

## Gender and the politics of marriage in post-war Australia and Britain

Much of the contemporary debate around same-sex marriage has been framed in legal terms. Campaigners and lobbying groups for same-sex marriage have inevitably focused on the issue of legal equality, arguing that the inability of same-sex couples to marry represents a form of legal discrimination, while the success of such campaigns has been hailed as an indicator of equality before the law. Some academic commentators and historians have located these recent changes in the context of a more gradual progression from legal oppression to equality over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In his 2001 work on same-sex marriage in the Netherlands, Kees Waaldijk argued that the attainment of marriage equality legislation in that country was the result of an inevitable progression towards legal equality which resulted from the gradual liberalisation of attitudes toward homosexuality over the preceding century.<sup>1</sup> Marriage equality from this perspective is therefore framed as the ultimate and final signifier of a successful battle against legal discrimination and for social acceptance of homosexuality.

Amidst this optimistic rhetoric, a less vocal, but equally powerful critique has been articulated by queer scholars in recent decades, questioning the representation of marriage as an ideal or universal model for same-sex relationships. In 2002, Lisa Duggan coined the phrase 'homonormativity' to describe a neoliberal vision of limited equality on depoliticised, 'private' terms. Arguing that neoliberal policies in the US and Britain have forged 'a politics that offers a dramatically shrunken public sphere and a narrow zone of "responsible" domestic privacy', Duggan describes marriage equality as 'public recognition of a domesticated, depoliticized privacy' and claims that the quest for lesbian and gay marriage 'does not contest dominant

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<sup>1</sup> Kees Waaldijk, 'Small Change: How the Road to Same-Sex Marriage Got Paved in the Netherlands' in *Legal Recognition of Same-Sex Partnership. A Study of National, European and International Law* (Hart Publishing, 2001), 437-464.

heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them.<sup>2</sup> For Duggan and other queer critics of the marriage rights movement, the concentration on this issue risks removing the radically transformative potential of queer sexuality from lesbian and gay activism and further outlawing those queer subjects whose sexual practices cannot be encompassed within the framework of the new homonormativity.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Judith Butler has argued that the debate around marriage equality has created a distinction between those recognised lesbian and gay subjects, in a stable relationship, who could potentially be legitimised by marriage and those illegitimate subjects whose sexual agency functions outside these parameters and thus could never be absorbed into the sphere of legitimacy. She notes:

The petition for marriage rights seeks to solicit state recognition for non-heterosexual unions, and so configures the state as withholding an entitlement that it really should distribute in a nondiscriminatory way, regardless of sexual orientation. That the state's offer might result in the intensification of normalization is not widely recognised as a problem within the mainstream lesbian and gay movement.

However, she suggests, normalization should be regarded with considerable concern as: 'Variations on kinship that depart from normative, dyadic, heterosexually-based family forms secured through the marriage vow are figured not only as dangerous for the child, but perilous to the putative natural and cultural laws said to sustain human intelligibility.'<sup>4</sup>

While these two broad arguments have dominated liberal academic debate about same-sex marriage, both, I would like to suggest, have, in different ways, tended to obscure questions of gender. In focusing on marriage equality as a final stage in a teleology of homosexual law reform, campaigners and commentators have drawn on a broadly masculine framework which

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<sup>2</sup> Lisa Duggan, 'The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism', in Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson (eds), *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics* (Duke University Press, 2002), pp.182, 190, 179. See also Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics and the Ethics of Queer Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1999), pp.82, 109-16. Writing from a feminist perspective, Barbara Baird has similarly framed the same-sex marriage debate in the context of the neoliberal politics of the family; see

<sup>3</sup> Judith Butler, "Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?", *Differences* 13 (1) (2002): 20; Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 126.

<sup>4</sup> Butler, 'Is Kinship', 16.

moves from 19<sup>th</sup> century legislation against sodomy to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century male homosexual law reform and culminates in gay marriage. Given the relative infrequency with which Western legal frameworks explicitly prohibited lesbian sexuality, this model is less helpful in considering same-sex marriage between women, and tends to obscure the different social and cultural forms of oppression faced by lesbians.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the focus by queer critics on the dangers of 'normalization' posed by marriage equality, invites us – quite rightly – to consider how marriage excludes those whose relationship models do not fit the pattern of a monogamous, long-term commitment between two people established by marriage. However, less attention is paid to the internal power dynamics within such a relationship and the ways in which gendered inequalities existing in wider society can be reproduced and maintained through the institution of marriage.

It is this inequality which has been at the heart of feminist critiques of the institution of marriage since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. From Mary Wollstonecraft's 1792 refusal of marriage as a surrendering of rights over her property, body and children, to the Radicalesbians' 1970s critique of marriage and all monogamous relationships as oppressive of women and destructive of individual agency, feminists have drawn attention to the ways in which marriage is particularly disempowering for women.<sup>6</sup> Nineteenth-century feminist debates about marriage drew on liberal ideals of freedom and bodily autonomy to attack the legal principle of coverture, which subsumed a married woman's legal existence into that of her husband. Campaigns sought to give

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<sup>5</sup> On legal approaches to lesbianism in the UK see, for example, Laura Doan, "'Gross Indecency Between Women': Policing Lesbians or Policing Lesbian Police?" *Social & Legal Studies* 6, no. 4 (1997): 533-551; and Laura Doan, "'Acts of female indecency': sexology's intervention in legislating lesbianism." *Bland and Doan* (1998): 199-213. On the Australian context, see Ruth Ford, "Lady friends' and 'sexual deviationists': Lesbians and law in Australia 1920s-1950s" in D.E.Kirkby (ed), *Sex, Power and Justice: Historical Perspectives on the Law in Australia, 1788-1990* (1995): 33-49; Rebecca Jennings, 'Sandra Willson: A case study in lesbian identities in 1950s and 1970s Australia', *History Australia* 10:1 (April 2013): 99-124; Rebecca Jennings, *Unnamed Desires: A Sydney Lesbian History* (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> On the Melbourne Radicalesbians, see Robert Reynolds, *From Camp to Queer: Remaking the Australian Homosexual* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002); Rebecca Jennings, 'Womin Loving Womin: Lesbian Feminist Theories of Intimacy', in Graham Willett and Yorick Smaal (eds.), *Intimacy, Violence and Activism: Gay and Lesbian Perspectives on Australasian History and Society* (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2013): 133-146.

married women the right to hold property and capital and retain their own wages, to be entitled to custody of their own children, to reform divorce law and to enhance women's rights over their own bodies. As Lucy Bland has argued, marriage campaigns were centred on the theme 'of a married woman's right over her own person – her personal autonomy – and a transformed, purified and moral relationship between the sexes.'<sup>7</sup> Thus many feminists promoted ideal marriage as an emotional and spiritual union between two equals, rather than an institution designed solely to legitimate sexual relations and the procreation of children. Feminists were successful in achieving a number of legislative reforms in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and the ideal of companionate marriage had gained widespread acceptance by the mid-twentieth-century. However, many of the structural inequalities in the marital relationship remained and critiques of the institution emerged with new vigour in the 1950s and 1960s, with the work of Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Viola Klein and Germaine Greer.<sup>8</sup> Drawing on social science research and philosophical perspectives, feminists highlighted the disparity between social norms which represented marriage and motherhood as the ultimate goals for women and the persistent unhappiness of many housewives in the post-war West. Much of this unhappiness was located in the institution of marriage itself and the gendered inequalities which it perpetuated. As Rosemary Auchmuty reflected in her summary of feminist critiques of marriage: 'Marriage has been shown to endow men with a better lifestyle, greater freedom and more power, while it has the opposite effect on women, limiting, impoverishing, and rendering them vulnerable to abuses of power by their husbands.'<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast: Feminist, Sex and Morality* (London: Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 2001), p.125

<sup>8</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1953); Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963); Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (London: Paladin, 1972).

<sup>9</sup> Rosemary Auchmuty, "Same-sex marriage revived: Feminist critique and legal strategy." *Feminism & Psychology* 14, no. 1 (2004), 105.

However, while feminist critiques of marriage have been voiced consistently throughout the same-sex marriage debate in recent decades, their impact has been limited. The very different experience which women have historically undergone in marriage is rarely acknowledged and contemporary debates about marriage equality continue to elide gender differences between lesbians and gay men. This article is an attempt to open up this debate and explore some of the questions which arise when we begin to consider the impact of gender, rather than sexuality, in shaping the experience of marriage for lesbians. What, for example, can individual women's experiences of both heterosexual and lesbian marriage-like relationships tell us about gendered roles in marriage and the social meanings given to marriage for women? Has women's experience of heterosexual marriage in the post-war period reflected feminist critiques of the institution? Have women found marriage to a man to be 'limiting, impoverishing, and rendering them vulnerable to abuses of power by their husbands'? Finally, if this is women's experience of marriage, does same-sex marriage have anything different to offer women, or is it unavoidably a restrictive institution which oppresses women? In her 2007 book, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire and Marriage in Victorian England*, Sharon Marcus argues that middle and upper-class Victorian women were able to form female marriages which were both accepted and acknowledged by their respectable, legally married peers and yet which, in their avoidance of coverture and other gendered inequalities, also represented a model of an ideal companionate marriage which inspired feminist campaigns for marriage reform. She claims:

Although women in a female marriage did not have the benefit of a legally recognised union, they already enjoyed two of the privileges that women married to men fought for over the course of the century: independent rights to their income and property, and the freedom to dissolve their relationships and form new ones. They also created unions that did not depend on sexual difference, gender hierarchy, or biological reproduction for their underpinnings, as most Victorian marriages between men and women did in legal theory if not in social fact.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire and Marriage in Victorian England* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007), 205.

Female marriages, instead, combined romantic notions of marriage as based on love and fidelity, with an understanding of marriage as a contract between equals. Marcus' work therefore highlights the flexibility of marriage as an institution and points to the potential for same-sex marriage to rework the institution itself.

In exploring these questions, I will draw on oral history interviews, conducted by myself for a project on lesbian relationship models in post-war Australia and Britain, as well as interviews with British lesbians contained within the Hall Carpenter Archive at the British Library, to consider whether and how women's imagined and lived relationships with other women have differed from those with men. Both sets of interviews were conducted with women who identified as lesbian at the time of the interview and explore, amongst other themes, women's experiences and understandings of relationships. In the context of post-war social pressures on women to marry in both Britain and Australia, many of the women interviewed had experience of both heterosexual marriage and long-term same-sex partnerships and their accounts therefore afford a rare opportunity to compare women's expectations and experience of opposite-sex and same-sex relationships. While these women's accounts of their heterosexual marriages were inevitably framed through the prism of their subsequent identification as lesbians, rendering them potentially less positive about heterosexual marriage than many of their contemporaries, their accounts are valuable as evidence of the flexibility of marriage as an institution. Many women who had experienced heterosexual marriage as a limiting and unequal relationship, nevertheless went on to forge marriage-like relationships with other women, which they described in more positive, equal terms. Any attempt to explore the potential for same-sex couples to rework the institution of marriage is necessarily rendered problematic by the different legal and social contexts in which opposite-sex and same-sex marriage have been understood in the past. Same-sex marriage was not legally recognised in the UK prior to the Marriage (Same

Sex Couples) Act 2013 and has not, to date, been recognised in Australia and there is therefore no shared legal or social framework for comparing opposite-sex and same-sex marriage in the post-war period. While opposite-sex marriage brought with it legal protections and structures as well as social approbation, same-sex marriage in this period was typically a private relationship with few or no legal protections, which, unlike its Victorian counterpart, was as likely to draw familial and social disapproval as commendation. However, while the legal and social context in which a marriage exists is undeniably important in shaping individual women's experiences of the married state, it is the private, interpersonal aspects of the married relationship which are the primary concern of this article.

In the immediate post-war decades, social attitudes toward marriage and motherhood as the ideal social role for women framed women's experience in Australia and Britain and prompted many women to marry, sometimes despite an awareness of their attraction to other women. Historians have stressed the social importance of marriage in this period and Lisa Featherstone has argued that in 1950s Australia, 'For all men and women, marital heterosexuality was clearly constructed as both the ideal and the norm.'<sup>11</sup> Marriage rates remained high in the 1960s, reaching a peak in Britain in 1972, when fewer than 5% of women remained unmarried. However, from the early 1970s, a growing acceptance of pre-marital sexuality and unmarried motherhood fostered increased rates of cohabitation before marriage and the importance of marriage as an indicator of respectability declined in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>12</sup> This shift in attitudes toward marriage is reflected in women's personal accounts of their experience of marriage in the post-war period. The desire for social approval or the need to have children within a socially acceptable framework dominated women's accounts of their motivations for marrying between the 1950s

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<sup>11</sup> Lisa Featherstone, *Let's Talk About Sex: Histories of Sexuality in Australia from Federation to the Pill* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), 242.

<sup>12</sup> Jane Lewis

and 1970s. Sharley, who came to Britain as a refugee from Germany on the Kindertransport in the 1930s, said that she married a British conscientious objector in the 1940s in response to a psychological need to be a British citizen. A matron at the hospital where she worked had treated her badly for being German and she hoped that marriage to a British man would offer some protection from such attitudes. She recalled that she ‘quite liked’ Alan, her husband, and ‘probably thought she was in love’ but ‘hated being touched’ by him. In addition to the security of British citizenship, marriage allowed her to find an outlet for her ‘strong maternal drive’ and, after having children, she ceased sexual activities with her husband and subsequently came out as a lesbian.<sup>13</sup> A decade later, college student, Cynn timer, confided in a friend about her passionate physical relationship with another woman. Her friend told her that she was ‘clearly the most obvious lesbian I’ve ever seen.’ Confronted with this new word and concept, Cynn timer tried to make sense of her lesbianism in the context of the only socially acceptable intimate relationship she was aware of: marriage. She recalled:

And I think the male-female married relationship was, to me, the only possibility, and if I fell in love with a woman, who was clearly a fairly feminine sort of woman, and I was clearly a tomboy, then I must be the one who was in some way wrong, and the way to put things right would be to have operations to change my sex and then we could get married and then perhaps we could have children.

Unable to imagine herself married to a man, but equally unable to conceive of a relationship between two women as acceptable, Cynn timer at first believed that it was only by becoming a man herself, that it would be possible for her to achieve both the loving relationship and social respectability she desired. After several years of indecision, the relationship ended when Cynn timer’s lover sought the respectability of legal marriage and Cynn timer herself began to explore the possibility of a non-marital relationship between two women.<sup>14</sup> In late 1970s Australia, after a period of relationships with and attractions to other girls in her adolescence, Jenny also considered heterosexual marriage as providing the only route into social acceptance. She had

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<sup>13</sup> National Sound Archive (NSA), Hall Carpenter Collection (HCC) (C456), F2158-F2163, Sharley McLean.

<sup>14</sup> NSA, HCC (C456), F2109, Cynthia Reid.



experienced bullying and social ostracism at school when her peers discovered her same-sex attractions and explained her decision to marry as a response to this:

I had this weird thing that I wanted to be very normal, and that involved getting married and having kids, and being successful and doing all those things that, I suppose, those people that taunted me when I was younger, it was a case of, you know, I'll show you, this is how I am. I did that for a very long time. I did, I had a very successful relationship, very successful children.

Jenny described her marriage as motivated entirely by a desire to conform to her understanding of what was regarded as 'normal' and 'successful' in society at large. Asked to reflect on her own role within the family she created, she replied:

Both within the family and externally, we were this wonderful family that people used to think, oh, they're great ... but at the time, it was important to me that people knew that we were happy and doing things that families should do - you know, eating at the table every night and all those sorts of textbook things you read about. We were the textbook family. We did all those textbook things.<sup>15</sup>

Many women emphasised the importance of marriage as the primary site for motherhood in both countries for much of the post-war period. Both for women who wanted to have children, and for those who found themselves unexpectedly pregnant, marriage was understood as the only acceptable option in the 1950s and 60s. Margaret, who met her long-term lover, Vera, in Coventry in 1950, described how Vera left her after 15 years in order to marry and have children. Recalling their relationship, she explained:

While I was [in Coventry] I met the love of my life then. Vera. We were together about 15 years. But Vera wanted to have a little family. At the beginning of our relationship after about three or four years she wanted these children. She didn't like it that we weren't married and we couldn't be married. I'd read in the national paper, *News of the World* I think, about this woman who'd had a sex change. So I thought that's the answer... I had to see my doctor and told him I wanted to have a sex change ... [but] he said ... he couldn't do anything ... sometimes when we'd been very close, making love, and she'd cry sometimes afterwards because she wanted a baby and she knew there was nothing that could come of it.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Interview by author with Jenny (pseudonym) on 31 May 2012.

<sup>16</sup> Interview by author with Margaret (pseudonym) on 15 April 2015.

Margaret's experience was echoed by many women in Britain and Australia, whose same-sex relationships came to an end when one partner decided to marry in order to have children. Others found themselves drawn into marriage either through the fear or reality of extra-marital pregnancy. Australian, Jan, recalled that marriage offered the only protection against the disgrace of becoming pregnant out of wedlock. Jan married a fellow student at university in the 1950s and reflected:

See back in those days the other issue was, if you were sexually active that the possibility of a shotgun wedding was massively important ... you could lose your scholarship, you couldn't finish your course, I mean it was really dramatically bad for you career-wise and I wasn't all that careerist, but I was quite keen to finish my course. So the only way out really was to get married because we'd all realised by then that contraception such as it was, was pretty unsafe. Yeah, so you got married.<sup>17</sup>

In the early 1970s, Sally was also at university in Melbourne training to be a doctor when she fell pregnant and married the father of her child.

Conventional attitudes toward roles within marriage meant that many women described their experience of heterosexual marriage as having limited their opportunities and constrained their ability to express themselves as individuals. In accounting for these inequalities, women emphasised the significance of gendered roles in shaping the internal power dynamics of relationships, rather than the institution of marriage itself. Sally recalled:

I continued doing my course when I had the baby which was my son Adam. We were both living in Carlton and trying to study with a young child. They didn't have crèches in those days ... But I struggled on for another year or so and then just gave up. My ex-husband continued to study and he finished his course. It's not an unusual pattern.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly Jacinta, who fell pregnant to a boyfriend she met while fruit-picking in Queensland in the 1980s, described the experience of marriage and motherhood as a closing down of possibilities. She explained:

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<sup>17</sup> Interview by author with Jan Aitkin, 5 June 2012.

<sup>18</sup> Interview by author with Sally (pseudonym), 6 October 2012.

When we first come back from picking, I was going to – I'd signed up for Kangaroo Point TAFE, because they did art courses down there [and I was going to do commercial art]. I'd actually looked at a house to rent. It was like a share house or whatever, and it was probably about two weeks later, I found out I was pregnant. So I suppose everything just stopped then.

Jacinta took the decision that if she was going to keep the child, she should stay with the child's father, Robert, and went on to have a 20-year relationship and two further children with him. She described their relationship as 'very up and down' and said 'he was just abusive and stuff and progressively got worse.' They adopted conventional roles, with Robert working and Jacinta taking responsibility for childcare and housework (with assistance from her mother, who lived nearby) and it was the power imbalance and gendered constraints of this relationship which Jacinta emphasised as her reasons for ultimately leaving.<sup>19</sup>

These accounts of heterosexual marriage suggested that marriage was understood by women within a broader social context as an approved form of intimate relations and a legitimate framework within which to raise children. However, for many women, the gendered roles which were widely accepted as the norm within marriage meant that this social approval came at the cost of limiting their opportunities in the workforce and locating them in a subordinate position within an unequal relationship. In the late 1960s and 1970s, women's liberation and lesbian and gay activists began to articulate a powerful critique of marriage and the nuclear family as oppressive institutions. Feminist and gay literature, magazines and newsletters were filled with passionate accounts of the nuclear family as a heteropatriarchal institution which crippled its individual members, oppressed women and promoted compulsory heterosexuality. A special issue of British feminist journal, *Shrew*, in 1971, on the family, began with the observation: 'the institution of the family is responsible for many (all?) of our hang-ups'.<sup>20</sup> Col Eglington elaborated on this point in her submission, on behalf of lesbian and gay campaigning group,

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<sup>19</sup> Interview by author with Jacinta

<sup>20</sup> 'Editorial', *Shrew*, May 1971 (Vol.3, No.4), p.5.

CAMP NSW, to the Australian Royal Commission on Human Relationships. She argued: ‘the nuclear family is a power structure, a sexist power structure in that the assigning of male and female roles to the children of the family necessarily assigns power in that women take the lesser power position and men in our society hold the power, they hold the self-determining power and also the sort of more obvious powers, money, position, careers, these sorts of things.’<sup>21</sup> The marriage relationship at the heart of the nuclear family, feminists argued, was oppressive and divisive for women. Reflecting on the different experiences of marriage for British men and women, *Spare Rib* argued: ‘The power is in his hands. He may choose to treat you well. If not – if he doesn’t give you enough for the housekeeping, or if he starts to beat you up – then nobody will intervene unless you admit that your marriage has irretrievably broken down and institute divorce or separation proceedings.’<sup>22</sup> Marriage was therefore an unequal institution in which women were placed in a subservient role, forced into unpaid drudgery, and isolated from the support of other women. In the social revolution which was to come, it was hoped new relational models would emerge to challenge and replace the nuclear family. Same-sex relationships seemed to offer an opportunity for women to explore these new, more equal, forms of relationship. As Australian, Jan Smith put it, in 1977: ‘The essential point of Lesbianism, and that which is usually overlooked, is that it involves not just sex, but love between women: love between equals – a potentially far healthier and more egalitarian proposition than the typical heterosexual equivalent.’<sup>23</sup>

Women’s accounts of their own relationships strongly reflect this perspective and many women who moved from heterosexual marriages to lesbian relationships, throughout the post-war period, regarded their relationship with another woman as an opportunity to liberate themselves

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<sup>21</sup> C.Eglinton, PP?H/lb.Human p.3198 12/2/1976

<sup>22</sup> ‘Happily ever after?’, *Spare Rib*, March 1976

<sup>23</sup> Jan Smith, ‘Lesbianism and Mental Health’, *Broadsheet*, no.53 (October 1977), p. 19, contained in ‘Women and Madness Kit’, National Library of Australia.

from the oppressive structures of marriage and forge new ways of relating. Sharley, who began a 25-year relationship with Georgina in the early 1950s after a decade of marriage to husband Alan, recalled:

Georgina would say to me, 'What shall we do?' And I'd say, 'What do you want to do?' ... And I said, we must both take responsibility. I don't want to pressurise you into doing things and I don't want to be pressurised by you. I think we should be equal. Now she loved cooking, and I certainly didn't object to her cooking and she was more domesticated than I, but it didn't mean to say that she was into a domestic scene rather than I. She was certainly tidier ... But you see, again, Georgina was political. Maybe not quite as far committed as I was, but her politics also taught her that as a woman she has got to be a responsible person.<sup>24</sup>

Sharley saw her and Georgina's political consciousness as having been important in shaping their ideas about their relationship and, from the 1970s onwards, an increasing number of women were influenced by feminist ideas about equality and collectivity in constructing roles in their relationship. Sally left her husband for her partner, Anneke, in the mid-1980s and reflected on the shifting dynamics in their relationship:

We've had lots of spirited discussions. We often disagree on nearly everything. We go back and forth, back and forth, back and forth for days if not weeks. So it's very tiring at times but we get there in the end. With the housework I think I probably did a bit more. I don't know - certainly we did close on even. At that stage I think I used to do more of the cooking. But that's changed now and Anneke does most of the cooking now... it evolved over time ... our roles changed. We were aware that it was really hard to create roles for a lesbian relationship, and that's what we thought we had to do.<sup>25</sup>

While Sharley and Sally imagined their same-sex relationships as offering an opportunity to escape the gendered inequalities which they saw as inherent in heterosexual marriage, both their accounts also demonstrate that equality did not necessarily come easily in relationships between women either. Both described a process of conscious consideration and ongoing negotiation in order to achieve equal roles. Other women's accounts of their same-sex relationships suggested that gendered inequalities might be replaced by other forms of structural inequality. Angela, describing her seven-year relationship with Jean in 1960s London, referred to the power

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<sup>24</sup> NSA, HCC (C456), F2158-F2163, Sharley McLean.

<sup>25</sup> Interview by author with Sally (pseudonym), 6 October 2012.

struggles caused by the age difference in the relationship. Jean was thirteen years older than 20-year-old Angela when they met, with a young child and a career as a schoolteacher; Angela recalled that Jean ‘used to try to put her foot down’ and ‘treated [her] like a pupil sometimes’ during their ‘up and down’ relationship.<sup>26</sup>

While many women envisaged their same-sex relationships as offering a potential freedom and equality in contrast to the gendered constraints of heterosexual marriage, attitudes toward female marriage were mixed. For Sally, the carefully considered balance and understanding which has structured her relationship with Anneke was developed in the context of a political framework which rejected marriage. However, considering the possibility of legal same-sex marriage after 25 years of partnership with Anneke, Sally observed:

I basically have spent decades believing that marriage is a patriarchal institution, designed for inheritance rules. However ... if Anneke were wanting to get married then yes, I think I would. But I'd feel really strange ... I cannot get away from my previous beliefs of it being an institution which was bad for women. So I'll just have to update myself and get with the times. But it has so many bad connotations for me; it's really hard to get past them.<sup>27</sup>

Sally's grudging comment that, if her partner wanted to marry, she might have to reconsider her strong objections to marriage as an institution and ‘update myself and get with the times,’ points to a growing sense that marriage might be a more flexible institution than the rhetoric of women's and gay liberation suggested. After building an equal partnership over 25 years with Anneke, Sally was ready to consider the possibility that the relationship between the two of them could be sustained even in the context of the institution of marriage and that it might, therefore, be possible to move away from the historic inequalities which have shaped women's experiences of marriage in the past, towards a more personal, egalitarian model of marriage. This is a view

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<sup>26</sup> NSA, HCC (C456), F1622-F1624, Angela Chilton

<sup>27</sup> Interview by author with Sally (pseudonym), 6 October 2012.

which is supported by the accounts of a number of other women who have conceived lesbian marriage in very different terms from the oppressive institution critiqued by feminism.

Reflecting on the female marriages of Victorian actress, Charlotte Cushman, Sharon Marcus observed that ‘The language of marriage described the quality of her commitment to a sexual partner rather than a gendered division of roles.’<sup>28</sup> Describing what attracted them to the possibility of formal marriage with their female partners, British and Australian women in the late twentieth-century similarly tended to construct marriage as an expression of private commitment. Jenny, who described her heterosexual marriage as a demonstration of success to others, framed lesbian marriage in different terms. Discussing her intention to ask her partner of seven years to marry her, she explained:

I think it shows an even deeper level of commitment that yes, in the eyes of the law, we’re a couple ... It’s not just that you’ve shackled up together and share the expenses, and it doesn’t mean that you love each other less or more, but it’s showing your partner, even in the act of asking them to marry you, that you consider the relationship a very deep and meaningful relationship ... I don’t know that I think too much about the public acknowledgement of the relationship ... It’s about us, it’s about my commitment to her, so that she knows how committed I am. It’s like a formal commitment.<sup>29</sup>

Similarly, Jacinta, who had recently become engaged to her partner, Vicki, imagined their planned wedding as a commitment to each other. Reflecting on the fact that their Australian marriage would not be officially recognised, she said: ‘It doesn’t bother me, because I just think if you’re going to be with someone, you can stand there and make a commitment to them without signing a piece of paper and all the rest of it anyway.’ Jacinta, like many of the women who described their same-sex relationships throughout the post-war period, represented hers as a partnership based on equality and communication. Consciously reacting against her previous

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<sup>28</sup> Marcus, *Between Women*, p.200.

<sup>29</sup> Interview by author with Jenny (pseudonym), 31 May 2012.

unhappy marriage to a man, Jacinta explained that her current same-sex relationship was structured on very different terms. She said:

Because my last relationship was so nasty, he was a dictator and stuff, I've just gone these are my rules. I'm not going to let someone wipe their feet on me. It works both ways, I think, in a relationship too. There's give and take, and if there's no give and take, then obviously, there's no relationship. It's just totally different.

In practical terms, this meant that Jacinta and Vicki shared the cooking and housework on an informal basis. As Jacinta put it: 'it just goes with the flow. One will do it or the other one will get up and do it. We don't have a list or anything like that.' For Jacinta and Vicki, their anticipated marriage would not simply maintain the structural equality they had built in their relationship to date, but reinforce it through an expression of personal commitment to each other.<sup>30</sup>

In conclusion, I have drawn on long-standing feminist critiques of marriage to urge that we pay greater attention to gender difference in our discussion of same-sex marriage. While the concerns of scholars such as Lisa Duggan and Judith Butler, that lesbian and gay marriage represents a potentially dangerous 'normalization' of same-sex relationships have been widely acknowledged, much less consideration has been given to feminist critiques of marriage as an unequal and oppressive institution. As same-sex marriage has become a reality in Britain and seems likely – eventually – to become so in Australia, we need to reflect much more carefully on the ways in which gender has shaped women's experience of marriage differently than men's. Examining a few personal accounts of British and Australian women's relationships, I have tried to suggest that same-sex marriage need not necessarily replicate the power inequalities inherent in heterosexual marriage and that, for those women, at least, who seek to consciously reject older

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<sup>30</sup> Interview by author with Jacinta



models of marriage, it might be possible to rework the institution into a more private and considered commitment between equal partners.