

# Women's liberation, relationships and the 'vicinity of trauma'

by Deborah M Withers

**Abstract:** This article enacts a compassionate historiography of the UK Women's Liberation Movement (UK WLM). It uses oral history as a methodology to record and create insights about the emotion work of history. It argues that historical accounts of the UK WLM need to incorporate understandings of the emotional intensity of feminist activism, and understand it in relation to the vicinity of trauma, experimental female homosocial bonds and the difficulty of finding language and a feminist voice that can articulate political and personal claims.

**Keywords:** Women's Liberation Movement, compassionate historiography, female homosocial, female homoerotic, voice

There's never been love without anger  
I've never known love as a smooth ride  
I never can quite put into words  
The feelings I cannot hide  
If I could be you or you could be me  
Maybe we'd know how it goes  
But right now we've gone beyond words  
There's nothing more to show

*Language for Lovers, Ova*<sup>1</sup>

I start this article with song lyrics from the Women's Liberation music duo Ova because they articulate how emotions were expressed, or unexpressed, within the political cultures of the UK Women's Liberation Movement (WLM). Although the lyrics explore a relationship between two lovers, the 'language for lovers' that Rosemary Schonfeld sings about here can in fact refer to the circulation of emotions that were collectively and relationally experienced within the WLM.

The subject matter of the song will seem familiar to listeners – clichéd even – as it details

the breakdown of a romantic relationship, and the difficulty of forging bonds with another that can be sustained over time. Yet it is the way the song introduces anger and the utter incommensurability of the situation that holds relevance for this paper. 'I never can quite put into words,' and later, 'we've gone beyond words' the song states, touching upon the difficulty of expressing within language the pain and intensity of the relationship that has broken down, yet nonetheless proved so inspirational for the songwriter's creativity.

Through the examination of oral history interviews from 2000-2011, this article will explore the emotional intensity of the UK WLM dramatised in the Ova song. My aim is to highlight the importance of accounting for the complex role emotions, speaking and finding (feminist) language played in shaping relationships in the WLM. I will do this by considering five sites, which are by no means the only sites, through which complex emotional dynamics were filtered in the feminist social movement: trauma, relationality, voice and voicelessness,

female homosocial/ homoerotic bonds and everyday creativity.

By considering these areas, my aim is to enact a compassionate historiography that can offer a nuanced appreciation of the difficult emotional cultures that circulated in a constant, yet uneven way, in the UK WLM. These emotional contours – that often shape the trajectory of social movements but can be resistant to symbolisation – need to be woven into the fabric of historiographical understanding of the UK WLM so that a deeper, and complex comprehension of its trajectories can be made.

### Compassionate historiography and methodology

A compassionate historiography requires an appropriate methodology, and this article draws upon oral history interviews as evidence. As Carrie Hamilton suggests, oral interviews provide useful tools to explore, and appreciate, the emotion work of history. She writes:

Because interviews contain not only a narrator's words but also changes in the pace and tone of her voice, facial expressions, gestures, non-verbal sounds such as laughter and crying, as well as silences, oral history sources offer a potentially wider range of emotional evidence than most written sources.<sup>2</sup>

The research sample discussed in this article is drawn from three separate projects. The first is from a collection of oral histories conducted by the Feminist Archive South in 2000-2003.<sup>3</sup> The second, and largest source of interviews considered here, were collected as part of the Heritage Lottery Funded *Sistershow Revisited* project (2008-2011)<sup>4</sup> that researched the early history of the Bristol WLM (1973-1975).

Bristol was, and continues to be, a thriving city for feminist activism and other forms of alternative culture. Women involved in the Bristol WLM took part in a range of activities including Sistershow (agit-prop theatre), visual art, music, reading groups, initiatives related to ending violence against women (such as setting up safe houses), the Bristol Women's Centre, the Family Allowances Campaign, Wages for Housework, *Enough* (the collective magazine), the Gay Women's Group, and the National Abortion Campaign, to name a few.

Bristol also hosted the 1973 national WLM conference. Although it is hard to quantify exactly how many women were involved in the WLM in Bristol, the group contact list included details of 113 women (December 1972), 144 women (January 1974) and 200 women (January 1976). These women received the monthly newsletter, the main form of communication for the network, which included details of the latest

news, events and campaigns. The majority of women in the Bristol WLM were white, and while it is clear that political issues related to class and sexuality was debated, race and dis/ability were not discussed with comparable frequency.

The third research sample uses one of the interviews I did with women involved in the music-making cultures of the WLM for the Women's Liberation Music Archive (2009-), an on going research project.<sup>5</sup> None of the interviews conducted explicitly sought to explore emotions in feminist social movements. Noting the important role emotions played in the WLM came as a by-product of considering the transcripts and, to a certain extent, from personal knowledge of participating within feminist and queer activism myself, albeit in a different historical context (the early twenty-first century).<sup>6</sup> That is, my own activist experience made me 'attuned to the silences, to the inarticulate, to the inchoate, to the less-than-fully-conscious' in accounts I had inherited of the UK WLM across a range of contexts.<sup>7</sup> These included historiography, public history, academia, popular culture and subcultural settings. In interviews I was therefore keen to explore the intensities of activism, and how they impacted on the relational quality of participating in the WLM.

It is not surprising that emotions became a focus in the interviews, given how oral history as a methodology asks people not 'merely "what happened?" but [...] "how did you *feel* about it?"'<sup>8</sup> Only two of the interviewees discussed in this article were consulted with the explicit aim of exploring their experience of emotions in the WLM. These two women attended the *Sistershow Revisited* exhibition that took place in Bristol, 2011. While invigilating the exhibition I saw them openly express emotional reactions to the material displayed. Observing this, I asked them if I could interview them about their experience of the emotional culture of the WLM and they agreed.

The women interviewed come from a range of class, geographic and sexual backgrounds, while all of them self-identify as white. The interviews offer a useful empirical starting point to analyse the emotional impact of participating in the UK WLM. Themes relating to sexuality, class and the different experiences of women who did and did not have children emerged in interviews as important factors that shaped relationships in the movement. These are, of course, not the only issues that affected women participating in the WLM. A major limitation of the data is how it does not directly consider the experience of Black<sup>9</sup> women involved in the WLM, or the Black Women's Movement. To a certain extent this reflects the lack of ethnic diversity in the Bristol WLM, from which the research sample is mainly drawn. It seems

reasonable to suggest that Black women's relationship to trauma, emotions and voicelessness will be qualitatively different to white women's, and cannot necessarily be fully accounted for by the frameworks I draw attention to in this article. The same can be said for disabled women participating in the UK WLM. Despite the partial nature of my research sample, I hope this article will offer some frameworks for thinking about the emotional dynamics of feminist history.

This article will start from the testimonies of what I call movement survivors in order to present avenues for compassionate engagement with histories of the UK WLM. I use the term 'survivors' here to take seriously the gravitas and intensity of taking part in feminist social movements, and to acknowledge that participation often has lasting effects, some positive and some less so, that often need to be worked through after the event(s). This article is a contribution to 'working through' at the level of historiography, enabled by the tools of oral history, social movement theories of emotion and critical theory.

### **Traumatic vicinities of the WLM**

The first factor I take into account constructing a compassionate historiography is the role trauma played in shaping relationships in the movement. Ann Cvetkovich has argued that activists within queer and feminist social movements

may not be trauma survivors themselves, [but] they have lived, as activists and lesbians, in *close proximity to trauma*. My goal has been to use [oral] interviews to create political history as affective history, a history that captures activism's felt and even traumatic dimensions. In forging a collective knowledge built on memory, I hope to produce not only a version of history but also an archive of the emotions, which is one of trauma's most important, but most difficult to preserve, legacies.<sup>10</sup>

Cvetkovich's methods and suggestions offer useful tools for understanding the difficult emotional dynamics women involved in the UK WLM faced. What is most significant is that she provides a framework where queer and feminist activist lives can be understood as permanently circulating within 'the vicinity of trauma.'

Trauma, for the purposes of this article, refers to any number of experiences including, but not limited to, incest, rape, experiencing a legal/ illegal abortion or domestic violence. The point that I want to develop *pace* Cvetkovich, is that traumatic experiences are central to the collective imaginary of feminist politics. They bound women together and consequently *hung*

*close* to people participating in the WLM. That is, trauma was always *there*. Lurking in the background, haunting meetings and conversations between activists, threatening to erupt, unexpectedly, as trauma can do. The social context of trauma also exacerbated, and was exacerbated by, inequalities between women based on class, race, sexuality, age, body size and physical ability.

Like Schonfeld's lyrics, that refer to an experience that has 'gone beyond words', theories of trauma highlight the insufficiency of language to communicate traumatic experience. At both individual and collective levels trauma operates in the 'dead time of the unspeakable'.<sup>12</sup> In turn, trauma theory has been used to understand and interpret catastrophic events marked by their profound 'incomprehensibility'.<sup>13</sup> Despite falling outside of linguistic comprehension, traumatic experience, nevertheless, *carries on* as affective forces. These work in 'un-structured and unbound' ways, existing outside language *per se* but nonetheless profoundly experienced (in the body) as 'not-yet-qualified intensities'.<sup>14</sup> Within the context of the UK WLM, this excess of forceful energy continued to circulate *within* the movement itself. It pressed against relations, creating an emotionally-charged social context characterised by instability and unpredictability. As Gould summarises,

these affective states – emergent, amorphous, *operating largely beneath conscious awareness* – may be difficult to assimilate and address even as they *exert pressure* on the movement's existing customs, routines, systems, rituals, procedures.<sup>15</sup>

The historiography of the WLM needs to account for *how* feminist activists live or lived in close contact with traumatic experiences. Trauma may have been unevenly distributed and differently experienced because of race, class, body size, sexuality and physical ability of individuals. The important thing to remember is that energies – some comprehensible (such as anger, joy, excitement), others not – *circulated* between women in the movement.

### **Finding new language to understand experience: early WLM politics**

Women in the WLM may have initially found solace and solidarity coming together in Consciousness Raising groups, yet when discussions turned to surviving sexual and domestic abuse, incest, illegal and legal abortions, or coming to terms with lesbian sexuality in a very homophobic and sexist world, what strategies and tools did these women have in dealing with the magnitude of these experiences? How possible was it to share experiences with others, experiences that were in many ways resistant to

narration because of their traumatic nature? How did the social context of unarticulated trauma further exacerbate the 'intense and often mixed emotions that can arise from political activism'?<sup>16</sup>

It is significant that many Women's Liberationists identified so strongly with what Betty Freidan called the 'problem with no name'.<sup>17</sup> Women's experience – as it would come to be defined in the political language of the WLM – did not yet have a communicable language that could be shared with others. Part of the aim of the WLM, and its cultural legacies, was to create that language. I do not want to *reify* language as the only space where sociality can be shared with others. Yet it is crucial to note that it is *within* language that human culture communicates. As feminist discourse analysts Sue Wilkinson and Celia Kitzinger argue, 'the language within which experience is framed is seen not simply as describing the social world, but also as, in some sense, constructing it'.<sup>18</sup> So when there is no language or when it 'runs dry',<sup>19</sup> it makes sharing and understanding experience more difficult, if not impossible.

Pat VT West, the late Bristol-based feminist and poet, describes how this lack of language affected women in early WLM meetings:

We decided after a few meetings [of the Bristol WLM], *when we found it increasingly difficult to speak*, [that we would produce a magazine called Enough.] *It's hard to remember now, but [feminism] wasn't talked about and it was hard to find the language. We didn't know how to voice the things we were feeling.* We decided in the midst of this we would produce this magazine to help try to make it a broader subject that people talked about.<sup>20</sup>

VT West powerfully conveys the difficulty of connecting women's experiences with language in the early days of Women's Liberation. She describes how 'finding the language' was part of a creative process – publishing a magazine – that was intrinsic to this political action. I want to be clear I am not suggesting that if there was adequate language to talk about women's experience in Consciousness Raising Groups, relationships would have been harmonious or easy. What I do want to take seriously is the specific and paradoxical historical context of the WLM: it was an experimental political-social space that was attempting to *create new language* for experiences that were often *indescribable*.

Creating space for understanding the trajectory of the WLM with all this in mind helps produce insights into the inter-personal dynamics of the movement that would, through its life-cycle, often be marked by heated disagreement, conflict and the breakdown of relationships. It

offers the possibility for a more compassionate historiography that is accountable to force and excess, valuing the significance of what is felt: a historiography appreciative of the role language, affect and emotion play in creating spaces of shared (if often dissonant) identities and experience. It encourages historiography attentive to gaps and silences that can move beyond a detached, unfolding narrative. As Michael Roper suggests:

Too often, what goes missing from linguistic analyses is an adequate sense of the material: of the practices of everyday life; of human experience formed through emotional relationships with others; and of that experience as involving a *perpetual process of managing emotional impulses*, both conscious and unconscious, *within the self and in relation to others*.<sup>21</sup>

It is within such unfolding of the difficulties of relation that a compassionate historiography can begin to be enacted.

### **Relational pressures: getting along in the WLM**

Friendships are hugely important in the formation and sustainability of social movements. Poletta, Goodwin and Jasper argue:

We accept a friend's invitation to a rally because we like her, or we fear her disapproval if we turn her down, not just because we agree with her. It is affective ties that bind and preserve the networks in the first place, as well as give them much of their causal impact.<sup>22</sup>

This quote highlights the powerful way emotions influence people's engagement with social movements. 'Fear of disapproval,' of needing to demonstrate that one is having the 'correct political response' to a situation, may motivate action rather than solely a strong, conscious, political commitment. There is then a register of emotional ambivalence that draws people to social movements. This mingles political belief with other factors such as the need to belong and/or realise personal validation. Gavin Brown affirms this point: exploring the role of affect and emotions in social movements 'should engage with the excitement and camaraderie of activism, as well as the ambivalences and disagreements.'<sup>23</sup> Such emotional ambivalences were arguably strong within the WLM, with many women participating in the movement to augment feelings of personal validation. This seems likely given how the movement drew so strongly on personal experience as the basis of political critique.

Many theorists have also pointed to the posi-

tive role emotions can play in social movements, for example by acting as a motivating force.<sup>24</sup> Yet how does the *quality* of emotions and affective ties shared within social movements impact on their longevity? What occurs when anger and frustration are the dominant forces binding people together, as they often were in the early days of the WLM? As Helen Taylor, who was involved in Bristol WLM, remembers:

We were all angry and expressing it in different ways. Inevitably that anger came out towards each other. There was a lot of jostling for power and a lot of argument among us. I never accept the idea that women fight more than men. I think it was because we were all in the early days of trying to find a feminist voice. And often that voice was angry, because we were all sick of that patriarchal society.<sup>25</sup>

Taylor connects the need 'to find a feminist voice' with feelings of anger that were re-circulated *within* WLM groups (rather than external targets, such as 'patriarchy'). Such behaviour led to forms of inter-personal violence ('a lot of argument among us'). Likewise, the jostling for power that Taylor points to is suggestive of the ways WLM group members grappled with power dynamics internalised from living within a heavily hierarchical society steeped in gender, racial and class inequalities.

In the interview, Taylor describes how the different life experiences of women also placed a strain on interactions. In the following excerpt, Taylor reflects on the expectations she had of other women in the group with whom she was organising. She recalled her frustration with the loose organisational, non-hierarchical style the group privileged, which could lead to women continually turning up late to meetings. Recalling an incident where she had pointed out to another woman that being late affected the success of the meeting she said,

Jill said to me very sharply, 'Look, I just put four children to bed.' And there was nothing I could say to that. There were women who had to do all that domestic labour, and I was single and had no children, so if you work with women you have to realise that women have complicated lives. It was difficult, as a lot of women did have young children. It wasn't easy for anybody.<sup>26</sup>

Taylor's reflection on the situation reveals the affective residue it has embedded in her memory today: 'Jill said to me very sharply' recalls this incision. The statement offers insight into the intensity of interactions within WLM groups, outlining an instance where Taylor realised that other women's lives were different to hers. It

also reveals the variable difficulties women had to negotiate to engage with political work, and that the WLM was a process of exploring those difficulties together.

### **Voice and voicelessness**

Finding a political voice, it seems, was not an easy procedure for women involved in the early days of the UK WLM. In the quote below, an anonymous interviewee describes her experience of trying to participate within mixed gender Left-wing activist groups in the late 1960s, prior to her involvement in the Bristol WLM. This was marked by

not being able to speak out directly in a group, [as well as] being intimidated and not being heard. It was like you'd try and speak and it wouldn't happen. Anything I did say would come out *angry* or *incoherent*, you know, it was like *not being able to speak*. Some of that went on in the women's movement too.<sup>27</sup>

This quote suggests the intimate relation between anger and (dis)articulation within political organising for the interviewee in the late 1960s and, further, how this was related to the act of communication itself. The recurring trope of speechlessness emerges again here, and is suggestive of a wider political condition of women attempting to participate in political activism in Britain in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

It is worth pausing over the reference to incoherence mentioned by the interviewee, and thinking about this in conjunction with the idea I introduced earlier in the article: the notion that trauma is unspeakable or incomprehensible ('it was like not being able to speak'). While I am by no means suggesting that the speaker was traumatised by her experiences of working in mixed groups *per se*, this passage does communicate the sense of the speaker residing within a position where there is no recognisable, legitimate, shared social space from where she can speak. Here speechlessness and frustration coalesce to create a difficult reality that far exceeds the frameworks the speaker had for coping with the situation ('anything I did say would come out angry or incoherent'). The fraught political context of speechlessness that many women found themselves in is aligned to trauma but is *not the same as* trauma, because of how it functions as a non-discursive space that is nonetheless filled with force and intensity. Retrospectively the speaker can name the specific emotion – anger – these interactions produced. But how much did such experiences *at the time* generate forces of excess, unnamed, unharnessed, operating 'beneath conscious awareness'?

The feeling of not being able to speak would

have arguably affected the confidence of women entering political circles, and the speaker admits this when she refers to feelings of intimidation. Crucially, this limited experience of political organising within mixed gender groups – and the attendant affective residues of it – was taken with women to WLM meetings. And this often impacted on the relational quality of women's organising too: 'some of that went on in the women's movement too'.

Experiences of disempowerment in mixed groups also created unrealistic expectations that organising with women would be vastly different. As one interviewee, who self-identified as coming from a working-class background, describes:

When I attended Women's Liberation meetings in Bristol I thought '*at last* I might actually find my voice.' [Laughs exasperatedly] Not quite! You not only had ex-university or university women, but also exceedingly wealthy women [in the groups]. There were at least three Anglo-Irish aristocrats and the things they were taking for granted materially was beyond anything I'd ever experienced. It was *exceedingly painful* because the contradiction was worse than when I organised in mixed groups. Being dominated by men was easier to deal with than being dominated by wealthy, privileged women.<sup>29</sup>

Yet again the interviewee talks about finding a 'voice' that, when spoken, can be heard by others. This speaking to a listening other, championed by Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero as a relational ethical ideal,<sup>30</sup> is arrested by the existence of profound class inequalities in Women's Liberation groups. It is important to note the way the interviewee speaks of this experience as being 'exceedingly painful.' This passage outlines very clearly the deep and lasting emotional impact that participating in the WLM had on the speaker and, one could speculate, on many other women who passed through it.

This suggests that encounters between women who had different life experiences could not only produce conflict and disagreement, as referred to in the earlier passage from Helen Taylor, but also created powerful emotional chasms amongst women in the movement. Such breakages were difficult to bridge at the time because of the problem of voice and voicelessness that is referred to by many of the interviewees. Of course, not all women felt voiceless or disempowered, and the uneven distribution of political subjectivity seems (predictably) to reflect class and other embedded social hierarchies. However, regardless of who could 'speak', and here I mean both literally and in the sense of *feeling* legitimatised to speak *and* be heard by

others, the spectre of the 'extremely painful' at times did haunt the edges of interactions. This exerted pressure that sometimes erupted unexpectedly, creating emotionally unstable social conditions between women in the movement. And women did not always listen to each other: 'the personal is the political is quite an arresting slogan, but in practice in consciousness raising it was the personal is me me me'.<sup>31</sup>

The interviewee elaborated the ways she attempted to intervene in political meetings to point out class inequalities and assumptions. However, such actions were frequently misunderstood and, often, dismissed:

In my Consciousness Raising group all that I was doing was questioning the assumptions of home ownership, that your husband was earning regularly a high salary, that you would inherit wealth so you could buy your house in Clifton [a wealthy area of Bristol] as normal, general experiences and would dare to voice my own experience of being brought up on the Bournville housing estate in Weston-Super-Mare. The result of that was the argument wasn't understood. I then found myself being made the object of pity which was not the point and also what would happen was I would get angry because I was the object of pity, then people would burst into tears and say 'you make me feel so guilty'. Along with everything else I didn't want their guilt! It was emotionally confusing.<sup>32</sup>

This extract reveals the emotional circuits that flowed within WLM meetings. Here political objections about inequalities were hi-jacked by the emotional responses of privileged women. Such instances would shift the focus onto their experience as they grappled with their guilt. As the interviewee states, such reactions create an emotionally confusing situation that cannot address the seriousness of the political issues raised. 'Such behaviour derails conversations about privilege and creates a whole lot of *no-go areas*.'<sup>33</sup>

It is here again that the zone of prohibition or realm of the unspeakable ('no-go areas') emerges within the political communities of the time. These spaces become charged with frustration and anger created by pointing out entrenched class inequalities (in this instance), heightened by not having that experience recognised as valid by fellow activists. These moments are fuelled by intense emotions from all the people involved – shame, anger, disappointment and guilt are all mentioned or alluded to here – even if they reflect differentials of privilege and marginalisation. Such emotional explosions served to maintain power structures and prevent engagement with important emotionally and

politically challenging issues.

Indeed, these moments of deflection arguably make forms of experience that highlighted inequality or differences between women *un-expressible*. Such enforced silences, created through emotional reactions such as outbursts of intense crying or raised voices, fed the gaps between experiences existing under the veils of sisterly unity. Ultimately this led to women leaving or not committing to the WLM, as the pain was too great: 'the unease of the situation meant I could never commit to it fully. I saw lots of other women I knew getting involved and I thought "I'm not there" because of the class difference.'<sup>34</sup>

It is clear from these extracts that WLM meetings were complex spaces, which women entered into with expectation and hope but often exited from with feelings of disappointment, anger and confusion. The confusion of not belonging to a place where women may have felt they were *supposed to belong* created another set of emotional dislocations. Again, the relationship between communication, emotion, voice and voiceless-ness, no-go areas and heated interactions operated as vectors through which experimental relationships with other women were forged. These profound factors – which for some interviewees still remain incomprehensible and painful to this day – need to be accounted for in histories of the UK WLM in order to appreciate why and how the movement broke down, and why it was so difficult for many of the women involved.

### Female homosociality and other traumatic vicinities

I will now return to the epigraph of this article. I used the music of Ova because 'Language for Lovers' privileges the *homoerotic* intensity of feminist relationships. While I am not suggesting that all women involved in the WLM were lesbians, it is important to remember that within the movement many women were thrust into the milieu of women's homosocial bonds for the first time in their lives. That is, the 'sanctions which, historically, have enforced or ensured the coupling of women with men and obstructed or penalised [...] [...] allying in independent groups with other women'<sup>35</sup> were openly critiqued in the WLM. Female homosocial spaces were created as a form of political action that privileged the political value of being with other women as an end in itself.

For this reason it is important to remember that the WLM was a *new* and *experimental* political-social space based on an inchoate, and arguably fragile, female homosociality. This emergent relationality attempted to bypass the norms of compulsory heterosexuality that directed women's kinship and sexual desire towards men, through the creation of defined,

female-only social spaces. Jill Robin reflects on this sense of an unknown social frontier: 'It was difficult to work as women together, and get to know how you work together and *how you relate to each other*.'<sup>36</sup> Considering how few models for female homosocial relationships there were in society at the time, aside from actual 'sisterhood', it is not surprising that these relational experiments were fraught with difficulty and sometimes became spaces of conflict.

Female homosocial contexts did often provide grounds for women to question their sexuality. Such relational openings may, or may not, have resulted in erotic attachment with another woman. As Jill recalls, somewhat idiosyncratically:

I had a moment of romance. I fell for some woman who was rather upper class and I can't remember who she was! She was a mother and rather stylish, and had been on the Greek islands with Graves and all that background. I had a moment of thinking I quite liked women in that way. But I didn't lose my virginity to a woman in that way! It opened up my sexuality. It's not just mothers and daughters; we were also sisters.<sup>37</sup>

This passage reflects with humour the 'moment' of homoerotic opening that happened for many women in the WLM. Such an opening was the consequence of Jill's extended exposure to female homosocial relations, one that may never have happened outside of an all female context ('I had a *moment* of thinking I quite liked women in that way'). It is telling how Jill frames the bond between women as a familial one suggesting, despite retrospection, a persisting lack of language to adequately describe female *homosocial* relations. Women had, and arguably still have, limited imaginaries to think through kinship with other women. Yet the importance of those relationships for inaugurating major perceptual changes about personal identity is very clear from this passage.

Therefore, as much as it is important to consider Women's Liberationist lives as always circulating within the vicinity of trauma, it is also valuable to see them circulating within the vicinity of female homoeroticism, due to openings produced by an extended context of experimental female homosociality. Such occasions were staged at a time when the potent mixture of sexism and homophobia was strong in society. This meant that such erotic and, even, friendship bonds between women were incredibly difficult to commit to within the sociality of everyday, because doing so could result in ostracism from family and social ties, as well as living with the threat of extreme violence.

Such proximity adds a further degree of vulnerability to the inter-personal bonds that

women were forming within the WLM as they negotiated new forms of intimacy in the face of multiple forms of structural oppression, additionally inflected by racism and class inequalities. Adrienne Rich's widely read 1980 pamphlet 'Compulsory Sexuality and Lesbian Existence' would later articulate the continuum of lesbianism that all women's lives resided in, if they participated in homosocial or homoerotic relationships with women. These factors affirm the centrality of the female homosocial and erotic within understandings of the WLM.

### **Affective intensities and everyday creativity**

I finish this article by further examining the creative work of the UK WLM and its concurrent emotional registers. To do this I use an interview with Rosemary Schonfeld. Schonfeld was part of Ova, a musical collective who made a major contribution to the burgeoning lesbian, gay and women's music cultures of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Schonfeld moved to London in 1975 and became involved in the squatting and art scene. Here she met Jana Runnalls, with whom she would later form Ova, started a relationship and came out as a lesbian. Her involvement in the WLM began in the second half of the 1970s, in particular political music making and lesbian/women's communities. She remembers it as a chaotic time:

What I feel about that time is we were thrown together and we had to create a safe space for ourselves and for that kind of reason, there were no places, there weren't even women's bars, they began to spring up...suddenly there was all of us, it was a generational thing, and we had to create everything.<sup>38</sup>

This extract communicates the spontaneous coming-together of lesbian feminists that emerged from the WLM ('we were thrown together'). Here Schonfeld narrates how the absence of *spaces* (physical, cultural, desiring and so forth) for lesbians and those wanting women-only social interactions meant that they had to be produced because nothing, or very few things, existed. This kind of everyday creativity – organising social spaces and events, writing and distributing pamphlets, running skill-sharing workshops, networking, breaking into squats, attending lengthy meetings and discussing strategies, organising demos, cooking large meals to share with others – was the fuel of the UK WLM and many other social movements of the time. Yet these activities – and the insistent pressure to create the social itself, often with limited resources – can be an absolutely exhausting and often frustrating process, particularly when this work can also double as everyday

survival (having a place to live and feeding your community).

This pressure to be inventive when faced with the persistent absence of the world you want to live in is massively underpaid work. It is also work done largely in the name of an ideological ideal. The economic instability surrounding these actions, their lack of profitability (both economic and emotional) can lead to what is now termed 'activist burnout', an emotional culture of frustration and anger that can be profoundly damaging at both individual and collective levels. It is such laboured contexts (emotional, temporal, monetary) that need to be accounted for in attempting to understand the emotional dynamics of the UK WLM.

What is also left out of histories of the WLM – and often understandings of contemporary feminist movements too – is how vulnerable a lot of the women were who participated. After all, it is often negative personal experiences that politicise people, particularly when the personal and the intimate provide the grounds from which to construct politics. As Alison Rook commented about her involvement with Sister-show, it gave her 'the courage to speak and write and express on the stage the horrible things that happened to us, and share them. It was empowering and therapeutic.'<sup>39</sup> Sharing 'horrible things' may of course have been therapeutic. However, these 'things' may also have been re-circulated as unbound energies that could not healthily be assimilated by all who witnessed them. They may have jarred or produced feelings of personal danger, confusion or instability. Again, this points to the context of the WLM as being one in the vicinity of trauma – a force hanging close to the people participating – that could be used as creative inspiration for action.

Schonfeld further reflects on this point: 'The women's movement generally provided a relatively safe environment for damaged individuals. A lot of us were damaged in one way or another.'<sup>40</sup> Such a statement invites consideration about how people who were 'damaged in one way or another' formed relationships. How did they resist replicating abusive cycles within the ambitious social, world-making context of the WLM? Schonfeld goes on to say:

We were all in it together in a way so naturally there was huge conflicts because it's not as if we chose each other because of our personal preferences and so many of us were fighting for similar goals, and you wanted to do it in different ways, you disagreed. It was incredible though, I look back at that time – even though it was tough in many ways, not only because of the discrimination but the way we interacted with each other because we were all sorts –



and it was pretty brutal sometimes. My friend in Germany called it a bloodless revolution. That was what I was involved in.<sup>41</sup>

Schonfeld's memories reveal a time marked by conflicts, a time of shared aims but different means, and 'brutal' forms of relationality. The sense of struggle and deep transformation, of being on 'the front line' is communicated by the phrase 'bloodless revolution'. Bloodless yes, but it is clear that the psychic and emotional impact of participating in the WLM, particularly within lesbian communities that were pursuing experimental intimacies within a hostile cultural context, was profound. As Schonfeld again reflects, 'we got no validation from society generally, and so we had huge expectations of each other.'<sup>42</sup> And when expectations are disappointed, that can only produce more pain and frustration, contributing to a negative cauldron of affect that ultimately can only implode, often between women in the movement.

### Concluding thoughts

In this article I have enacted a compassionate historiography of the UK WLM, using oral history interviews as my primary methodology. Compassionate historiography aims to be sensi-

tive to the emotional work of social movements and can be kind to their mistakes. I have argued that it is important to highlight the difficult and incomprehensible energies that circulated among the collective working practices of the UK WLM in numerous sites such as meetings, newsletters, protests, theatre performances and music. And that the historical moment when the movement in the UK arose was one with limited language to comprehend experiences that many people argue are indescribable or, even, unspeakable. Because of this lack of linguistic capacity, affective knowledge was unearthed but not always dealt with or understood. However it continued to circulate uncompromisingly in the vicinity, resulting in challenging emotional situations.

I have also argued that it is important to view the UK WLM as a political-social experiment that fashioned female homosocial and homoerotic relations. Such intimacies were indeed intensely fragile,<sup>43</sup> and could be marked by fragmentation, anger and conflict as well as joy, desire and hope. These are all factors worth considering if the silences – or under-articulated histories of the UK WLM – can come to be appreciated for their emotional dynamism and difficulty.<sup>44</sup>

### NOTES

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1. Ova, 'Language for Lovers' in *Possibilities*, Stropky Cow, 1984, p 444.
2. Carrie Hamilton, 'Moving feelings: nationalism, feminism and the emotions of politics', *Oral History*, vol 39, no 2, 2010, p 86.
3. To read summaries of the interviews, please visit <http://sistershowrevisited.wordpress.com/2011/03/14/personal-histories-of-the-second-wave-of-feminism/>
4. See <http://sistershowrevisited.wordpress.com>
5. See <http://womensliberationmusicarchive.wordpress.com>
6. It would be interesting, therefore, to conduct a range of interviews that explicitly sought to explore the role of emotions in the WLM.
7. Deborah M Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and Act Up's Fight Against AIDS*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010, p 30.
8. Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, London: Routledge, p 22, italics mine.
9. I use the term 'Black' to refer to the political category that was used in the 1970s and 1980s (and still today) to denote women who self-identify, originate or have ancestry from global majority populations (ie African, Asian, Middle

Eastern and Latin America) and indigenous and bi-racial backgrounds.

10. Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2003, p 167.
11. Cvetkovich, 2003, p 3.
12. Patricia Ticineto Clough, 'Reflections on sessions early in an analysis: trauma, affect and "enactive witnessing"', *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, vol 19, no 2, 2009, p 151.
13. Cathy Caruth (ed), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1995 and Jane Kilby, 'Trauma Theory and the Liberty of Reading' in *New Formations*, vol 47, 2002, pp 217-230, p 217.
14. Gould, 2010, p 29.
15. Gould, 2010, p 270, italics mine.
16. Hamilton, 2010, p 85.
17. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, New York: WW Norton, 2001, p 57.
18. 'Introduction' in Sue Wilkinson and Celia Kitinger (eds), *Feminism and Discourse: Psychological Perspectives*, Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 1995, p 3.
19. Virginia Woolf, 'On Being Ill' in *The Moment and Other Essays*, London: Hogarth Press, 1951, p 15.
20. Pat VT West, interview conducted with Viv Honeybourne, Bristol, UK, 2000, Italics mine.

21. Michael Roper, 'Slipping out of view: subjectivity and emotion in gender history', *History Workshop Journal*, vol 59, 2005, pp 57-72, p 62, italics mine.

22. Jeff Goodwin, James M Jasper and Francesca Poletta, 'Introduction: why emotions matter' in Goodwin, Jasper and Poletta (eds), *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001, p 8.
23. Gavin Brown, 'Autonomy, affinity and play in the spaces of radical queer activism' in Kath Browne, Jason Lim and Gavin Brown (eds), *Geographies of Sexualities: Theory, Practices and Politics*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007, p 203.
24. See Jeff Goodwin, James M Jasper and Francesca Poletta, 'Emotional dimensions of social movements', in David Snow, Sarah Soule and Hanspeter Kriesi (eds), *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2004; and James M. Jasper, *The Art of Moral Protest: Culture, Biography, and Creativity in Social Movements*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.
25. Helen Taylor, interview conducted with author, Bristol, UK, 2010.
26. Helen Taylor, interview, 2010.
27. Anonymous, interview conducted with author, Bristol, UK, 2011a.
28. Gould, 2010, p 270.
29. Anonymous, interview conducted with

author, Bristol, UK, 2011b.

**30.** Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Towards a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005, pp 5-12. See also Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, London: Routledge, 2000, pp 55-67.

**31.** Anon, interview, 2011b.

**32.** Anon, interview, 2011b.

**33.** Anon, interview, 2011b.

**34.** Anon, interview, 2011b.

**35.** Adrienne Rich, 'Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence', *Signs*, vol 5, no 4, 'Women: Sex and

Sexuality', 1980, p 636.

**36.** Jill Robin, interview conducted with author, Canterbury, UK. Italics mine, 2008.

**37.** Jill Robin, interview, 2008.

**38.** Rosemary Schonfeld, interview with author, Bristol, UK, 2010.

**39.** Alison Rook, interview with author, Canterbury, UK, 2008.

**40.** Rosemary Schonfeld, 'Postscript by Rosemary Schonfeld', 2011. Available online: <http://womensliberationmusicarchive.files.wordpress.com/2010/10/rspostscript.pdf>

Last accessed 24 October 2011.

**41.** Schonfeld, 2010.

**42.** Schonfeld, 2011.

**43.** Julia Downes, 'Crisis, conflict and the personal-political collapse in DIY queer feminist worlds', presented at 'A Carnival of Feminist Cultural Activism', University of York, 5 March 2011.

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