empire—in which it does succeed to a great extent—it inadvertently continues to perpetuate an Orientalist and exoticised view of colonial spaces that at times reads as apologist and sits uncomfortably with readers versed in postcolonial discourse of empire. But it is, on the other hand, a valuable piece of research, not least in its transnational approach, which emphasises urban life as a lens through which we can view the complex and diverse global connections of the modern era.

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**Jennings, Rebecca**  
*Unnamed Desires: A Sydney Lesbian History*  
(MELBOURNE: MONASH UNIVERSITY PUBLISHING, 2015).  
ISBN 9781922235701 (PBK) $34.95

**Stella, Francesca**  
*Lesbian Lives in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia: Post/Socialism and Gendered Sexualities*  
(BASINGSTOKE: PALGRAVE MACMILLAN, 2015).  
ISBN 9781137321237 (HBK) £68.00

Recent work in lesbian history demonstrates the continued importance of oral history narratives and personal memoirs in documenting past experiences of women who have sought sexual and emotional intimacy with other women. It also demonstrates a refreshing resurgence of scholarly interest in this still underdeveloped field. Much history of (homo)sexuality has been dominated by gay male narratives, justified by the overwhelming tendency for both penal and medical traditions to focus exclusively on male homosexuality, and the consequent imbalance in archival materials available to historians. Added to this, the broader social phenomenon of men’s sexuality being valued over women’s sexuality has meant that there is a greater cache of evidence charting public expressions of, and responses to, male homosexual identities, desires, social lives and political interventions.

Two books bring the field of women’s experiences of same-sex desire back into focus, but—importantly—also present a constructive challenge to this narrative. While exploring geographically and politically divergent contexts, both provide renewed models for how the history of women’s same-sex desires can be told.

*Unnamed Desires: A Sydney Lesbian History* by Rebecca Jennings is based on thirty-two oral history interviews and some rare personal memoirs. Already an expert on British lesbian history, this book is the product of a postdoctoral research fellowship at Macquarie University in Sydney. It fills an astonishing lacuna—it is the first full historical monograph
on lesbian lives, subcultures and activism in Australia. For this reason alone it is a significant contribution, joining numerous book chapters and journal articles by other historians of Australian lesbian life. Indeed, the only monograph Jennings is able to cite with a primary focus on passion between women in the Australian past is Sylvia Martin’s *Passionate Friends: Mary Fullerton, Mabel Singleton and Miles Franklin* (2001). Lucy Chesser’s *Parting With My Sex: Cross-Dressing, Inversion and Sexuality in Australian Cultural Life* (2008) serves as one other monograph of great relevance to the history of same-sex attracted women, yet its primary focus is on the sartorial and embodied presentations of *gender* transgression, not on sexual orientation. Rather, the main focus for Jennings is the lived lives of women who sought out sexual and intimate experiences with other women (in fact, one of her findings is precisely that many of her interviewees, particularly those living through the 1950s and 1960s, did not transgress aesthetic gender stereotypes).

The book’s pioneering contribution offsets its geographical limitation to the urban context of Sydney. Organised both chronologically and thematically, its five substantive chapters cover issues of the silencing of same-sex desires by women, as well as concealment and isolation, which Jennings takes to characterise the early to mid-twentieth century. The chapters analysing the post-war decades, by contrast, focus on the emergence of lesbian subcultures, social spaces and friendship networks, eventually spilling into a political movement and public acknowledgement (if not acceptance) of same-sex intimacy between women. A rare unpublished memoir by a woman called Sandra Willson, in which she describes her encounters with lovers, police and the psychiatric establishment, offers a fascinating bridge between themes. Willson was in possession of a copy of Magnus Hirschfeld’s book *The Third Sex*, indicating a critical engagement with her desires and emotional aspirations.

The oral histories and memoirs Jennings uses challenge four persistent assumptions about women who have engaged in same-sex intimacy: firstly, as mentioned above, the notion that they *typically* transgress gender norms; secondly, that the presence of absence of ‘lesbian’ identity labels has always been important; and thirdly, that a commercial bar scene was pivotal to post-war lesbian socialising. Jennings’ attentiveness to varied manifestations of same-sex desires constructively highlights the limitations of historical work that uncritically adopts reified identity categories. A discussion of the significance that mothers’ rights had within lesbian politics during the 1970s challenges assumptions about the meaning of both childrearing and heterosexual
marriage or family models in these women’s lives. Jennings emphasises that in the absence of an ‘explicit cultural discourse’ around female homosexuality in the twentieth century, there was space for women to ‘imagine and engage in emotionally and sexually intimate relationships with other women’ (102) without subscribing to a particular identity label. These experiences were often woven into lifespans that also incorporated heterosexual marriages. Many women ‘understood their sexuality in more fluid terms without seeking to categorise their sexual identity’ (102). Many of them also understood the structural and material advantages to be gained from heterosexual marriage, and so made strategic decisions about their lives, sometimes at the expense of, or in addition to, romantic commitments.

The fourth assumption Jennings challenges involves what is commonly understood as the public/private divide. Much existing scholarship by default perpetuates the idea that women’s same-sex intimacy and desire has been confined to non-public spaces. On the contrary, interviewees spoke of public locations used for romantic or sexual assignations, or for meeting acquaintances and developing social networks. Similarly, the assumed safety and privacy of the home was non-existent for many interviewees, even those living as couples, who adopted strategies such as keeping a bed made up in a second bedroom to maintain the appearance of two single women.

Lesbian Lives in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia: Post/Socialism and Gendered Sexualities, by Glasgow-based historical sociologist Francesca Stella, covers many of the same themes and challenges, albeit within a very different—and politically more complex—context. Based on sixty-one ethnographic interviews of women aged between eighteen and fifty-six, the book transverses different terrains temporally (and politically) between Soviet and post-Soviet periods, and (geographically) between the capital Moscow (thirty-four interviews) and city of Ul’ianovsk in the central Volga region (twenty-seven interviews). Stella manages thus to capture both distinct and connected experiences of different generations of women, offering a similarly groundbreaking English-language study focusing primarily on lesbian life. Likewise critical of the limitations of identity politics in sexuality studies, Stella argues for using identity and intersectional critiques constructively, whilst also maintaining a clear view of the material and political circumstances in which ‘agentic’ subjects (Goffman) shape and create their own lives.

One of the book’s core scholarly (and political) interventions is to augment efforts towards ‘de-centring
Western sexualities’, in which the work of Johanna Mizielińska and Robert Kulpa has played a leading role. Like Jennings’ questioning of the received narrative vis-à-vis the commercial bar scene, Stella’s book expands earlier critiques of coming-out and the emergence of a gay liberation movement within historical narratives of same-sex lives as ethnocentric. They do not work as a reference point in relation to Soviet or post-Soviet Russia. Moreover, Anglophone scholarship has been too often ‘reduced to self-proclaimed or ascribed identities’ (18), ignoring varied structures of family and social institutions in the shaping of gender and sexuality, and obscuring the fact that sexualities can change across the lifespan and are not fixed.

Critical both of scholarship in which ‘Russian’ sexualities are defined either by similarity or alterity to ‘Western’ sexualities, and in which the differentiation between ‘Russian’ and ‘Western’ same-sex sexualities is exaggerated, Stella seeks to avoid both methodological nationalism and Orientalist reification of Russian sexualities. Instead, it is crucial to analyse lived experiences within specific socio-historical frameworks.

To this end, one of the most important insights arising from both her interviews and her other research on the Soviet period is the effect of the ‘working mother’ contract on women’s lives in general, and on same-sex attracted women in particular. Due to the fact that all citizens, irrespective of gender, were mobilised into the workforce, there was a much higher proportion of women in the workforce than in the West, and yet the responsibility for reproductive work within the home—both child-bearing and domestic labour—fell almost entirely to women. While noting that Russia is in no way unique in the sense that motherhood, far more than marriage or heterosexual coupledom, has historically been the essential marker of womanhood, Stella’s informants re-confirmed earlier findings by Laurie Essig and Anna Rotkirch that heterosexual marriage played a key role in the lives of older lesbians who had experienced same-sex sexual relations and desire during the Soviet period. Furthermore, the specific character of collective housing in the Soviet period rendered invalid any assumptions about the home as a private, free space.

Nevertheless, the book seeks to transcend the sphere of the family and delves as well into women’s experiences in workplaces, and, perhaps most interestingly, their more recent uses of public space. Her interviewees’ descriptions of the tusovka—akin to what in English might be called a queer network—demonstrate how the boundaries between visibility and invisibility are
porous and fluid. Aside from certain cafés and club nights, a key element in the formation of tusovka in both cities, particularly in the absence of a large visible enclave in the manner of Sydney’s Darlinghurst, has been the street culture centred around the Tver’skoi Boulevard in Moscow, and certain park benches in particular streets in Ul’ianovsk. These narratives defy common assumptions that lesbians and queer women have not used public space.

Taken together, these two books form not only a valuable documentary contribution to the lesbian past, but also an important multi-levelled intervention into the broader field of history in general, and the specific field of LGBT history in particular. They demonstrate that women’s past experiences of same-sex desire, emotional intimacy, identity, political activism, culture and community can be reconstructed. Importantly, they can provide unique challenges to woolly and imprecise narratives loosely based upon the very specific contexts of certain (for example, American) historical and political environments. Both books also demonstrate the importance of situating actual, lived experiences within these very particular material circumstances. Although themes of silence, concealment, isolation and invisibility are undoubtedly central to the ‘sexual stories’ (Plummer) of same-sex attracted women, these books also speak to the assertions of agency, community and voice that these women have made in carving out their own experiences within the circumstances at hand.

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Stuart Macintyre
Australia’s Boldest Experiment: War and Reconstruction in the 1940s
(Sydney: NewSouth, 2015)
ISBN 9781742231129 (PBK) $34.00

Post-war Australia was a time of sweeping change in the country. The influx of migrants from war-ravaged Europe, the expansion of the Commonwealth government, the onset of the Cold War and the birth of the modern welfare state transformed Australia from a predominantly rural population of seven million to ten million in just over a decade. Despite being thought of as a progressive experiment that invented the secret ballot and first elected a labour party to its national government, it was post-war reconstruction that pushed Australia into modernity. Stuart Macintyre’s Australia’s Boldest Experiment is a monograph that recounts, in vast detail, the people, events and wider historical forces that brought about this remarkable transformation.

Macintyre astutely reminds us, in the first sentence of the book, that on the eve of World War Two Australia was