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QUEERING DESIRE

Lesbians, Gender, and Subjectivity

Edited by Róisín Ryan-Flood and Amy Tooth Murphy

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21

DESIRE ON THE INSIDE

Incarcerated Women, Bisexual Identity, and Human Connection

Amy B. Smoyer and Rebecca Harvey

About one-third of the nearly 200,000 people incarcerated in US women's prisons identify as sexual minority women (Meyer et al. 2017; Kajstura 2019; The Sentencing Project 2022). Against the backdrop of a popular culture that is simultaneously repulsed by and curious about incarcerated lesbians and women having sex with women in prison (Herman 2003; Millbank 2004; Ciasullo 2008), social science research about the 'complex landscape' (Carr et al. 2020, p. 561) of human sexuality in correctional settings has been criticised as limited, reductive, and homophobic (Millbank 2004; Severance 2004; Kunzel 2008; Jackson 2011; Vasiliou 2020). By narrowly focusing on discrimination against lesbian, gay, and transgender people in carceral settings, existing literature tends to centre 'vulnerability and deviance' instead of 'more textured understandings of the pains, pleasures, and embodied experiences of prison' (Carr et al. 2020, p. 561). Further, this narrow focus has the effect of minimising what LGBTQIA+ people can teach and model for all people about how to survive in carceral settings and other contexts that disqualify and belittle our shared humanity.

To address this gap in our empirical knowledge, we conducted 14 interviews with people who identified as sexual minorities and who had been incarcerated at the state's only women's prison[1] in the past five years. All data collection took place in a small city in the northeastern region of the United States. The goal of this qualitative inquiry was to build knowledge about the lived experience of incarceration among people who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or reported having sex with women prior to or during incarceration. To recruit participants for this study, we posted flyers in public spaces and asked social service agencies and organising groups that collaborate with formerly incarcerated people and LGBTQIA+ communities

to share the flyer with their communities. Interviews were conducted in a private meeting room in the city's central public library, audiotaped, and transcribed for analysis.

When directly asked, a great majority of the people who participated in the study (n=12, 86%) included bisexuality in their narratives about sexual orientation. This sample is consistent with national demographics: A 2021 survey of adults in the United States found that 57% of LGBT people identify as bisexual and that women are three times more likely to identify as bisexual than men (Jones 2022). Still, we were surprised by this representation. The fact that we had not anticipated the sample's composition, even though we are social scientists with programmes of research and community practice that centre LGBTQIA+ communities, reflects the extent to which bisexuality has been 'bypassed' and rendered invisible by academics and US culture more generally (Callis 2009, p. 213). Indeed, bisexuality interrupts queer theory and other scholarship about sexuality by calling 'into question the hetero-homosexual binary that structures conceptualizations of sexuality' (Feldman 2009, p. 259). Further complicating the discourse is the fact that the term – bisexuality – lacks a 'singular or simple definition' (Callis 2009, p. 214). The meaning of bisexuality is derived from what it is not: a negative space that exists between and among the hetero/homo binary that 'does not depend on the repudiation of difference and the disavowal of internal and symbolic limits' (Feldman 2009, p. 260). Indeed, as we will elaborate further on in this chapter, it seemed like many of the study participants had difficulty articulating a term that could adequately capture their fluid identities and chose 'bisexual' as a rejection of the other terms, a default, rather than an accurate descriptor.

Methods

The protocol for this study was reviewed and approved by our University's Institutional Review Board. As was described earlier, we used convenience sampling to recruit 14 individuals who had been incarcerated in the state's women's prison in the past five years. These individual interviews were equally conducted by the first or second authors. Participants were compensated $30 for their time. All the interviews, each lasting about one hour, were audiotaped and transcribed by an online transcription service (www.temi.com) with review and final edits by student research assistants. All identifying information, including names, dates, and addresses, was removed during transcription. The names that are used in presenting this data are pseudonyms.

The total study sample included 12 cisgender bisexual women and two non-binary lesbians. In response to the identified gaps in knowledge about bisexuality and the fact that almost all of our study participants currently or

previously identified as bisexual, we decided to focus this analysis on exploring the narratives of these participants (n = 12). These 12 participants were primarily people of colour, identifying as Latinx (n=4), African American/Black (n=4), multi-racial (n=1) and White (n=3). Their average age was 38 years old (range 27–55). Five of the women had been incarcerated only one time, and three had been incarcerated on over ten occasions. Most had experienced short terms of detention (less than one year); one woman had been incarcerated for five years and three had completed two-year bids.[2] Most participants (n=10) had children. Four had been married to a man and one was currently married to a woman.

The transcribed interviews were loaded into Dedoose, an online qualitative data management system that facilitates data analysis. We then followed the thematic analysis process described by Braun and Clark (2006). After familiarising ourselves with the study data, we carefully read each transcript and generated an initial set of codes. The first author then coded all 12 interviews using these initial codes and adding additional codes that were identified in vivo. The coded data was then reviewed by both authors to review and define the final themes.

Results

The data analysis process identified two themes in the participants' narratives: the desire to be seen and understood as bisexual and the desire for human connection. Each of these themes is explicated below.

Bisexual Identity

In response to our inquiry about sexual orientation, study participants conveyed a clear and determined desire to authentically describe their sexuality to us and themselves. Given the limitations of language about sexuality, this was a difficult task. While all participants in this analysis used the word 'bisexual' to describe their sexual orientation, they often resisted labels and struggled to explain the fluidity of their sexual orientations and identities. Our first interview question, 'How do you describe your sexual orientation?', often caused participants to stumble. Consider Ellie's (Latina, age 39) response:

> I am a woman and I like men and women. If I see something nice in somebody, that I feel like I can relate with, or have something in common with, that there tells me I may have a connection with someone. [...] That's probably what makes me not want to say where I'm at, where I clearly [...] I don't want to label myself 'cause the outside world they do judge and it's difficult. [...] I know a lot of females who are, that, you know, lesbians, whatever you want to call them. But for me, I came out at

a later age, which is very interesting, because I didn't think that I was, at all. But yeah, I do now because the way that [...] you know [...] just certain different things.

Ellie's reply evokes the labour of trying to fit a round peg into a square hole, as she tried to shepherd her desires into pre-established social categories. Her resistance to labels, for both herself and her lesbian acquaintances, reflects both social stigma and the inadequacy of language to describe embodied experience.

In this extended passage, Carmen (Latina, age 37) echoed Ellie's ideas about sexual desire being person-specific and touched on many of the ideas that other participants raised [italics added]:

> I really always identify myself as bisexual. Like *I knew I liked the woman.* Like when I was younger I didn't understand really what it was. But I see myself noticing females a little more, look at their shapes or like, Oh my God, they're so pretty, but like obsess over them [...] So I didn't, kind of young still so I was kinda like, *cause you know, it's like you have to like boys* [...] you have to have a baby when you're older, get married or something. So I knew it wasn't kind of right, I guess. Cause you have a mom and dad or you have an aunt and uncle, it's not like two girls, so I didn't understand it ... But I knew as I started getting older and understanding like there's such thing as lesbian or gay man and things like that. Then I know like, yeah, I think I'm a little more like curious to the woman. And so I had a couple of female partners and, or just experiments at first and then I had like a full-fledged female partner and then now like I've had kids throughout the years in that phase and stuff and now I'm back with a woman partner. So I mean I would say like, *I definitely see interest in both, but I'm more like who I love is who I love.* So right now it's a woman, if I did love a man somewhere there and there, so *I guess as a person would say* [my sexuality] is bisexual, but I just like love to people who they are.

In this response, Carmen begins by explaining that she has always felt sexual attraction to women but did not understand how to react to these feelings in a culture of compulsory heterosexuality without any same-sex role models. As she learned more about queer identities, she was able to explore her curiosities about women and had several 'full-fledged' relationships with women, including her current partner. Because she has loved men in the past, she guesses that other people would say she is bisexual, but she seems wary of this label, preferring to describe her desires and behaviour: 'I just love to people who they are'. Erin (White, no age provided) offered a similar sentiment: 'It's definitely the person and not just sex. You're attracted to somebody and you connect to somebody. Who cares what their identity is? It's just about love is love you know?'

Persistence and Permanency of Desire

Descriptions of the persistence and permanency of their sexual attractions also shaped their narratives about sexual orientation. Seven women described themselves as attracted to both men and women, identifying their bisexuality as fixed regardless of their sexual history or the gender of their current partner. In contrast, two participants explained that they had previously identified as bisexual and now consider themselves gay: Toni (Black/Latinx, age 27), who is currently married to a woman, defined her bisexuality as developmental: 'I was like in the closet in the beginning, then I started bisexual, then I became gay'. Perla (Latina, age 37) also described bisexuality as an intermediate point:

> Within the past like two years, I actually turned, you know, just straight gay. I've always been, in the past, bisexual, so I liked both. But being with men in relationships of domestics [violence] and being controlled, I decided I didn't want to be with a man no more.

Three participants reported that they identified as heterosexual and had only male partners until middle age, when their sexual orientation expanded to bisexual, and they began to have both male and female sex partners.

Like Perla (Latina, age 37), half of the participants in this study (n=6) said that they began to have sexual relationships with women after experiencing heterosexual trauma including childhood sexual assault and intimate partner violence perpetrated by male partners: 'The abuse or just, you know, the cheating and stuff' (Georgia, Black, age 48). This finding aligns with previous research that has found women 'forgo future relationships with men' because of previous abuse and trauma with men (Farel et al. 2013). While these women articulated the desire to have only female partners, they still included bisexuality in the descriptions of their sexual orientation because they had intimate relationships with men in the past and/or continued to feel an attraction to men, albeit to a lesser extent than women.

Prison Possibilities

Finally, participants described how the experience of incarceration played a role in the blossoming of their sexual orientation. Most participants (n=8) engaged in sexual behaviour with women and men prior to incarceration. Some of these women, especially those with short sentences, deliberately chose not to have sexual relationships in prison to avoid potentially complicated dynamics. Others found it affirming to be living in a place with

many openly gay women. For example, Bailey (White, age 29) found that the experience helped her to manage internalised stigma and act on her desires:

> When I went to jail, it's [same sex relationships] more open even though it's stereotyped and not supposed to happen, a lot of the girls are intimate with each other and with the inmates it's an open thing. I went to jail the first time when I was twenty-two and then I just didn't care anymore [about what people thought of her sexuality] ... A lot of women are gay, a lot of them are bisexual, and like I said it's so forbidden like we get in big trouble for that but it's like a secret, but everybody does it. [...] 75% of the females are dating a woman or have sexual relationships with a woman. [...] I'm comfortable now. I like who I am [...] I'm grateful that I'm not embarrassed anymore. Like, I'll tell the world. I don't care, you know?

There was a minority of participants (n=4) who reported that their first sexual experience with a woman took place in prison. Josephina (Latina, age 32) described:

> Prison made me find who I really am cause I used to lie just to not be hurt. I used to accommodate myself to my husband's life or my friends' life, like not to be hurt and not to feel pushed away. But being in prison I could be who I really am. I could be happy. I could be angry when I want. I found love with a person who I wanted it to be, and I was able to express that I'm bisexual.

For both Bailey and Josephina, prison provided a space where, for the first time in their lives, they did not have to hide their sexual desires from their peers.

Taken together, participants' narratives about their sexual orientation weave a larger story about their identity. Their responses to our inquiry about sexuality were an opportunity for them to share the myriad of lived experiences that have contributed to who they are today, including experiences of pleasure and pain, in prison and the community. By avoiding existing labels, participants manifest their desire to be seen as unique and dynamic human beings who have been shaped by the people and institutions around them and who possess, above all else, a desire to love and be loved.

Human Connection

Human connection surfaced as another primary theme of desire in these narratives. This finding aligns with attachment theory, which asserts that from infancy human beings are powerfully drawn towards relationships (Bowlby 1988). Secure attachments are a necessity for optimal human functioning

and enable human beings to develop self-esteem, compassion, and empathy (Siegel 2022). Similarly, attuned connections or 'feeling felt' by another person allow human beings to survive the trauma and thrive despite extraordinarily difficult circumstances (Siegel 2009, p. 10). In the context of prison, where interpersonal and institutional oppression is ubiquitous, participants described how they entered into same-sex relationships in order to meet their desire for human connections and survive the daily dehumanisation of prison life. As Ellie (Latina, age 39) explained:

> If I had been there longer maybe I would have, yeah, oh you bet your sweet ass I probably would have had me a relationship maybe one, two, three of 'em ... You want to feel like somebody's there, you always want to feel like you got somebody there.

While some women did not have the time or energy to build a relationship, most participants did make emotional and sexual connections with other women.

Emotional Care

Participants reported that peer support on the inside was critical because emotional support from family and friends in the community and professionals was limited. For example, Tiana (Black, age 45) received some financial support from one of her sisters and '[e]very now and then I might get a card or something. I tried to stay away from the phone and visits'. Other women concurred that visitation from the outside was uncommon and emotionally complicated. According to the participants, professional mental health services in the prison were limited to group therapy and psychiatric medication consults. Disconnected from social networks in the community and with limited access to professional therapists, participants relied on supportive girlfriends:

> Women are more open to listening to you than another man is so they're more like a counselor up here for me, you know, a therapist, you know, mental health worker, whatever, you know? That's the good thing about being in a relationship with a woman (Georgia, Black, age 48).

Women built intimate and romantic relationships with other women through emotional care and expressions of tenderness. Erin (White, no age) described moments of intimacy and connection with her girlfriend while riding in the prison transport van: 'We would just talk and try and touch each other without getting caught holding hands ... we could color and talk and drink coffee. Sit next to each other'. Ellie (Latina, age 39) described how connections

were made through a range of activities including, but not limited to, sex [italics added]:

> When they're bunkies, they'll do some kind of sexual activities, or in the showers. Any chance they get. Some of them want to work, and do the same things, so they can work and be together, in the same atmosphere, in the same things and they feel like, 'Oh no', you know, 'stick by me until this is over until this bit is over'. *They want to feel loved and comfortable* [...] I was able to do braids girls, you know, their hair. Talk with them, listen to them, laugh with them, watch TV [...] We got these things called 'kites' that we throw in jail, and kites are like notes and what we do is we make 'em and we turn them into a kite, and it would fit under the door, or it can be small enough to fit into a laundry bag, or throw into the shower, or throw into the room. Little notes, little letters that they write, little love letters [...] Really you find time to be with a woman, that is the hardest thing to do in there, but you will find somebody, you know, and somebody wants to find you too.

Erin's narratives delineate a range of activities that could be used to overcome the isolation and dehumanisation of prison life by connecting with others 'to feel loved and comfortable'. Similarly, Carmen (Latina, age 37) remembers the ways in which she and her partner would spend time together: '[My girlfriend and I] would play cards together or sit next to each other, watching TV, take walks in the rec yard together, go to meals together, do volleyball, whatever we could'. Georgia recalled that she and her prison partner, 'We used to cook for each other'.

In narratives like these, participants describe the emotional labour and effort that goes into building relationships. These are the same courtship rituals that occur in community settings: working together, talking, listening, laughing, writing love letters and cooking. Women agreed that kites were particularly important to creating connections because of the architectural divides and policy prohibiting any type of fraternising: 'At first, we was in two separate cells. It was like we had a talk from one cell to the next, so everybody hears our conversation. We had to write letters to each other' (Robin, Black, age 29). As Perla (Latina, age 37) notes, kites often stand in when prison rules prevented women from being physically close to one another: 'I've never really seen anybody have sex in there, but there have been like, you know, people writing, you know, kites and trying to be, yeah. Flirting and trying to be in relationships'.

The women's efforts to meet their desire for human connection can be understood as acts of self-care that resisted the prison's power to isolate. Given the harsh conditions and lack of therapeutic resources in prison, connection with another person was critical to women's mental health:

> It [prison] breaks people down. They wonder why people hang themselves? [...] With women, we have very like, a lot of mental health, addiction, PTSD, we don't have our kids, we don't have our family and I think most woman, a lot of woman, come in a relationship because they're looking for love. They wanna feel that connection with somebody. They wanna feel, you know, comforted and companionship. Women want that, woman need that (Bailey, White, age 29).

While these relationships were very intense and important on the inside, they rarely continued into the community. Often one partner remained incarcerated or, even if both women were released, their emotional connections, so critical to prison survival, would wane:

> I have her name tattooed here, it's fading. This is the one I caught myself marrying, we actually jumped over the broom [laughing].[3] She got my name tattooed on her thigh and I have hers right here. We Facebook with each other, you know. [...] But it's like, by the time they came home my mind was somewhere else and by the time I went home, you know, it just, but we remained friends.
>
> *(Tiana, Black, 45)*

Like the tattoos inked onto their bodies, their prison marital vows and commitments faded over time as their desires drifted 'somewhere else'.

Sexual Behaviour

Participants described sexual behaviour as another vehicle for nurturing their desire for human connection. They reported sexual behaviours in the context of different types of relationships, from committed monogamous partnerships to casual encounters. Sexual behaviour most frequently took place in semi-private locations like the showers or cells, and also occurred in relatively public spaces: 'When it's table, like meetings, AA meetings and stuff and Bible study, they do, you know, finger penetration and stuff like that' (Josephina, Latina, age 32). As Jane (White, age 36) recounts below, all of this behaviour was prohibited by prison policy, and women caught engaging in sexual activities could be disciplined (e.g., loss of commissary, loss of recreation time, segregated housing) and possibly pick up a new sexual assault charge for violation of laws related to the 2003 Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA):

> I never got in trouble, I never got caught. You're not allowed to be in somebody else's room. So, if I went into somebody else's room to kiss 'em I'd be in trouble or if I went in the shower and we did our thing in

> the shower, we would be in trouble, you know, no sexual touching. We'd be in trouble from holding your finger. I can go to, it's called PREA. So, there's things like that. I never did it though. I never got caught.

While Jane was never caught, discipline for sexual behaviour was a common experience for many participants or people who they knew. This added an element of stress and fear to their sexual lives that some women reported growing accustomed to over time:

> In the beginning it was like that, I was like, 'Oh my God, I'm nervous, I'm going to get in trouble this and that I'm gonna wind up going to seg or whatever'.[4] But as time went on, it was, it became easier. So, I didn't really wasn't as like nervous or stressed out about it 'cause I learned how to do certain stuff like when it came to that.
>
> *(Perla, Latina, age 37)*

Georgia (Black, age 48) described how the physical desire for intimacy and human touch trumped fear of punishment: 'I understand like COs [correctional officers] in the system being against women having sex in there [but] you got people who got forty-five years, you know, you get tired playing with yourself. I mean, it's sex'. For others, the risks associated with sexual intimacy were too great: 'I ended up being in her room, you know, got caught kissing her but didn't go further than that cause like I'm not gunna get in trouble no more, you know' (Robin, Black, age 29). So, while participants reported sexual behaviour between incarcerated people was common at the correctional facility, the threat of disciplinary action and the limited opportunities for privacy restricted their ability to enact desire and connect with other women in this way.

Discussion

These narratives from bisexual women about their desire to manifest sexual identity and build human connection expand upon existing theory and suggest future pathways for research and practice.

Sexual Fluidity

These narratives further bolster the utility of the concept of fluidity in understanding women's lived experiences of sexuality (Diamond 2008). While participants self-identified as 'bisexual' when asked to describe their sexual orientation, this response was often prefaced by conditional phrasing. Participants struggled to answer our inquiries about sexual orientation, and the existing vocabulary rarely seemed to fully capture the fluidity of

their experiences and desires. Upon reflection, we understand how our interview instrument enforced 'a homo/heterosexual binary system on the more complex set of identities and sensibilities of prisoners' (Kunzel 2008, p. 31). Appreciating the inadequacy of established sexual orientation categories and the opportunities of qualitative methods, it would have been more productive to have participants describe their intimate relationships, desires, and behaviours. Researchers and practitioners who work with justice-involved women are invited to explore the development of questions that intentionally shift conversations away from existing categories of sexuality and make space for many versions and descriptions of self to surface. Further, using an intersectional lens to explore how oppression and privilege related to race and class impact sexual orientation and gender identity, and vice versa, would develop more detailed and nuanced understandings.

Binary Disruption

These findings also invite continued interrogation of academic research and public discourse that seeks to differentiate between the 'true lesbian' and the 'situational' homosexual (Severance 2004; Ciasullo 2008; Kunzel 2008; Callis 2009). This differentiation minimises women's articulations of self and desire and removes women's agency by suggesting that some women's sexual behaviour is only the result of peer pressure or the single-sex prison environment and is unrelated to their 'real life' sexuality outside the institution (Jackson 2011). Contemporary understandings of sexual fluidity reject these binary categories and highlight that human sexuality, especially among women, is shaped by the individual's socio-political environment and circumstances (Diamond 2008; Jackson 2011). Nevertheless, these discussions about the authenticity and permanence of queer identities in prison spaces persist because they endorse the binary paradigms that are the foundation of a heteronormative patriarchal society. The binary theory that suggests people are either homosexual or heterosexual is not supported by this data.

Similarly, the binary theory that the prison place and the people confined there are separate and different from larger society is also not supported by this data. Rather, this data suggests that desire felt in prison is an extension of community experiences and incarcerated people are authentic versions of themselves, in motion and evolving, as every human is changed by their lived experiences. Pretending that prisons are separate and distinct from the community facilitates the inhumane treatment and dehumanisation of incarcerated people. When we believe that the woman with children and a husband in the community can also be attracted to, supported by, and married to a woman in prison, the door is opened to other non-binary realities, for example, that the woman being confined and degraded in a correctional facility for selling illicit drugs is a kind and generous person who wants and needs to

be loved, and the prison project of punishment and humiliation begins to fall apart. In short, these women's brave narratives about recognising and embracing their desire before, during, and after prison are stories that challenge the legitimacy of correctional facilities by disrupting the binary upon which they are built (e.g., guilty/innocent, inmate/staff, confined/free, evil/good).

Peer-Based Rehabilitation

In addition to disrupting oppressive binaries, these findings offer a peer-based blueprint for survival and recovery in correctional spaces. Participants' narratives illustrate how the emotional support that incarcerated women receive from their intimate romantic partnerships with other incarcerated women can play a critical role in their rehabilitation processes. Indeed, existing research has demonstrated the importance of positive relationships to recovery (Vasiliou 2020; Tadros and Smithee 2022). Human connection can provide space for people to change their narratives, integrate thoughts and feelings, acknowledge positive strengths, and come to terms with their faults (Siegal 2022). Attachment allows people to experience themselves as worthwhile, legitimate, and multi-dimensional, despite mistakes, bad decisions, and lack of power or resources.

Given the strict rules in prison against all physical touch and fellowship, building and maintaining these relationships can be difficult. Yet women persisted, developing creative ways to linger at the edge between authorised and furtive activities. This human drive to overcome hopelessness in the face of trauma is an act of survival and resistance: 'When incarcerated women resist state attempts to deny their private lives by building sexual intimacy or family with other prisoners, the prison becomes a queer space' (Jackson 2011, para. 2). By complicating and confounding the meanings of desire, friendship, intimacy, pleasure, and connection, these women continue to unravel the harsh dichotomies and fears from which prison institutions extract their power (Vasiliou 2020).

Conclusion

Standpoint theory asserts that marginalised people are socially situated in a way that allows them to see and understand power dynamics with greater clarity than folks at the centre and, leading on from this, social science inquiry should be grounded in the expertise of vulnerable communities (Bowell n.d.). This project follows this guidance by interviewing formerly incarcerated sexual minority women, primarily people of colour, to build knowledge about incarceration and sexual orientation. Their narratives inform our understandings of their lives and the prison project more generally by sharing the ways in which they meet their desires to realise authentic sexual identities and human connection while incarcerated.

Notes

1 We chose to not name the specific state for confidentiality reasons.
2 The term 'bid' is an informal way to refer to a period of incarceration. Thus, here a two-year bid means a two-year prison sentence.
3 'Jumping the broom' is a marriage ritual among African-Americans that was practiced in the southern United States when Black people were enslaved and excluded from state-sanctioned marriage (Strong 2013). The ritual continues today among African-American community as a tradition that nurtures collective memory and 'cultural consciousness' (Strong 2013, p. 2).
4 Seg is an abbreviation for 'administrative segregation', which is one of several forms of isolation used in prisons for disciplinary and/or protective reasons. People held in seg have limited to no access to educational and therapeutic programming, commissary purchases, 'recreational time and basic human socialization' (Kulak 2018, p. 312).

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QUEERING ROMANCE

Expressions of Love and Intimacy in Late-Twentieth-Century Lesbian Relationships

Rebecca Jennings

The slogan 'Love is Love', emblazoned on t-shirts, Pride banners, and in media headlines has become a shorthand for an increasingly pervasive stance in LGBT politics: that love is so powerful it can form the basis for claims to broader civil and human rights; that love rather than sex is the defining feature of intimate relationships; and, therefore, that lesbian and gay relationships are no different from heterosexual ones. In campaigns for marriage equality since 2000, it has proven an extremely effective argument, enabling LGBT activists to stake a claim to the same civil rights enjoyed by heterosexual couples and defusing the perceived threat to society and the institution of marriage posed by same-sex relationships (Robinson and Greenwich 2018). For some advocates of marriage equality, such as veteran Australian campaigner, Rodney Croome, securing access to marriage rights represented the achievement of public recognition of same-sex love as valid and equal to heterosexual love and thus the final step in social acceptance of LGBT people (Boucher and Reynolds 2017). However, the claim that 'love is love' and its use as a justification for marriage equality has sparked considerable contention as well as provoking many questions about the nature of queer love and its difference from heterosexual love. While these debates have, until now, been framed largely in relation to sexual politics or contemporary popular culture, they also have implications for and can benefit from historical analysis of romantic love in the past.

Drawing on oral history interviews and newspaper accounts of lesbian practices of romance in Britain and Australia between 1945 and 2000, I will consider whether and how the concept of romance and romantic love has been deployed in lesbian relationships in the past. I will address the question of whether romance has been an aspect of lesbian forms of intimacy;