychology/sociology viewpoint.”¹⁸⁴ Gittings also hated *The Grapevine*: “That review was an absolutely fraud, a prostitution of our position for the sake of selling the book thru the book service . . . [Martin’s] standards are simply different and actually we disagree with her almost across the board on political matters as well.”¹⁸⁵

Debates over “Valuable” Lesbian Literature in *The Ladder* and *Arena Three*

Literature was a source of tension among DOB, MRG, and the readers of their magazines because, as seen with Stearn’s work, it had the ability to shape mainstream society’s opinions about lesbians. While members often disagreed about the usefulness of salacious literature, their dialogue further strengthened lesbian resistance in the international network. Arguments over literature happened both in the pages of *The Ladder* and *Arena Three* and in the personal letters

¹⁸³ Meeker, 128-132.

¹⁸⁴ Gene Damon, “Literature Review in ’64,” February-March 1965, 22.

¹⁸⁵ Barbara Gittings, quoted from Passet, 42.

of leaders in these organizations. For instance, Martin was not hesitant about calling out books that she believed were “trash” and hurt the lesbian reputation. Grier, on the other hand, “recognized readers came from all walks of life and read for many reasons: self-improvement, self-understanding, escape. As she knew from personal experience and from the many women who wrote to her, any book that helped a lesbian recognize herself in print was worthy of recognition and preservation.” Gittings also challenged Grier’s inclusion of “trash” and she wanted Grier to focus more on “quality nonfiction,” so it was quite significant that Grier held firm even though many DOB members thought she was wasting her time collecting books that many considered obscene.¹⁸⁶

When it came to confrontations with Gittings, who was determined that “sleazy” literature disappeared from the pages of *The Ladder*, Grier held strong in her conviction to propagate any book with lesbian representation, no matter if the work was seen as valuable or not. In September 1964, Gittings demanded that Grier “be more selective and drop the trash” from the list of books she reviewed for the magazine. Gittings went a step further and threatened to limit Grier’s control over published literary reviews, which was a scary prospect for Grier since “such a step would have decimated [her] column because fully eighty-nine percent of the titles included in ‘Lesbian Literature in ‘63’ consisted of original paperback novels.” Gittings told Grier that “I simply don’t see *The Ladder*’s function as pandering to the taste of the lowest denominator. Why shouldn’t it by-pass or try to elevate the taste of the dog-cat-bat reader, instead of catering to her comic-book level . . . What the poor schnooks need . . . is to have another lesbian periodical which will feed them exactly what they want.”¹⁸⁷ Despite this pressure from Gittings, Grier refused to eliminate “trash” literature from her column and turned to other

¹⁸⁶ Passet, 44.

¹⁸⁷ Passet, 78.

magazines, including *Arena Three*, to publish more of her reviews. Grier's determination to highlight a variety of works gave her readers in both magazines a better understanding of their literary options. For many readers, these works reassured them that they were not alone and broadened their ideas about the lesbian and her role in society. All of these things accumulated in the strengthening of readers' resistance in an era when lesbianism was still seen by many doctors and journalists as a mental illness.

DOB's Battle with A "Tell All" Lesbian Pulp

This tension over literature was seen the most in DOB and MRG's relationship to lesbian pulp fiction novels. In the 1930s, publishing companies introduced a new way of producing books with cheaper materials. This resulted in the mass production of pulp novels, which were easily consumable by the public because they cost less than hardbacks and were sold in highly-trafficked areas such as bus terminals. Although these novels were printed on thin paper, they represented much more than entertainment for many lesbians since "finding, buying and keeping the paperbacks was a political act. . . . To pick the books out, carry them to the counter and face the other shoppers and the cashier was often tantamount to a coming out declaration."¹⁸⁸

Although many lesbians viewed their purchasing of these pulps as a "declaration," many others in the network believed that the novels hurt the lesbian reputation too much to be considered beneficial.

Early on in *The Ladder's* publication, the DOB made it a point to challenge lesbian pulps for their skewed representation of lesbian relationships. As scholar Suzanna Danuta Walters details, the pulps "occupied an ambiguous space" in the community since they "often conflicted

¹⁸⁸ Suzanna Danuta Walters, "As Her Hand Crept Slowly up Her Thigh: Ann Bannon and the Politics of Pulp," *Social Text*, no. 23 (1989): 83-101.

with the image of the ‘nice’ lesbian (a regular girl just like you and me) promoted by the homophile organizations.”¹⁸⁹ In many ways, the pulps *were* harmful to the lesbians: most pulps were written by and for men, and their depictions were usually closer to caricatures than reality. Some of these paperbacks were written by women, however, and many lesbians, yearning for representation, flipped through their pages in the privacy of their own home. Katherine V. Forrest, author of many lesbian novels, remembered her first time purchasing a lesbian pulp: “Overwhelming need led me to walk the gauntlet of fear up to the cash register. Fear so intense that I remember nothing more, only that I stumbled out of the store in possession of what I knew I must have, a book as necessary to me as air.”¹⁹⁰ Despite some lesbians sharing a special bond with the “original paperbacks,” many producers and readers of *The Ladder* decried the vulgarity of their content and believed lesbians should strive to read more intellectually stimulating fiction.

The most well-known confrontation between DOB and lesbian pulps happened in 1957. On May 28, the Daughters held a public debate over the merits of the “controversial book” *We Walk Alone* by Ann Aldrich. Some members, including Martin, believed that Aldrich offered a skewed portrayal of lesbianism: “For all [of] Miss Aldrich’s good intentions she did not achieve her purpose and failed to balance her more bizarre examples of Lesbianism with those who have attained adjustment and are useful, productive citizens in today’s society.” Similar to the *Arena Three* reader M.S. from Chapter Two, DOB’s criticizing Aldrich’s book because it did not contain lesbians who do “useful” things. Another criticism is that Aldrich “placed too much emphasis on the lack of finances or low income of the Lesbian (Ann Aldrich cites this factor as being the main reason the Lesbian as a rule does not seek therapy). The speaker felt that many

¹⁸⁹ Walters, 85.

¹⁹⁰ Katherine V. Forrest, (Introduction) *Lesbian Pulp Fiction: The Sexually Intrepid World of Lesbian Paperback Novels 1950-1965*, ed. Katherine V. Forrest (San Francisco: Cleis Press Inc., 2005), xiv.

Lesbians had very good positions—of responsibility and remuneration.” The Daughters wanted to diversify the lesbian reputation and believed that Aldrich’s work supported the very caricatures that the organization worked to nullify. Martin went on to defend Aldrich’s work by pointing out the value in negative depictions: “All too many homophile readers were looking for "affirmation" rather than information or a well-rounded picture of Lesbianism, that a true picture must include the negative aspects.”¹⁹¹ By pointing out both the flaws and positives of Aldrich’s work, Martin and other DOB members left it up to readers to decide for themselves if lesbians benefited from *We Walk Alone* and other lesbian pulps.

Disputes over the Value of British Lesbian Literature

Literature also played a major role in shaping the resistance of readers of *Arena Three* by sparking debates over whether lesbian fiction should do more to depict happy characters that everyday lesbians found relatable. Like Martin and Grier, Langley encouraged debate over literary works and often wrote about her own experiences with novels in articles for A3. As seen in Chapter Two, much of A3’s early content was about literature that depicted lesbians, especially Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness*. A point of criticism of Hall’s novel was whether or not her depiction was relatable to the everyday lesbian. Although Langley wrote about venturing all the way to Paris to get her hands on a copy, she believed that the lesbians found in Hall’s work were not familiar to many readers because “the ‘Lesbian’ presented, in various guises, in the pages of literature by such writers as Ian Fleming, H.E. Bates, even Radclyffe Hall (if she is lucky enough to find a copy) is not of her world at all.” She described visiting the local library as an alienating experience for a lesbian looking for representation: “The young Lesbian may go to the library in vain. Almost nothing had been written about her—

¹⁹¹ --, “Aldrich ‘Walks Alone,’ *The Ladder*, June 1957, 16.

although she may find numerous books about the male, little or nothing they contain is of the slightest relevance or help to her. There are no reports of public prosecutions for her to consult to find out what others of her kind have done in the past, and what happened.”¹⁹² Langley’s account highlighted the importance Grier’s accumulation of lesbian literature and the ties that she and many other lesbians made in the international network. Without reading Grier’s monthly discussion of popular and rare books depicting lesbians and engaging in fruitful debates over literary lesbian representation, many women in North America and Europe would have believed that the alienating experience at her local library was the only choice available.

The Well of Loneliness created much debate over the lesbian reputation in *Arena Three*, and many readers agreed with Langley about its lack of relatability. A reader thought lesbian literature needed to have more happy endings and chided *The Well of Loneliness* for being too depressing:

What I find unpleasant is the miserable public image created by 99% of homosexual literature seen by the general public. When I first read the “Well of Loneliness” as an enlightened schoolgirl, my reaction was ‘Oh dear! I’m not as miserable as I should be. Maybe I’m not queer after all!’ I can think only of two books I have read on the subject, which have happy endings. All the others are full of messages and misery . . . There is a desperate need for happy books and plays, not only to change our public image of neuroses ridden sex maniacs, but to cheer up our own miserable misfits.¹⁹³

This reader believed sad endings hurt the lesbian reputation because they promoted the idea that lesbians could not possibly experience fulfilling lives without taking part in the heterosexual world. She also points out how literature with sad endings ultimately hurt lesbians themselves because many internalized these messages of misery and wondered if there was something wrong with them if they did not feel like the distraught characters.

¹⁹² Langley, “The Lesbians of England,” 3.

¹⁹³ Miss J. Purvis, “Happy Homosexual,” *Arena Three*, Vol. 8, Issue 5, 5.

On the other hand, some supported *The Well of Loneliness* and thought readers were asking too much of the novel. An *Arena Three* correspondent took issue with reviewers who called the novel “a ladylike book in all senses,” not because women who weren’t “ladylike” could appreciate its content, but because “it was after all Miss Hall’s intent to write for the general public, which even today is very conservative. If she had written an ‘unladylike’ book, she would have had even more trouble.”¹⁹⁴ At the heart of these discussions of “ladylike” characters were questions about the lesbian reputation among the greater public and how far writers should go to appease their audience when what entertained did not necessarily promote diverse portrayals of lesbianism.

Another book that caused much discussion in *Arena Three* was Maureen Duffy’s *The Microcosm*. As seen in Chapter Two, Duffy was a well-known figure among London lesbians, and many were interested to read her depiction of The Gateways Club when *The Microcosm* was published in 1966. In her review of Maureen Duffy’s *The Microcosm* in A3, Grier believed the book “lacks popular appeal, for it is truly an intellectual study, a novel of ideas, a thoughtful book.” She implied that Duffy’s novel was better than works that weren’t intellectual since “there are no words to do justice to this book” and “the reader is required to think as well as enjoy, but it is not a novel to miss.”¹⁹⁵ Another reviewer had a very different take on *The Microcosm* on the same page of the magazine:

It may be that the publishers scrambled this—Maureen Duffy’s third—novel into print to meet a deadline, for it unfortunately reads like a hastily-edited writer’s notebook, with disjointed episodes, unfinished plots, experimental switches in time and style. The reader can overlook discrepancies in spelling and casual punctuation, but cannot help being irritated by not knowing who is talking to whom, and by the inexplicable inclusion of flashbacks to 1812 and Boadicea. To the uninitiated, the book’s humourless butchiness

¹⁹⁴ --, “Book Notes,” *Arena Three*, January 1969, 11.

¹⁹⁵ Gene Damon, “The Microcosm,” *Arena Three*, June 1966, 5-6.

will be a trifle alarming, and the fact that [the main character] finally renounces her petrol pump will be of small reassurance.¹⁹⁶

While Grier believed *The Microcosm* was an intellectual achievement, other readers thought Duffy took her experimental writing too far and found her descriptions of butch gender expression too “alarming” to be helpful. This debate over the role of intellectualism in Duffy’s novel reflected the debate that occurred in the international lesbian network: What was the role of intellectualism in the fight for lesbian rights? Was intellectualism productive even when it resulted in negative depictions of lesbianism in media? Lesbians throughout the network grappled with these questions, and it was through this grappling that many lesbians broadened their understanding of helpful resistance in elevating the lesbian reputation among a mainstream audience.

This broadening of understanding was also reflected in Grier’s correspondence with Duffy, for their letters and her multiple readings of *The Microcosm* made her reconsider her stance on butch/femme gender representation. Her multiple readings of the novel “expanded and complicated her understanding of homosexuality” since “the reader encounters a diverse array of lesbians, all of them living on the social margins because of their sexual orientation.” Although Grier had many female lovers during her teenage years and had experienced serious relationships with other women, she still had little experience interacting with other lesbians face-to-face. This lack of experience “left her with a class-based understanding of butch and femme,” which made her “a particularly noisy opponent” of butch/femme identities because she “[equated] middle-class professional women with femmes and butches with working-class bar culture.”¹⁹⁷ Grier’s experience with *The Microcosm* showed how literature could broaden lesbian readers’

¹⁹⁶ C.B., “The Microcosm,” *Arena Three*, 5.

¹⁹⁷ Passet, 64.

conception of lesbianism and the many ways women expressed their gender. *The Microcosm* was an important book to Grier because she believed it “[provided] a comprehensive history of Lesbianism and [showed] the growth and amalgamation with the world at large.”¹⁹⁸ Both her analysis of the book and her discussions with Duffy made her rethink her previous misconceptions about lesbian identities.

The international lesbian network helped many women connect with others who shared the same goals for lesbian rights. The DOB and MRG played an important role in the network because they provided readers the space in the pages of their magazines to discuss lesbian representation with others in the network. For many isolated lesbians, *The Ladder* and *Arena Three* made them feel less alone and gave them hope for a better future for lesbians.

¹⁹⁸ Gene Damon, “The Microcosm,” *Arena Three*, 5-6.

Conclusion

The Daughters of Bilitis came about during a time of immense homophobia. All across the United States, police increased their crackdown on gay and lesbian bars, the federal government sought to exclude homosexuals from the professional sphere with the “Lavender Scare,” and neighborhood doctors took it upon themselves to “cure” homosexuality in patients. While much of this was not new, homosexuals possessed a larger public role in the 1950s due to World War II and the popularity of gay and lesbian pulp fiction novels with heterosexual audiences. At first, the DOB just wanted to connect with other lesbians and allies in the Bay Area, but the group’s aims soon shifted to include reaching lesbians throughout the English-speaking world. Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin promoted positive representation for lesbians through many strategies including the collaboration with heterosexual allies in the media and religion. They also sought to educate lesbians about their self-worth and legal rights by establishing connections counselors and lawyers. Their goals were not always shared with other DOB members, especially when it came to *The Ladder*. There was much disagreement about the direction of the magazine, with Barbara Gittings and Barbara Grier resenting the power that Lyon and Martin had over *The Ladder*. These disagreements led to Gittings being fired from the editor position and Grier participating in the magazine’s theft in the late 1960s.

The Minorities Research Group emerged in a relatively similar climate as the DOB, although the Wolfenden Committee Report accomplished something that was quite unique for the time period by acknowledging that gay and lesbian Britons had a right to privately engage in same-sex relations. Many lesbian bars called London home, including the most renowned—the Gateways Club. Members of MRG were familiar with the Gateways, and many, including MRG founder Esme Langley, thought it was the group’s responsibility to elevate London lesbians

beyond the flirtation and vice of the bars. Moreover, many regulars at the Gateways participated in butch/femme gender representation, and many fights occurred during early MRG meetings about what was “proper” conduct for members. Langley wanted the face of MRG to be business professionalism, but many members resented this and her authoritative leadership of the group and *Arena Three*. Only a year into MRG’s life, many members deserted Langley to form their own group, Kenric. While Langley continued to run MRG and A3 throughout the 1960s, the group’s influence arguably never recovered, and many former MRG members were left with reservations about publishing a homophile magazine after dealing with Langley’s control of A3.

The DOB and MRG shared many goals, and the elevation of the lesbian was one of them. It is difficult to speak in broad terms about both groups, however, and tension existed in both San Francisco and London about what this elevation should look like. Both groups endured internal disagreements about group activities and the direction of their magazines. While both groups experienced these power struggles, certain DOB and MRG members looked to the international lesbian network, and more particularly, the link between TL and A3, to further their ambitions for lesbian rights. The women of DOB and MRG sent each other mail, called each other up on the phone, and traveled across the Atlantic to continue their conversations about lesbian resistance in person. Their communication shaped their personal understandings of resistance and ended up in their magazines, which helped readers craft their own resistance.

Correspondence between DOB and MRG had the greatest effect. In personal and published letters, the women challenged the invisibility of the lesbian since it seemed like she only had worth when her actions became criminal. They also discussed the value of lesbian representation in books, films, and television. They alerted each other to television programs where lesbianism was defended and they shared ideas of what a successful defense of lesbianism

looked like. They read, critiqued, and shared each other's literary work, which positioned literature as a key tool for resistance. These poems and short stories asked what it meant to be a lesbian, why she was so hated by the heterosexual world, and what could be done to end her persecution. The DOB and MRG also shared their experience of forming lesbian rights groups through the international network, and they helped women in places such as Germany understand what it took to build resistance in their own neighborhoods.

The DOB and MRG were products of an era before the feminist movement, and many members understood that by the 1970s it was time for another crop of organizations and publications to take on the fight for lesbian rights. Furthermore, this emergence of feminist organizations such as NOW and other more radical groups “signaled an important shift in the communication networks of women in the United States overall.”¹⁹⁹ This shift occurred in part because “gone were the days when women who were exploring their sexual desires had extremely limited options for places in which to do so” and the options lesbians had to connect with one another “expanded exponentially” with the introduction of new feminist groups.²⁰⁰

Many women, inspired by the new discourse on gender equality, established their own magazines to promote feminism, and *The Ladder* and *Arena Three* turned away from solely focusing on lesbian issues to feed their own changing political views. They were unable to keep up in a radical environment flushed with many publication choices, however, and ceased publication in the early 1970s. Their legacy was immense since they paved the way for magazines such as the American *Lesbian Tide* and the British *Sappho*. Both *The Tide* and *Sappho* had close connections to the DOB and MRG, for *The Tide* began as a DOB newsletter

¹⁹⁹ Meeker, 226.

²⁰⁰ Meeker, 227.

in 1971 by the Los Angeles chapter and *Sappho* was founded in part by Jackie Forster, who was an original member of MRG.

More needs to be done on the ties between the Daughters of Bilitis and Minorities Research Group. Although book-length scholarship about the DOB exists, the historiography still waits for such a publication about MRG. There is still much to learn from the achievements of homophile leaders such as Barbara Grier, Barbara Gittings, Esme Langley, and Diana Chapman. Today lesbians in North America and Europe experience better representation in media and hold more civil rights in part because of the groundwork laid by the Daughters of Bilitis and Minorities Research Group during the mid-twentieth century.

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Curriculum Vitae

Linsey Scriven
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EDUCATION

University of Nevada, Las Vegas
M.A., History, May 2017

Mills College
M.F.A., Creative Writing, May 2015

University of Nevada, Las Vegas
B.A., Journalism, May 2013

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

History 100 Discussion Instructor, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, January 2017 to May 2017

- Taught supplement section to HIST 100
- Prepared students for tests and quizzes
- Focused on historical writing skills
- Organized and graded testing materials

History 101 Teaching Assistant, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, August 2016 to December 2016

- Supported professor in classroom management
- Graded weekly posts and essays via Turnitin
- Worked one-on-one with students to improve historical writing
- Organized and distributed learning materials

History 110 Graduate Assistant, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, January 2016 to Present

- Assisted professor in online course construction and organization
- Created test and essay questions
- Graded discussion posts and final projects
- Uploaded reading material to online platform

History 101 Teaching Assistant, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, August 2015 to December 2015

- Assisted professor in classroom management

- Graded weekly posts and essays via Turnitin
- Worked one-on-one with students to improve historical writing
- Organized and distributed learning materials

Writing Center Fellow, Mills College, Oakland, CA, August 2014 to May 2015

- Tutored students in liberal arts and sciences
- Led teaching workshops to undergraduate tutors
- Conducted academic skills workshops to undergraduate students
- Organized and conducted creative writing workshops to undergraduate students

English 100 Teaching Assistant, Mills College, Oakland, CA, August 2013 to May 2014

- Conducted weekly one-on-one writing labs with students
- Undertook curriculum planning and lecture responsibilities
- Created discussion-based lesson plans that established Composition techniques
- Edited and discussed student research papers

ACADEMIC AND CREATIVE WRITING WORKSHOPS

- “Controlling the Voices: How to Implement Effective Dialogue in Creative Works” April 2015
- “Taming the Beast: Using Research Effectively in Academic Essays” March 2015
- “Everyday Plagiarism” March 2015
- “How to Utilize Dialogue in Creative Works” November 2014
- “Surviving Finals as a Writing Center Tutor” November 2014

HISTORICAL AWARDS AND CONFERENCE PANELS

Kalafatis Lodge-Clark Scholar for Fall 2016

Silent Sin City: Brief Histories of Underrepresented Groups in Las Vegas, Oral History Association Conference, October 2016

ACADEMIC PUBLICATIONS

Berkley, Shelley. Oral history by Linsey Scriven and Emylia Terry. “Part One: Congresswoman Shelley

Berkley and the American Dream.” *The Women’s Research Institute of Nevada*. The Women’s Research Institute of Nevada, April 2011. Web. Video.

Berkley, Shelley. Oral history by Linsey Scriven and Emylia Terry. “Part Two: Congresswoman Shelley

Berkley, the Public Servant.” *The Women’s Research Institute of Nevada*. The Women’s Research Institute of Nevada, April 2011. Web. Video.

LITERARY PUBLICATIONS AND AWARDS

2015 Winner of the Marion Hood Boess Haworth Prize in Fiction for Children and Young Adults

“Learning to Drive.” *The Boiler Journal*. Fall 2014.

JOURNALISM PUBLICATIONS

“Shakespeare Company facility opening delayed.” *Las Vegas CityLife*. April 2013.

“Documentary on Westside concluding TV run tomorrow.” *Las Vegas CityLife*. Feb 2013.

Various film synopses. *Las Vegas CityLife*. November 2012 through May 2013.

Various articles. *The Rebel Yell*. January through October 2012.

“Woman of the Month: Dr. Marcia Gallo.” *QVegas* Jan 2011: 18. Print.

“R-Generation – Teens Suffering from Depression Not Alone.” *The Las Vegas Review Journal*
20 Mar

2007: Volume 14. Print.

ACTIVITIES AND VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE

2015 National Education for Women’s Leadership Nevada Conference Day Coordinator

2012 Association of College Unions International Conference

2011 National Education for Women’s Leadership Nevada Conference Attendee

2011 Peers Advocating Anti-Violence Education, Jean Nidetch Women’s Center

2010 Student Conduct Board, University of Nevada, Las Vegas

2010 NODA Conference

INTERNSHIPS

Las Vegas CityLife, Fall 2012 - Spring 2013

- Interviewed community leaders for publications, researched community activities, edited and wrote blog entries for lasvegascitylife.com

Jean Nidetch Women’s Center - Summer 2011

- Updated community resource pamphlet, updated social media, organized Take Back the Night event