ASSEMBLING A LIFE: THE (AUTO) BIOGRAPHY OF

ALEXIS AMELIA ALVEY

1942-1945

by

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ABSTRACT

Alexis Alvey was one of the first sixty-seven Canadian women to join the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service, or Wrens. Between 1942-1945 she served as an officer on naval bases across the country, but Alvey's military career ended seven months before the end of the war, when she was mysteriously discharged "Services Complete". Over the course of the war, and for forty years following, Alexis Alvey carefully collected and arranged her personal papers related to her career with the Wrens. In 1985 she donated them to the University of British Columbia. This thesis uses those papers to make two arguments. First, it was Alexis Alvey's atypical femininity and 'deviant' sexuality that put an end to her military career. Second, Alvey's sexuality is implicit in her collection, present everywhere but never articulated. By reading Alvey's Collection as a text, and considering its origins as a source, this thesis shows how and why its creator attempted to use 'history' to claim for herself a class-based respectability. It is able to argue that Alvey's military career ended prematurely because she was a 'mannish' lesbian. Thus, it places firmly within the historical record a lesbian identity and experience which may have otherwise been overlooked.

To Alexis

Acknowledgements

Where to begin? To be honest, I would have to go back more than twenty years to thank Professor Charles Hamilton, who first told me that historians didn't have to have all the answers, merely a few good questions. In the more recent past, I would like to thank Charlene Porsild, and the History Department at Simon Fraser University, for acknowledging my first work with this collection with the Margaret Ormsby Prize for the Best Undergraduate History Essay in 1995. George Brandak, the Manuscript Curator at the University of British Columbia who serendipitously introduced me to the collection, and who continued to enthusiastically support my work with it, deserves a special vote of thanks. And I would like to thank my lucky stars for the privilege and pleasure of being supervised by Dr. Joy Parr, who always knew the right questions to ask, and where I might find the answers.

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Introduction

> Two smart girls accepted for first Royal Canadian Naval Service Training STOP Reporting Ottawa August 24 STOP Assignment for both on West Coast so keep chin up and fingers crossed STOP Love and Kisses Amelia and Grace[1]

In July of 1942 Alexis Amelia Alvey and Grace Brodie telegraphed Alvey's mother to share some exciting news. After a lengthy application procedure, the two women at long last had been accepted into the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service (WRCNS). By the end of the year, Alvey, Brodie, and twenty-one other women from across Canada would become the Canadian Navy's first female commissioned officers. For the next two and a half years they would experience first-hand Canada's involvement in "total war."

During that period, and for almost fifty years following, Alexis Alvey meticulously gathered and filed away documents related to her wartime experience. The resulting collection comprises 3.15 meters of textual records, including thirteen boxes of letters, photographs, diaries and Navy administrative papers, now housed at the University of British Columbia Special Collections Archives. The Alvey fonds

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[1] Alexis Amelia Alvey and Grace Brodie, Toronto, to Mrs. Eva Richardson, Seattle, Washington, 29 July 1942, from the Alexis Amelia Alvey Collection (AAAC), University of British Columbia Special Collections, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia, Box 6, File 6 (6-6).

contain newspaper clippings related to women's wartime service, as well as a fine collection of ephemera, including song sheets, theater programs, and every copy of the Wren's service newsletter, "The Tiddley Times". The collection demonstrates, by its breadth and size, that Alexis Alvey was a methodical and organized woman, and for this I am truly grateful.

This thesis will use Alexis Alvey's collection to explore the perceived choices and cultural patterns women faced during the Second World War. It will inquire whether it is possible to uncover how women's lives are made, not only by material conditions, but also by their expressed ideas and self-representations.[2] To better understand the complex relationship between individual consciousness and culture, it will ask how and why women understand and explain their lives.

I have used the Alvey papers to investigate what it means to consider a collection's provenance as an historical source.[3] Reading this collection as a whole, and considering its contents and its origins suggests questions about its creator's motivations. Why, for example, does she literally highlight certain aspects of her experience and identity, while she heavily censors others? I have read the collection as an autobiography, created by collage to reshape androcentric traditions to redefine

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[2] Joan Sangster, Earning Respect: The Lives of Working Women in Small-Town Ontario, 1920-1960, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), p.11.

[3] I am indebted to Dr. Allen Seager for encouraging me to pursue this direction, and to the work of John D. Wrathall, whose article "Provenance as Text: Reading the Silences Around Sexuality in Manuscript Collections", *Journal of American History*, 1992 79 (1), p. 165-178, has been helpful in determining not only the shape of this introduction, but of this project as a whole.

what it meant to be a woman during the Second World War. Grace Brodie recognized this when she gave her friend a scrapbook with which to begin. On its inside cover she encouraged Alvey to use the album, that she may "portray in picture and in word the progress of [her] triumphs: That those whose privilege it is to see may know - and knowing say - This is a woman!"[4]

Throughout her life, Alexis Alvey worked to prepare her papers for donation to a public institution where they would be well-cared for and accessible to "future researcher-writers."[5] It seems, however, that while Alvey meant to narrate a story of the Second World War, she also intended to make herself its subject. Her wartime experience gave her life meaning and respectability. Documenting that experience let her use history to claim a space in public life, a space that she believed might otherwise have been denied her. This thesis will ask, therefore, what compelled Alexis Alvey to seize the narrative of history to tell her future readers that this was, indeed, a woman.

Alexis Alvey donated her papers to the University of British Columbia in 1985. The collection represents an outstanding opportunity to document the social relations extant in the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service, or Wrens, from 1942-1945. Formed a year after the other two women's services, the women's branch of the

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[4] Grace Brodie to Alexis Alvey, inscribed by Brodie in scrapbook given to Alvey, Christmas 1945, AAAC 10-1.

[5] Alexis Alvey, note covering file entitled "Brodie, Grace, Correspondence," 1970, AAAC 11-2.

Royal Canadian Navy was from its inception the smallest and most exclusive of the three.[6] Perhaps because of its size and its limited lifespan, little scholarly work has been done on this service. Aside from a few pages in an official history of the Canadian Navy published in 1952, and an engaging amateur memoir published in 1983, nothing yet has been written about the inception of the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service, or about the experience of the women who served therein.[7]

Alexis Alvey and Grace Brodie meant to use the material to write something about the Wrens themselves. As they wrote to a friend in 1951,

> Both during and since service days Alex collected all available data about the WRCNS hoping that one day it might fit into a story...[it] can't be "history" - we don't have access to official records BUT - we don't want just a detached series of tales...rather [it should be] factual, accurate and [as] all embracing as we can make it. Of necessity it must be largely our story, limited by our experiences.[8]

The two women never did write their memoir, and Grace Brodie died in 1960. After Brodie's death, however, Alvey continued to work on the collection, creating by collage what she did not complete in prose. She structured her unconventional narrative, dated 1940-1988, to reflect the significance of her service with the Wrens,

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[6] Ruth Roach Pierson, "They're Still Women After All": The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood, (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 1986), p.95.

[7] See Gilbert Norman Tucker, The Naval Service of Canada, Its Official History, Volume II, Activities on Shore During the Second World War, (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1952), and Rosamond Greer, The Girls of the King's Navy, (Victoria: Sono Nis Press, 1983).

[8] Alexis Alvey and Grace Brodie, Seattle, Washington, to Dorothy Isherwood, London, England, 10 Sept 1951, AAAC 5-2.

and her lifelong involvement with the other women with whom she shared that experience. The earliest materials include diaries and correspondence, and there is a file of autobiographical material that she considered historically relevant. Subsequent additions are connected to Alvey's motivations and applications to serve with the Canadian military during the war. There are documents related to her service, training, and duties with the Wrens, and she has included many files of WRCNS administrative documents, both complete and incomplete.

Its donor has extensively processed the Alvey Collection; anyone sifting through the files can see the hand of its creator upon them. Almost every document has a hand-written or typed directive, either attached or scrawled in the margin; for example, "I went to church" is written on a Sunday Service program, and "Important Background Information" on a file of biographical material. UBC Archivist George Brandak reports that the fonds came to him structured in much the same way as we find them today.[9]

There are also documents that explicitly discuss the processing of the collection. In 1970, as she worked to prepare her papers for donation, Alvey wrote the following note. She placed it covering the file of her wartime correspondence with Grace Brodie to explain how and why she has censored parts of Brodie's letters:

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[9] George Brandak, Manuscripts Curator, Special Collections Division, University of British Columbia Library, Vancouver, British Columbia, interview by author, tape recording, Vancouver, B.C., 23 January 1998.

> In the hope that one day I may do some serious writing about the WRCNS, my experiences etc. in the service, I have kept Grace's letters to me in which she wrote about her experiences, some of which were in different administrative categories than mine (recruiting and manning) and also in different geographical areas and 'ships'.
> It is no secret that Grace and I shared an apartment home for a few months before joining up and it was our mutual hope to return to same after the war...So, just in case I never get to use these letters as source material and they should wind up in the possession of some research-writer I have de-personalized references (as well as a few comments about certain personalities that might prove embarrassing) by blocking or cutting them out.
> And my letters to Grace? She did not retain them. [10]

This arresting letter suggests that the Alvey collection can tell us much about what a narrative history would document of women's participation in the Royal Canadian during World War Two. I have chosen to focus on the process by which Alvey constructed her narrative by selecting and ordering her archive. In this way, I will be able to acknowledge the sexuality of the individuals I study and make part of my subject the documents they left to reconstruct their past, documents that others might censor. Not all silences are the same; what they hide can be deduced from the context in which they exist and the purpose for which they were produced.[11] Thus, this thesis will attempt to give meaning to this note and its unspoken sexuality.

The history of sexuality is the history of social relations. Sexuality is closely involved with social reality, and its forms, content, and context differ by century,

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[10] Alexis Alvey, note covering file entitled " Brodie, Grace, Correspondence", 1970, AAAC 11-2.

culture, and class being studied.[12] Queer theorists and historians of lesbians argue that until that history includes the experience of all people, including homosexuals, we can have only a distorted and sketchy view of the past.[13] The survival of the evidence of a lesbian relationship between Alexis Alvey and Grace Brodie was an outcome of Alvey's deliberate attempt to preserve the history of the WRCNS between 1942 and 1945. It provides us with evidence that some women in the past, as they do now, chose to lead women-centered lives.[14]

Women seldom leave records, and when they do, they often neglect the personal to focus on information about the public aspects of their lives. They hesitate to include details regarding sexual orientation, deviant or otherwise. Until very recently, to self-identify as lesbian has been to be marginalized or ignored. Even

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[11] Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick, The Epistemology of the Closet, (Los Angeles: University of California, 1990), p.3-4.

[12] Robert Padgug, "Sexual Matters: On Conceptualizing Sexuality in History", *Radical History Review*, Spring/Summer 1979, p.9. Padgug also writes that in any approach that takes as predetermined and universal the categories of sexuality, real history disappears. p.5

[13] As Becki Ross writes, these scholars are working "against the legacy of the destruction of records and memorabilia documenting female same-gender desire and the bowdlerization of texts by biographers intent on protecting the reputation of their authors." The House That Jill Built: A Lesbian Nation in Formation, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), p.7. See also Lillian Faderman, Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth Century America, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Blanche Weisen Cook, "The Historical Denial of Lesbianism" *Radical History Review*, 20 (Spring Summer 1979); Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinius and George Chauncy Jr. eds., Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past, (New York: New American Library,1989); and Allan Berube, Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two, (New York: Free Press, 1990).

[14] There is a lively debate among historians of lesbians about whether or not it matters if they "did it". Lillian Faderman has argued that genital contact between women is secondary to their choice of a relationship in which two women's strongest emotions and affections are directed toward each other . . . By preference the two women spend most of their time together and share most aspects of their lives with each other. This is a controversial argument in at least two ways: it either categorizes as 'lesbian' women who were engaged in asexual or "romantic friendships", or it waters down conceptualizations of lesbianism to the point of desexualizing them. See Lesbian History Group, Not a Passing Phase: Reclaiming Lesbians in History 1840-1985, (London: The Women's Press, 1989). I will argue here that if, as Blanche Weisen Cook and Adrienne Rich have written, "women who love women, who choose women to nurture and support and to create a living environment in which to work creatively and independently, are lesbians", then it doesn't really matter what someone born almost one hundred years ago did in bed. See Cook and Rich, "The Historical Denial of Lesbianism", p.64.

historians who acknowledge the existence of never-married women tend to relegate them to the edges of women's experience. While scholars have begun to write about "famous lesbians," the lives of ordinary never married or lesbian women are little documented.

The Alexis Amelia Alvey Collection represents an important opportunity to undertake such work. The above note suggests its author recognized her woman-centered life. The censored passages in the correspondence that follows may mark her understanding of its place "on the outside." If Alvey's collection is an attempt to construct herself as a legitimate public and political subject, then her elision of her relationship to Grace Brodie suggests she understood her sexuality as "deviant". While Alvey has attempted to suppress this part of her identity, we might ask: is her homosexuality connotative, present everywhere but never articulated?[15]

Alexis Amelia Alvey was born on 22 November 1904, in Seattle, Washington. Her mother was a nurse and a published author, and her father was a police officer, and a minuteman during the First World War. Her older brother Melvin served with the Navy during the Great War. As her mother was also involved in the war effort, young Alex was boarded at Holy Names Academy in Seattle until the Armistice. By

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[15] Ki Namaste, "The Politics of Inside/Out: Queer Theory, Poststructuralism and a Sociological Approach to Sexuality," in *Sociological Theory* 12:2 July 1994. Namaste goes on to say that ambiguities surrounding homosexuality is something a critical reading practice can exploit; the absence of homosexual denotation is what keeps us looking. By only implying a lesbian identity, Alvey induces her readers to wonder about its possibility as she makes it central to her narrative.

1922, she was herself in uniform, as a member of Seattle's first Girl Scout troop. As its first lieutenant, she was presented to Vice President Calvin Coolidge and his wife when they visited the area that year.[16]

Except for a 1923 article from the Seattle Post-Intelligencer reporting how eighteen-year-old Alex fought off an intruder who attacked her while she was at home alone, the collection tells us little else about Alvey's life until the early 1930s. Thanks to an activity report she wrote for her McMaster University class reunion, we know that she attended that institution during 1932 and 1933. Then, after becoming a naturalized Canadian citizen in 1935, Alvey took a position as head photographic technician in the Department of Pathology at the Banting Institute of the University of Toronto. In 1940, along with thousands of other Canadian women, she chose to contribute to Canada's war effort by joining a paramilitary organization. While still employed at the Banting, Alvey became a volunteer member of the Women's Company of the Canadian Red Cross, and she quickly became the Officer-In-Charge of the Transport Division. It was during these years that she met Grace Brodie, and in 1941 the two women decided to move in together.

The war had put an end to the depression, and by 1941 there were 100,000 more women working than a decade earlier. Historians estimate that by June of

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[16] This according to an article in the *Seattle Times*, 16 August 1922. Alvey attached a note to a copy of this article, included in her file of "important" background information, saying that Coolidge made quite an impression on the delegation of girl scouts because he came out of his hotel suite bedroom "with his pants on a hanger." AAAC 2-3.

1941, there were over 6,700 women in volunteer paramilitary groups, keen to be in uniform and have their ranks and titles officially recognized.[17] Organizations such as the Toronto Women's Red Cross Transport Division asked the Department of National Defense and National War Services to legitimize their organizations, but instead the government used these organizations as recruiting grounds for the official women's services. The Air Force became the first service to accept women into its ranks when the Canadian Women's Auxiliary Air Force was established by an Order-In-Council on 2 July 1941. The Canadian Women's Army Corps followed it shortly thereafter on 13 August, but it was not until nearly a year later that the Canadian Admiralty sent to Britain for advice on the founding of a women's naval service. British Wrens Joan Carpenter, Dorothy Isherwood, and Elizabeth Sturdee arrived in Canada from London in May of 1942. The three officers began immediately "to recruit a group of *suitable* [my emphasis] Canadian women who would serve as a nucleus for the new organization,"[18] and the WRCNS soon became known as the service into which one entered, and remained at all times, a lady.

Officially, "suitable" meant British subjects of British parentage, white, in good health, between the ages of 18 and 45 (officers 21 to 55), without dependents or children under 16. Carpenter, Isherwood and Sturdee toured Canada interviewing

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[17] Ruth Roach Pierson, "Canadian Women and Canadian Mobilization During the Second World War," *Revue Internationale d'Histoire Militaire*, France, 1982 (54), p.182.

[18] Gilbert Norman Tucker, The Naval Service of Canada, Its Official History, Volume II, Activities on Shore During the Second World War, (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1952), cited by Greer in The Girls of the King's Navy, 1983, p.15.

candidates, among them Grace Brodie and Alexis Amelia Alvey. Brodie was recruited immediately, but Alvey was not accepted until some months later, after a tenacious correspondence with the Royal Canadian Navy in which she argued that her American parentage should not prevent her from serving her adopted homeland. Thanks in part to the glowing letters of recommendation from her employer and her Member of Parliament, and because of the very positive impression she left with Superintendent Carpenter at her recruiting interview, Alvey finally was admitted into the Wrens in August 1942. She and Brodie left together for Ottawa, where in September they were among the first sixty-seven Wren ratings[19] to undergo a probationary training course at Kingsmill House. Both women became officers upon their completion of the course, but they were assigned to serve at opposite ends of the country. Alvey's first posting was as Acting Chief Petty Officer at the newly established training facility at Galt, Ontario, and Brodie was sent to the west coast to serve as British Columbia's only Wren, in charge of recruiting.[20] As she traveled across Canada by train, Grace Brodie telegraphed her friend to "remember the agreement [to] keep chin up love."[21]

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[19] "Rating" is the term used to refer to non-commissioned, enlisted members of the WRCNS i.e. not officers.

[20] The first Selection Board was held at Kingsmill house on 19 September 1942. Alvey and Brodie were among the first twenty-three women ever to carry the King's Commission, the WRNS having been an auxiliary service. Greer, Girls of the King's Navy, p.22.

[21] Grace Brodie, Revelstoke, to Alexis Alvey, Ottawa, 30 September 1942, AAAC 2-11.

By her own account, Alvey's military career was brilliant. As one of the leading hands who had been prepared to build the WRCNS, she was moved around the country for the next two and a half years. After spending an accomplished first three months at HMCS Conestoga in Galt, she returned to Kingsmill House in Ottawa, this time as its Unit Officer. In December of 1942 she took her first transcontinental flight, arriving in Vancouver on Christmas Day to establish a WRCNS "ship" at the Joint Services Base at Jericho Beach. In May of 1943 she led the Wrens' first march past in downtown Vancouver, held in honor of the visit of the Governor General the Earl of Athlone and his wife, Princess Alice. Immediately following this occasion, Alvey returned to eastern Canada, where she completed the Wren's newly developed Officer's Training Course. By this time Grace Brodie had also returned to Ontario, and the two women were able to take the course together. Alvey remained in Ottawa as Unit Officer until the following October, when she was posted to HMCS Stadacona, her final and most exacting command.

With Alvey in Halifax and Brodie in her new post as Unit Officer at HMCS Protector in Sydney, the two women would be able to see each other more often. As she traveled from Ottawa to Halifax, Alvey wrote in her daybook that the trip was only a "long weary day--nothing much in the way of scenery--just the thought that

Grace may be at the end of this track."[22] On arrival in that city, however, Alvey found much more than her good friend waiting.

The administration of the base, and especially the management and housing of the rapidly expanding Wren contingent, was a shambles. Wren quarters were in an unspeakable condition and discipline amongst the ratings was almost non-existent. From copies of the weekly progress reports Alvey wrote on the situation at Stadacona, it is apparent that she made huge progress in a very short period. Her daybook entries for this period indicate that by the close of most days, it was all she could do to bathe and fall into bed.

Alvey felt flattered to have been sent to Halifax. The concentration of Wrens at HMCS Stadacona was the greatest in the Commonwealth and as Unit Officer, she was responsible for the well being of all of them. There were at least 1,000 women serving with the Canadian Navy in Halifax, and in 1944 the Navy recognized Alvey's outstanding service at Stadacona by promoting her to the rank of Acting Lieutenant Commander. Alvey had also heard that "in the hearts and minds of many Wrens" she and Brodie had become successors to Carpenter and Isherwood, the British Wrens who had since returned to England.[23]

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[22] Alexis Alvey, journal entry, 1 Nov 1943, AAAC 11-2.

[23] Alexis Alvey, journal entry, 31 October 1943, AAAC 11-2.

Alvey had thus been recognized by Navy administration and by her peers, but the Canadian Admiralty had their own ideas about who would succeed Carpenter and Isherwood. In late 1943 they appointed a civilian, Adelaide Sinclair, the next Director of Women's Services. In doing so they broke their promise to the first class of Wrens, whom they had guaranteed that a Canadian woman come up through the ranks would eventually hold that position. Disillusioned by the time she arrived in Halifax, Alvey wrote that "the RCN endorsed this policy - then broke their word...our service is gradually but very surely being absorbed by the Navy proper."[24] She now believed that the Wrens would never be free of the (male) Canadian Naval establishment. As she wrote to her mother, "at least I know I do my daily job, but if I had it to do over in the knowledge of present circumstances I would remain a civilian."[25]

Resolved nonetheless, Alvey took up her post at Stadacona with typical tenacity and dedication to service. "I will never let down on my commitment to the service and his majesty they king,"[26] she wrote, and it was for this devotion she was promoted. Her hard work and obvious administrative abilities had been recognized. Why then, almost exactly one year later and many months prior to post-war demobilization, was Alexis Amelia Alvey was discharged "Services Complete" from

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[24] Alexis Alvey, journal entry, 29 September 1943, AAAC 11-2.

[25] Alexis Alvey, Halifax to Mrs. Eva Richards, Seattle, 8 August 1943, AAAC 3-3.

[26] Alexis Alvey, Halifax, to Mrs. Eva Richards, Seattle, 8 August 1943, AAAC 3-3.

the WRCNS? In October 1944, Director Adelaide Sinclair paid Alvey a visit in Halifax, and in a private interview in Alvey's quarters informed her that she would be transferred to Ottawa and posted to a clerical position in the photographic section. Alvey "flatly refused" the position.[27] She deemed the posting to be a "mediocre substitute for my present job," and told Sinclair that she "resented any maneuvering on her part to place me in a position that was untenable." Sinclair countered with concerns about the effects the damp Atlantic winters were having on Alvey's health, concerns which Alvey responded were unnecessary. "I would be the first to speak up," she said, "if it was truly in the interest of the service that I be moved."[28] A literal reading of the Alexis Alvey collection tells us that Alexis Alvey was truly "at a loss to understand [her] removal from Administration."[29] A deeper reading tells us more.

By preserving and placing her papers in a symbolic system of display, Alvey has made certain of her memories material; she has created what Jennifer Gonzalez calls an "autotopography." Her archival collection is a personal and physical map of memory, history, and belief. It is Alexis Alvey's "museum of the self," comprised of an array of physical extensions of the mind of its creator, a "private yet material

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[27] Alexis Alvey, journal entry, 14 October 1944, AAAC 11-2.

[28] Alexis Alvey, journal entry describing a telephone call between Alvey and Director Adelaide Sinclair, 6 November 1944, AAAC 11-2.

[29] Alexis Alvey, Montreal, to Commanding Officer (?) HMCS Bytown, Ottawa, 19 December 1944, AAAC 3-3.

memory landscape."[30] Alvey created this autotopography in the belief that certain pieces of her life had historical significance, while others did not. Throughout the documents there is evidence of her historical consciousness, of how she saw the present as an historical moment. The collection is what Pierre Nora would call "un lieux de memoire,"[31] a place where memory and history collide to create the tension that gives history new and multiple meanings. Further, it is evidence of Nora's concept of "the acceleration of history," in which individuals create artifacts for the sole purpose of claiming a place in a future history of the present. The documents in this collection were thus selected by Alexis Alvey to tell a particular story about a past that may or may not have ever transpired, created perhaps as much to "forget", as much as it was to "remember".

The pages that follow explore this collection's subtext; they are an explication of Alvey's military career, its origins, its progression, and its mysterious conclusion. Alexis Alvey has created an explicit and particular narrative that can be taken simply, at face value, as a memoir of her experience as a Wren and as a history of that organization. The objects and documents now housed at UBC were collected by her as proof of time and as the source of her narrative, but they suggest as many questions as they answer. Why did Alexis Alvey choose to represent herself within

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[30]Jennifer Gonzalez, "Autotopographies," in Gabriel Brahm Jr. and Mark Driscoll, eds., Prosthetic Territories: Politics and Hypertechnologies, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), p.134.

[31] Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire," *Representations*, No. 26 (Spring 1980), p.7.

one particular narrative, and not another? What pressed her to remember some things, while forgetting others? Which identity has Alvey chosen to feature in her memoir, and why? This thesis is a response to those questions and a demonstration of a fundamental commitment to the verb at the heart of memory.[32]

The Alvey Collection is home to both the discourse of history, and to memory. Because remembering is a moving back from the present into a reconstruction of the past, memory is in a constant state of change; it allows collected objects to have changing and multiple meanings. Where history is suggestive of reality, memory implies that there is more than one story to be told, in overlapping layers of meaning that do not take place in a linear, linguistic, or coherent manner.[33] Thus, this collection provides two seemingly contradictory opportunities. It simultaneously invites us to locate women within the larger narrative of Canadian wartime history, and provides a site of remembering which is a personal revision of that narrative. This discussion features both perspectives.

In chapter one I explore further the bricolage of theory and method that has led me to my conclusions about Alvey's multiple identities. I employ archival evidence to discuss the uses of (auto)biography and self-representation through collection, and to argue that Alvey's silence is itself a speech act. In chapter two I

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[32] Michael Frisch, "The Memory of History," *Radical History Review* 25, 1981, p.21.

[33] Gonzalez, "Autotopographies," 1995, p.139.

take this argument further. I use these methods to peel away the layers of my subject's self-representation to reveal three distinct but tangled identities: Alexis Alvey as a patriot, whose dedication to duty in a time of war was key to her understanding of public life; Alvey as a woman, whose gender was another battlefront of that war; and finally, Alexis Alvey as an individual whose "deviant" sexuality demanded from her a silence about a fragment of her self that current scholars would consider central to her experience. In the conclusion, I suggest that it was the tension between Alvey's discursive identities that led to her disillusionment with the nationalistic rhetoric of war, and eventually precipitated a premature end to her military career.

This project uses the Alexis Amelia Alvey Collection to explore how individual women can use hegemonic genres to create a space in which to tell their stories. I have done so to reconstruct the subjective reality of the period by exploring one woman's life. This is Alexis Alvey's story, remembered by her and written by me. I have been drawn to it by my subject's creativity, determination, and her strength of character, and no less by my love of a good mystery. From time to time, though, I find myself wondering how I can investigate Alexis Alvey's subjectivity without recognizing and validating my own. My work with the Alvey collection has led me to believe, along with Richard Westphall, that "it is impossible to portray another

human being without displaying oneself."[34] This project, therefore, seeks to do more than just "tell a story." It will also make explicit the subjectivity of storytelling and integrate it more fully into the acceptable dimensions of our knowledge of past lives. As Shani Mootoo writes:

> . . . my intention, as the relater of this story, is not to bring notice to myself or my own plight. However, I cannot escape myself, and being a narrator who also exist(s) on the periphery of the events, I am bound to be present...It is my intent, however, to refrain from inserting myself too forcefully. Forgive the lapses, for there are some, and read them with the understanding that to have erased them would have been to do the same to myself.[35]

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[34] Richard Westphall, "Newton and his Biographer," in Introspection in Biography: The Biographer's Quest for Self-Awareness," Samuel H. Baron and Carl Pletsch eds., (Hillsdale: The Analytic Press, 1985), p.188.

[35] Shani Mootoo, Cereus Blooms at Night, (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1996), p.4.

Chapter Two

Changing the Subject

> Gradually it has become clear to me what every great philosophy so far has been: namely, the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir.
> -Friederich Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil

On the face of it, Alexis Alvey's philosophy of history was simple. According to Alvey, historians write it, after years of inquiry into "official" documents. "I myself never intended to write a history," she wrote to a friend, "that would take too much research."[1] Alvey hoped instead to write a memoir, believing that "the personal narrative (where one sticks to the facts) is always preferable to government sponsored histories."[2] While she felt that participants would write the best history of the Wrens, she also believed that accurate histories of that type were nearly impossible. "History", Alvey pointed out, "is at the mercy of what has happened to survive, of what has been most durable...of what has not been removed or displaced."[3] It was in this belief that she began her comprehensive record of personal experience; the Alexis Amelia Alvey Collection would ensure that for the Wrens collectively, and for

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[1] Alexis Alvey, Seattle, to Rosamund Greer, Vancouver, 23 January 1983, AAAC 4-8.

[2] Alexis Alvey, Seattle, to Constance Ogilvie, London, England, 10 March 1965, AAAC 5-13.

[3] Daniel J. Boorstin, Head Librarian of the Library of Congress, highlighted by Alvey in a clipping from the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 12 May 1983, AAAC 4-7. Alvey's inclusion of this article in her collection, and her underlining of these particular lines in it, suggests that she would agree.

her personally, individual memory would be supported and enhanced by historical artifact.

I first encountered the Alvey Collection in 1995. The Curator of the Special Collections Division of the University of British Columbia used one of its boxes to demonstrate to my seminar group how one might encounter archival material. I was immediately engaged by that first glimpse of its contents, and decided that they would be an intriguing way to learn about Canadian women in the military during World War II. Since then, a critical re-reading has suggested that the collection illuminates more than the experiences of women during the war. Certainly, it did take form around the fact of the war; the collection's explicit historical context is the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service from 1942-1945, and its subject is the experience of the collector in that service. Alvey's historical consciousness and her rigorous attention to detail have ensured that future historians of the Wrens can enjoy a rich documentary source. To read the collection thus is very useful and certainly informative; however, this reading does not need to assume that this is all that the collection has to offer, nor that its significance can be read only off its surface. The archive also memorializes Alvey's uncommonly personal desire for history and a self-representation as a deeply committed, patriotic subject. Thus, she has ensured a place for her personal memories within the "official" historical narrative. She has also made herself its central figure.

Alexis Alvey is responsible for the arrangement of the collection. Alvey herself sorted and filed her papers, and the order of materials within the folders was maintained intact by the University archive upon donation.[4] For the most part, she ordered the collection thematically, not chronologically. The files are classified not by reference to the war itself, or to particular wartime events, but to people, places, and activities significant to Alvey. For example, there is a file of material related to Her Royal Highness The Princess Alice, Countess of Athlone,[5] whom Alvey counted important both as a public figure and as a personal friend. Also, there are files for each of the six cities in which she was stationed, as well as for three in which Grace Brodie served. Separate files for the naval bases in those cities, i.e. HMCS Burrard (Vancouver), document meticulously Alvey's administrative and personnel duties. There are seven files labeled "Administration," which contain administrative forms used by the WRCNS.

Exceptional for their temporal categorization are the "Pre-Service" and "Post-War" files, and a file named "Alexis Alvey - Post-Service." The first consists mostly of correspondence with her mother concerning her application for and entry into the service, and there is an obviously abridged personal diary, dated 29 July - 25 August 1942, in which Alvey recorded her "intimate" thoughts about why she chose to join

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[4] George Brandak, Manuscripts Curator, Special Collections Division, University of British Columbia Library, interview by author, tape recording, Vancouver, B.C., 23 January 1998.

[5] Princess Alice was the wife of the wartime governor-general of Canada, the Earl of Athlone, and titular head of all three of the women's wartime services. She and her lady-in-waiting continued to correspond with Alvey until the Princess' death, although the initiative to do so seemed to have been taken by Alvey.

the military.[6] In the slim Post-War file Alvey has placed clippings and brochures concerning the re-establishment of a women's naval service in 1952 and 1955.[7] In the third of these files, Alvey has conflated time and event to include documentation of the events leading up to her discharge. She explains why she does this in a handwritten note, attached to a selection of papers dated 9 November 1944 - 27 February 1945. She explains:

> Dates start while still at Stadacona - then to Bytown - finally a last letter after my leaving the service into Post-Service status. Attached together as all are related. [her underline]

In this way, she hints to her reader that the story of her discharge is not simple, and that to know the whole story, it is critical to understand where it begins. This file she crafts so that her path to discharge begins on 9 November 1944. But, as we shall see, there is other contrary evidence for an earlier beginning.

Forthright about her military triumphs and defeats, the collection's apparently singular narrative voice also sometimes whispers of more. Quiet yet insistent

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[6] For example, Alvey's journal describes her reaction to the jingoistic film "Mrs. Miniver", which she and Brodie saw in August of 1942. They saw the film together as they awaited their final call up, and before news of the Dieppe debacle had reached the Canadian public. It was "a truly great picture," she wrote, "Grace and I could hardly speak when we came away...we wanted to write to Mackenzie King to see it for his personal enlightenment, but what would be the use!" Journal entry 30 July 1942, AAAC 6-2. Evidently the Canadian government's continuing commitment to a non-combatative role for the Canadian armed forces frustrated Alvey and Brodie, as it did many other Canadians.

[7] Alvey and Brodie both applied to be readmitted to the service in the first post-war call-up, but not the second. This is not surprising for more reasons than age. In 1951, the services were a women's auxiliary force, to be commanded by women, but by 1955 they were to be an establishment of, "for the first time in the history of any Commonwealth Navy", a service in which women were to be full-fledged members of the regular force of the Royal Canadian Navy. Recruiting brochure, Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service, 15 July 1957, AAAC, 6-6. From Alvey's earlier wartime correspondence, it is easy to see that she would prefer the former to the later. In the margins of a *Toronto Globe and Mail* article about the unification of the men's and women's services, dated 1 Dec 1950, she has written "No Way!" AAAC 6-6.

allusions to other stories and other identities suggest that who is listening matters as much as what is said. This project will therefore sometimes look away from the "objective" reality of history to the places where people claim and need other kinds of knowledge, where the scientific method can obscure the complexity of things people need to know.[8] This is an act that would have been impossible during much of Alvey's lifetime; discordant voices are seldom heard by the classically trained. It will however resonate now, with the sounds of other lives since discovered. This approach highlights important differences between her time, and ours.[9]

Historical consciousness is never officially represented by a text; it is most often found in places other than in written histories.[10] In the pages that follow I will suggest that collections like Alvey's are a place wherein individuals may express their sense of time past. By gathering together mnemonic objects with relevance to both herself and to national history, Alexis Alvey made a personal space historical, and an historical space personal. Considered together, the provenance, structure, and content of the Alexis Alvey Collection are evidence of Alvey's historical consciousness and an example of how an individual can use collecting to work out an intentional inscription on the world.[11] I will outline below how my subject has

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[8] Lorraine Code, Rhetorical Spaces: Essays on Gendered Locations, (New York: Routledge, 1995), p.xii.

[9] Mary Premo, "We Heal From Memory: Trauma, History, and American Women's Writing," (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1996), p.24.

[10] Crane, "(Not) Writing History," p.15.

[11] Susan Pearce, On Collecting: An Investigation into Collecting in the European Tratdition, (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 18, 31.

employed the European tradition of collecting to memorialize one particular identity, within a specific historical narrative while she suppressed and preserved another, impossible for her to express at the time.

Autobiographies, especially those represented informally by collections of personal papers or artifacts, are places in which life history may make the transition from personal experience to collective memory. The Alvey archive is collection *and* autobiography, wherein she has used seemingly traditional genres to transgress patriarchal definitions of femininity. Thus, I engage here with current literary and cultural debates about women's autobiography to argue that Alvey's collection uses *the biographical role of property* to establish a discursive authority with which to interpret herself publicly.[12] My exploration of the collection as autobiography, therefore, is key to my understanding of it as a place where Alvey has subtly made, and just as subtly unmade, the ideology of sexual difference promoted during the war. This exploration is critical to the argument that a subject's engagement with history may be simultaneously imitative and disruptive, not only of traditional historiography and autobiography, but also of the idea of a unified, public selfhood.[13] Valorization of a representative and independent self is risky business for a woman; it places her outside of the ordinary, and risks a reputation.

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[12] Italics in the original. Walter Grasskamp, "Artists and Other Collectors," in Museums by Artists, ed. A.A. Bronson and Peggy Gale (Toronto, Art Metropole, 1983), p.129, cited by Gonzalez in "Autotopographies", p.134.

[13] Sidonie Smith, A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p.10.

Autobiographical text is like a hope chest, wherein one may place certain precious memories for safekeeping.[14] "History" too is a type of memory capable of belonging not just to collective entities, but also to individuals. I use the Alvey collection to explore how individuals use collection as/or autobiography to make history as read and written equal to history as remembered. The collection is a syntagmic array of mnemonic devices intended to create a space for the memory it represents. According to Pierre Nora, memory like this is in a constant state of change; it *takes place* in a way that history does not. The challenge here is to pin down how and why Alvey uses memory and nostalgia to both historicize her experience and to undermine the use history would make of it.[15]

This challenge engages an important issue: how to reconcile these imaginary multiple endings and layers of identity with Alvey's demonstrated belief in traditional narrative history. Considered superficially, the archive as historical source or memoir demonstrates Alvey's belief in the sanctity of the unified "I" and the objective reality of experience. Post-structuralists would challenge these comfortable assumptions, arguing that embedded within the autobiographical text are "deferred identities that subvert any pretensions of truthfulness."[16] Such theorists are concerned to investigate conflicting self-representations within the text. By using a patchwork of

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[14] bell hooks, "Writing Autobiography," in Talking Back: Thinking Feminism Thinking Black, (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1988), p. 158.

[15] Gonzalez, "Autotopographies," p.139.

[16] Smith, A Poetics of Women's Autobiography, p.5.

theories and methods, including those classified as deconstructionist, I will demonstrate that I do not in the end believe it necessary to hold to any one theory. The untangling of the threads with which individuals weave the elaborate fabric of their social, psychological, and economic lives requires the integration of a number of critical approaches.

Relativism need not be incompatible with a certain degree of realism. It is possible to reject the positivist aspects of realism while maintaining a belief in the social reality of the past, even when that reality is socially constructed. There are facts about others that have to be respected, facts that constitute "the person one was" at a particular historical moment.[17] It is critical that we know those facts about Alexis Alvey, yet such knowing does not necessarily mean we can fathom all of the person she was. We know more by engaging in an examination of the making and re-making of her identity from the subjectivities available to her at the time. By simultaneously holding that individualities are malleable, yet ultimately irreducible to discursive analysis, it is possible to avoid the historicism that is so often accused of reducing the past to an undefinable network of power relations capable of denying individuals a place in history. If this were not possible, neither historians nor their subjects could ever hope to understand their past, or trust that they could change

[17] Code, Rhetorical Spaces, p.30.

their present. Considered thus, the Alexis Alvey Collection is *poeisis*,[18] a creative remembering of the past with the power to change the future.

This chapter, therefore, is a "storied epistemology;" it provides the argumentative context in which to explain how, why, when, and where Alexis Alvey's archive, and the person it represents, can be most fully known.[19] It will use Lorraine Code's concept of "rhetorical space" to evoke a metaphoric location within which relations of power and privilege can either inhibit or entitle particular stories and particular identities.[20] Its theory and method have evolved in response to one particular text within one particular social-historical reality; it is a micropolitical analysis of practices of self-representation that highlights the intersections of gender, class, and sexuality. The point here will not be how the documents demonstrate these theories. Rather, it is how this mixing of explanatory bits is capable of creating the discursive space in which to consider this source as evidence. For this adventure I ask my reader's patience, suffered perhaps from a place of "negative capability."[21] I make this request because if, as Code suggests, work such as this is read through the

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[18] I use this term as Susan Pearce and Lorraine Code do, to define the ways in which individuals work creatively within and through tradition to make meaning for themselves. Pearce goes on to say that together with *praxis*, they give a sense of individual as both actor, and acted upon. In On Collecting, she concludes that "people are not wholly determined by their pasts, and collecting is a gesture of self-assertion with a dynamic potential." p.412. See also Code, Rhetorical Spaces, p.x.

[19] I borrow the phrase "argumentative context," and the ideas it represents in this paragraph, from Lorraine Code, Rhetorical Spaces, p.155.

[20] Code, Rhetorical Spaces, p. ix. Code depicts rhetorical spaces as "fictive, but not fanciful or fixed" locations "whose territorial imperatives structure and limit the kinds of utterances than can be voiced within them with a reasonable expectation of uptake and "choral support:" an expectation of being heard, understood, taken seriously. They are the sites where the very possibility of an utterance counting as true-or-false...is made manifest." p.ix-x.

biases it is meant to challenge, its innovative quality will be lost.[22] In other words, briefly suspend your disbelief as I change the subject to allow for a referential realism in which deviance is the norm.

Alexis Alvey's faith in the ability of her collection to reflect what actually happened during the war betrays a belief about history more traditional than mine. She believed in the transparency of her collection, that it was capable of reflecting her memories of what had happened in the past, even though she knew that "as one grows older...the happy memories magnify while the unpleasant ones recede."[23] Still, she was convinced that future historians and research-writers would use her collection as evidence, and that she would see the inscription of her memories in the histories they would write.

Such an account seems too simple now. It is understandable though, coming from an amateur historian in the first half of the twentieth century. It had been only twenty years previous that the first serious exploration of the social framework of memory was undertaken by French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs.[24] In the 1920s, Halbwachs postulated that while individuals may remember, it is social groups that

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[21] I am referring here to the state of mind, formulated by John Keats and cited by Joy Parr, in which "one waits, 'attentive and deliberating, seeking but not foreclosing the search for an answer.'" From Joy Parr, "Gender History and Historical Practice" in Joy Parr and Mark Rosenfeld, eds., Gender and History in Canada, (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1996), p.20.

[22] Code, Rhetorical Spaces, p.5.

[23] Jean Forsythe, Vancouver, B.C. to Alexis Alvey, Seattle, Washington, 17 May 1965, AAAC 6-6. An expression of longing like this is evidence not only of an historical consciousness, but also of a nostalgic representation of the past. Gonzalez reminds us that nostalgia is a "looking back upon the past with the hope of finding an identity that, never having really existed, is still the only source of support for a present subjectivity." I will take up this point at greater length in Chapter Two. See Jennifer Gonzalez, "Autotopographies," p.138.

determine what is memorable, therefore shaping social behaviour.[25] At the same time that Alexis Alvey was beginning her wartime collection, Halbwachs was working with the *Annalistes*, and by that time, he had begun to associate his theories of collective memory with historical practice. Paris is a long way from Ottawa, however, and Alexis Alvey's wartime approach to history and memory remained rather naïve. Nonetheless, her exceptional historical consciousness lead her to use collecting as a medium for the transmission of her memories, creating with her collection in fact what Halbwachs was calling a palace of memory.[26] Later, she would become convinced of her collection's explanatory potential and of its relevance to the public domain.

The Alexis Alvey Collection is testament to its creator's acute personal sense of the historical. Alvey resolved to memorialize her experience between 1942-1945 because she was convinced that this period represented "an unprecedented call to women to serve."[27] She wrote in her journal that she believed that the war would be a period in which "the round of daily life [will be] violated and reversed...one of those intervals in history in which the events make the individual feel that he [sic]

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[24] Maurice Halbwachs, On Collective Memory, ed. and trans. by Lewis A. Coser, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

[25] Martin P. Johnson, "Memory and the Cult of Revolution in the 1871 Paris Commune," *Journal of Women's History*, Vol. 9, No.1, (Spring 1997), p.39. Johnson also cites Amos Funkenstein, who states that "memory is always derived from the present and from the contents of the present." See "Collective Memory and Historical Consciousness," *History and Memory* 1, no.1 (1989): 9.

[26] Peter Burke submits that four other media may be employed to transmit social memory: oral traditions, written records, pictorial images, and actions and rituals of commemoration. Peter Burke, "History as Social Memory," in Memory: History, Culture, and the Mind, (London: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 101.

[27] Alexis Alvey and Grace Brodie, manuscript of possible prologue. AAAC 5-5.

counts."[28] From the earliest days of the war, therefore, "Alex realized the value of saving anything she found and accumulated a great deal."[29] Immediately following her discharge in 1945, Alvey received a letter from her mother encouraging her to use her collected materials write a history of the Wrens. Much of the contents of the collection, and its subsequent arrangement, suggest that it was the possibility that she may eventually do so that shaped the collection. Even after it became apparent that a written work would not be forthcoming, organizing and adding to her collection remained part of Alvey's life's work. Its shape therefore suggests not only the sort of history Alexis Alvey would have written, but also is an indication of what sort of history she believed should be created by her imagined reader/writer.

The "Post-War" file, for example, contains recruitment material for the re-establishment of the women's branch of the Canadian Navy. Records of Alvey's 1951 re-application to the service, and her subsequent refusal, are not included in that file, but are found instead in "Alexis Alvey - Post Service," demonstrating a considered division between public request and private response. This arrangement shows as much the distinctions in her mind between business and personal as it does the distinctions between historically relevant and historically unimportant. In fact, one may assume that Alvey considered all the materials in her collection to be

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[28] Stephen Spender, from small undated piece of paper included in 1944 daybook, by Alexis Alvey, who added "concerning the rise of fascism in Europe." AAAC 11-3.

[29] Alexis Alvey and Grace Brodie, Seattle, Washington, to Evelyn Cross, Ottawa, 5 October 1951, AAAC 4-1.

publicly memorable, otherwise they would not have been included.[30] What the papers do suggest, however, is that theories of private memory and collective history ought to be used here to ask new questions about how and when the personal becomes historical.[31]

The study of memory as an historical source has been underway only since the 1960s, when historians began to write and theorize oral history. Since the late 1970s, some scholars have become concerned with what Peter Burke calls "the social history of remembering." [32] Proceeding from the idea that memory is malleable, they have argued that it is important to attend to how it is shaped, and by whom. In 1989, Natalie Zemon Davis and Randolf Starn insisted that "whenever memory is invoked we should be asking ourselves: by whom, where, in which context, against what?"[33]

It has since become commonplace to recognize that even our most personal memories are connected to and shaped by the collective past.[34] French historian Pierre Nora characterizes the historical age in which we live as being almost without memory. According to Nora, it is crucial now more than ever that the private stories and local memories found in archives or personal collections such as Alvey's be

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[30]Wrathall, "Provenance as Text," p.176.

[31] Crane, "(Not) Writing History," p.20.

[32] Burke, "History as Social Memory," p. 100.

[33] They make this statement to avoid the impression that there is only one collective memory, and have adopted the term "counter memory," developed by Foucault, to suggest that "memory operates under the pressure of challenges and alternatives." From Nathalie Zemon Davis and Randolf Starn, "Introduction", in "Memory and Counter-Memory," Special Issue of *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989), p.2.

[34] Premo, "We Heal From Memory," p.13.

preserved. He calls them "lieux de memoire," and describes them as "the ultimate embodiments of a memorial consciousness that has barely survived in an historical age that calls out for memory because it has been abandoned;" they are the remains of memorial consciousness in an historical age.[35] Nora believes that in a culture for which history has eclipsed memory, "lieux de memoire" are able to undermine the public, collective memory that informs them by providing evidence of shifting ideas and identities within the dominant discourse.[36]

Since Nora, and the 1992 translation of Halbwachs, a handful of historians have combined ideas about memory and commemoration to explore the circumstances in which particular manuscript collections have been produced. Mindful of the methods of archivists, they have used the archival concept of provenance to explore the social constructions of power, meaning, and knowledge. Archival practice rests on principles of provenance and original order; archivists believe that materials are most useful when acquired in the grouping which reflects their initial use, and that they ought to be maintained in that structure.[37] Thus, archivists seek to capture the relationship between the source and its original

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[35] Nora, "Between Memory and History," p.12.

[36] Gonzalez, "Autotopographies," p.139.

[37] Brandak interview, 23 January 1998.

arrangement. To be most useful to historians, the concept of provenance may also extend to the historical actuality from which documents arise.[38]

John Wrathall and Susan Crane are among those who have used such methods: Wrathall to consider a collection of papers related to the American YMCA at the turn of the century, and Crane to examine the collecting habits of a nineteenth century amateur historian. Both scholars use the origins of manuscript collections to investigate the historical consciousness of their subjects, and to draw conclusions about how and why they used personal objects in particular ways.[39]

John Wrathall has analyzed the arrangement and content of the Robert Weidensall Papers to uncover the collection's underlying logic regarding what was and was not considered historically relevant by its creator. For example, Wrathall argues that the structure of the collection shows that for his subject, the personal was historical only when it served to establish him as a man of faith, ready for his public ministry within the Young Men's Christian Association. Weidensall used his genealogy, home life, and origins to establish his credentials as a public persona; he censors allusions to his love life and his status as a bachelor, considering them to be beyond the realm of discussion. Wrathall argues that because other papers in the

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[38] Susan Grigg, "Archival Practice and the Foundations of Historical Method," *Journal of American History* 78 (June 1991), p.233.

[39] See also Trudy Nicks, "Dr. Oronhyatekha's History Lessons: Reading museum Collections as Texts", in Reading Beyond Words: Contexts for Native History, (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1996). Nicks reads Oronhyatekha's collection of antiquities as a text, and in context, to provide an example of the active responses First Nations peoples have made to the presence of non-indigenous culture in the post-contact period. She uses his collection to show that while Oronhyatekha acquired some mainstream attitudes and values, he also manipulated them to further Iroquoian interests in turn of the century Ontario.

YMCA collection show that a man's love life was publicly relevant, specifically as it related to his Christian duty to marry, Weidensall's bachelorhood was indeed part of public discourse. Wrathall points out that Weidensall's elision of his unmarried status created a puzzling silence about his sexuality.[40]

Alexis Alvey has also used her papers to portray the emergence, development and experience of her public persona. It is possible to argue that her "Important Background Information" was carefully selected to offer only those pieces of her personal past that she judged relevant to her career as an officer in the Wrens.[41] Her family's connections to patriotic military and paramilitary activities are emphasized, suggesting that her childhood was spent preparing for the Second World War. Her spinsterhood, however, and her relationship with Grace Brodie, appear in the text only tangentially. She "de-personalizes"[42] certain references in her correspondence with Brodie, in effect altering the historical record to render that part of her life irrelevant to the matter at hand.

We know now, as Alvey knew then, that the personal lives of women were very much part of public discourse.[43] There are many places in the collection where Alvey discusses female sexuality and marriage (always in relation to other women's

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[41] Wrathall, "Provenance as Text," p. 177-178.

[41] AAAC 2-3.

[42] Alexis Alvey, note covering file, AAAC 2-11.

[43] See transcript of speech on morality delivered by Alvey to all new Stadacona ratings. She prefaces her talk with the words, "If I save only one of you, then this speech is worthwhile." AAAC 4-7.

lives), emphasizing that without the latter, the pursuit of the former would be meaningless and self-destructive. Entries in her 1943 and 1944 journals seem to prove her point - Alvey mentions therein numerous incidents in which she had to apprehend married and/or unmarried women *in flagrante delecto*, or deal with the resulting pregnancies and abortions.[44]

Marital status and sexuality were entirely relevant, especially to those attempting to recruit women into the military services while their family members were hesitating to allow their daughters, girlfriends, or wives to enlist. Overwhelmingly it seemed that the Canadian public believed women could best serve the war effort by maintaining a healthy home life. Officially, the earliest thoughts on the subject had been to exclude married women entirely from the armed forces, but recruiters eventually revised that idea to accept married women without dependents.[45] A survey commissioned by the government late in 1942, however, found that when pressed, 57% of the public would not give open approval to their friends or relatives enrolling in the women's services, married or single, believing that "army life" was "unsuitable."[46]

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[44] See journal entries 7-21 February 1944, also 1 March 1944 and 18 March 1944, AAAC 11-3.

[45] Pierson, They're Still Women After All, p.114.

[46] Elliot-Haynes Limited, "Report: An Enquiry into the Attitude of the Canadian Civilian Public Towards the Women's Armed Forces," (Montreal/Toronto: Elliot-Haynes Limited, 1943), p.24, AAAC 7-2. This survey was commissioned by the Combined Services Commission when enlistment figures for the women's services dropped in 1942 after the initial cohort of women already involved in paramilitary organizations were absorbed into the military proper. The survey showed that disapproval rates were just as high for single as for married women. That a copy of this report is part of the Alvey Collection demonstrates that Alvey was aware of its findings.

Gender roles, marital status, and ideas about femininity played a primary role in determining the activities of women during the war, but the separation of public and personal demonstrated by the Alvey Collection demonstrates that the collector saw parts of her personal life as being outside the realm of discussion. By including in her category of "personal" only that information related to her military career, and by attempting to censor the nature of her relationship with Grace Brodie, Alexis Alvey constructed a silence around her marital status and sexuality. Parts of her collection were paradoxically designed to promote forgetting as much as remembering.[47]

Alexis Alvey considered herself a collector, not an historian. Susan Crane would disagree. Crane argues that an historian is anyone for whom remembering takes the form of the production of some form of artifact. Crane analyses the collecting habits of nineteenth century historian Hans von Aufsess to determine if, and how, history is a kind of memory that can belong to individuals as well as to collective entities. She uses his collection to suggest that while her subject's story was personal on one level, on another it belonged to the nation. Like Alexis Alvey, Aufsess explicitly claimed to leave the writing of history to historians, characterizing himself only as avid collector of documents and objects.[48] But as Crane demonstrates, his personal and historical passions were difficult to separate. When

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[47] Gonzalez, "Autotopographies," p.136.

[48] His contemporary Leopold von Ranke agreed. According to Crane, Ranke made it clear in his review of Aufsess's work that "Aufsess's collecting passions were those of a mere collector of curiosities, not a professional historian. "(Not) Writing History," p.8.

Aufsess donated his collection to a museum he believed that his accumulation of historical objects represented an important part of German history. Crane therefore uses his collection to support the contention that individuals collect to express a sense of historical consciousness, and to preserve that sense because it is for some reason personally significant.[49] As Alvey expressed it when her photograph was being taken as part of the inauguration of the first class of Wrens, ". . . history being recorded, and I'm part of it - whoopee!"[50]

As a collector, Alexis Alvey gathered the assembled papers held in her name at the University of British Columbia. In amassing a large number of objects bearing an intrinsic relationship to each other, Alvey has engaged with the European tradition in which individuals use objects to construct and represent identity and experience. Collecting is an obsession organized; it is generally regarded as purpose-driven because it involves the seeking of specific objects within a designated category.[51] Alvey's collecting process also demonstrates, however, that collections seldom begin in such a deliberate way. The psychological drives behind "collectors" and "hoarders" are not always clear-cut.[52] In time, Alvey determined that her papers would be an excellent source for a written memoir, but she began collecting material simply

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[49] Crane, "(Not) Writing History," p.23.

[50] Her emphasis. Training logbook entry 18 Sept 1942, AAAC 3-2.

[51] N. Aristedes, "Calm and Uncollected," *American Scholar*, 57,3:327-36, cited by Susan Pearce, On Collecting, p. 21.

[52] Pearce, On Collecting, p. 21.

because she understood that she was a participant in an historic, and therefore memorable, event.

As it is with history, so too is selection at the heart of collecting. A collection is the result of a process in which an individual searches, selects, and acquires objects for a predominantly non-utilitarian purpose.[53] It is an imaginative act, intended to make identity and give meaning to an individual's view of the world. Collecting moves ordinary objects, like Alvey's personnel files and pay slips, from the realm of the ordinary into a sacred space in which they lose their practicality and become reified representations of thoughts and feelings.[54] Once collected, objects cease to be working goods and become symbolic of thoughts and feelings. They are chosen by the collector to endow the possessed with new meaning; previously useful objects become souvenirs. Thus, when Alvey began to compile samples of each of the Wren's administrative documents, she distanced them from their intended purpose and made of them objects representative of past experience, meant to promote both memory and amnesia. They became autobiographical traces of desire, providing a spatial representation of important events and emotional ties. This selection process lies at the heart of collecting, and the new object it creates - the collection - becomes

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[53] Roberta Kremer, "Meaningful Materialism: Collector's Relationships to Their Objects," (Ph.D. diss., University of British Columbia,1992), p. 24.

[54] Pearce, On Collecting, p.24-27.

a space in which time is stopped and meaning is materialized, under the apparent control of the creator.[55]

Until recently, only one aspect of this process has been deemed worthy of analysis. Freudian psychologists, concerned with linking childhood experience to adult behaviour, postulated a connection between the anal-erotic phase of infancy and adult traits like control and acquisitiveness. In her 1995 work On Collecting, Susan Pearce writes that this notion of collecting as anal retentiveness is best taken with a grain of salt. She goes on to say, however, that early psychologists did point out that our actions and feelings have an underside that may not always be apparent either to ourselves, or to the outside world.[56]

Later, cultural critics writing about the production of knowledge and the nature of power suggested links between these phenomena and the ways in which language creates meaning.[57] Including objects in her definition of language, Pearce shows that they are symbols that can be read, whose metaphoric power to portray the delineation of power is produced by arranging them in sets. Objects are carriers of meaning, part corporate, and part individual. They are not passive; thus collected they give shape to identity and meaning to experience. Further, they can be used to

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[55] Pearce, On Collecting, p.27, p.175.

[56] Pearce, On Collecting, p.7-8.

[57] I refer here of course to what Pearce calls "the new French thought". With its post-structural notions about the nature of power and ideology that we cannot now avoid seeing, it was embodied by writers like Foucault, Lacan, and Derrida. This school of thought was foundational of post-modern literary criticism, a study which Pearce suggests has much in common with her work surrounding material culture and collecting. On Collecting, p.9.

at once represent accepted values and proper behaviours, and to modify, strengthen, or abandon them. The individual stands at the intersection of past and present, and she creates her collection in terms of the tension between them. It is this interplay between collective memory and individual historical consciousness that produces the change we call "history."[58]

There are numerous examples of this interplay in the Alexis Amelia Alvey Collection. For example, in the "Alvey, A.A. - Appointments and Promotions" file, Alvey has included a small booklet entitled "Quick Canadian Facts, 1945," in the back of which is a 1944 timeline of significant wartime events.[59] In her own hand, Alvey has inserted into this chronology occurrences important to her military career, thereby making the story of the war *her* story. Notable also as one of a minority of pieces representative of the grander narrative of the Second World War, this document has been personalized by the collector to pull focus away from the war and towards herself, where she obviously believes it belongs. While it was the Alvey Collection's wartime context, and its contents related to the status of women that ultimately led to its acceptance by a public archive,[60] I suggest that the collection was meant by its creator to depict her own experience of the war. It is an autobiography, in which Alexis Alvey has used objects as language to write herself into Canadian

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[58] Pearce, On Collecting, p. 18 and 34.

[59] AAAC 1-10.

[60] Brandak interview, January 28, 1998.

history, making use of the traditions of collecting and autobiography to establish an intimacy with history that gives meaning to personal identity.[61]

Autobiography in general, and women's autobiography in particular, has recently become part of the post-modern project. Historians and literary critics such as Sidonie Smith, Julia Watson, Biddy Martin, Carole Boyce Davies, and Bella Brodzki have unpacked the meanings of a literary construction of the self. They have also addressed ways in which the female autobiographical subject has been held in place by gender.[62] Sidonie Smith characterizes the critical literature as having moved away from a previously untroubled evaluation of the historical veracity of individual work towards a more psychoanalytical undertaking, in which the writer shapes an identity out of an amorphous subjectivity. Both of these approaches, however, still share an unexamined confidence in the authenticity of the self. According to Smith, post-structural criticism goes further, to consider the autobiographical text as a narrative artifice, embedded in which lie "deferred identities that subvert any

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[61] Frances Hart, "History Talking to Itself: Public Personality in Recent Memoir," *New Literary History* 11, no.1 (Autumn 1979), 193-210, p. 209, cited by Helen Buss, Mapping Ourselves: Canadian Women's Biography in English, (Montreal: McGill Queens University Press, 1993), p.81.

[62] Felicity Nussbaum argues that in considering ideas about the clash of class and gender in women's autobiography, these scholars have gone a step further than Foucault, who ignores the economic reproduction of sexuality at the same time that he features male sexuality. Nussbaum suggests, and I strongly agree, that any theoretical structure that does not require a consideration of gender allows for the exclusion of women. See The Autobiographical Subject: Gender Ideology in 18th Century England, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1989), p.xii. See also Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck eds., Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1988), Biddy Martin, "Lesbian Identity and Autobiographical Difference(s)," in her Femininity Played Straight: The Significance of Being Lesbian, (New York and London: Routledge, 1996) p. 137-162; Sidonie Smith, A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), and Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body: Women's Autobiographical Writing Practices in the Twentieth Century, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press,1993); Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds., Getting a Life: Everyday Uses of Autobiography, (Minnesota; University of Minnesota Press, 1996), De/colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography, (Minnesota; University of Minnesota Press, 1992); and Carole Boyce Davies, "Collaboration and the Ordering Imperative in Life Stories," in Smith and Watson, Getting a Life.

pretensions of truthfulness."[63] This approach has implications for the readers/authors of such texts because of the need to rethink ideas such as "identity" and "experience" without abandoning the idea of a subject who is dialectically engaged in the social reality of the past.[64] The autobiographical subject must not be sought in particular identities, but rather in her micropolitical practices of self-representation. Thus, Alexis Alvey's contradictory and multiple constructions of subjectivity are here analyzed at the intersections of, and in the spaces between, ideologies of gender, class, and sexuality.[65] By seeking out the small, quiet places, where little is spoken, much can be heard and understood.

"Congratulations!" Alvey's mother's immediate response to the initial news of the acceptance of her "two smart girls" into the Wrens was filled with pride, but it was also filled with concern. "The discipline may irk," she wrote, but then added, "your two lives have already held discipline - and neither one of you are the satin-slipper-chaise-lounge type."[66] After telegraphing her mother, Alexis Alvey wrote a

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[63] Smith, A Poetics of Women's Autobiography, p.5.

[64] Teresa deLauretis, Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics and Cinema, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p.182.

[65] Martin, "Lesbian Identity and Autobiographical Difference(s)," p.143. Martin uses this theoretical approach to argue that for different women, at different times, and under different pressures, a lesbian identity is primary to a greater or lesser degree. She writes, "In the exchange between the work of women of color and that of white lesbian writers, *only apparently discrete and unified identities* are rendered complex by attention to the imbrications of different personal and community histories." (my emphasis) p.142.

[66] Eva Richards, Seattle, Washington, to Alexis Alvey, Toronto, 8 September 1942. There are a number of original copies of Alvey's correspondence to her mother, presumably saved by Mrs. Richards and added later to Alvey's collection, perhaps from her mother's estate. AAAC 6-7.

letter to provide more details, and perhaps to allay her concerns. She told her mother that

> ...this first group of people...are nearly all officer material, and the training of this first lot of women is the nucleus of the organization...there is no one, with the exception of Grace , who is going into it with more serious intentions...It will be a hard gruelling course but I can take it - right on the chin if need be - so think of me and hope for the best. I will live up to the usual Alvey traditions."[67]

The documents tell us that others agreed with Alvey's positive self-assessment. When asked to supply a reference to support her application to the Wrens, her employers at the Banting Institute at the University of Toronto attested to her sense of duty and her leadership qualities. Recruiting Officer Joan Carpenter recognized her immediately as officer material, noting that Alvey was "a very able woman . . . suitable either for a training officer or for Recruiting and Interviewing . . . obviously energetic and has a distinct personality."[68]

This selection of descriptive documents, placed together by Alvey in the Pre-War file, is representative of the method and manner in which Alvey has chosen

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[67] Alexis Alvey, Toronto to Eva Richards, Seattle, Washington, 19 August 1942, AAAC 6-7.

[68] When gendered references such as "girl" and "woman" are used, it is always interesting to notice when, and by whom, one or the other is chosen. When Alvey refers to herself as a "girl" it is to her mother, but when she is referred to by others as a "girl" (she was almost 40 years of age at this time) it is by her male supervisor. One reference letter read that "her quality of leadership has shown itself...I would recommend this *girl* [my emphasis] most highly as having all the qualities that would make for a good officer...she is anxious to give her services to war work, [and her] sense of duty and responsibility is of the highest order." Dr. W.L. Robinson, Toronto, "To whom it May Concern," 10 March 42, AAAC 6-7. Both Robinson and Alvey's mother have reason to think of her as immature socially or sexually; both are referring to her as an unmarried, childless woman in situations where girls do not traditionally achieve womanhood, i.e. in the military and on the job. On the other hand, Career Officer Carpenter of the British WRNS refers to Alvey in her application to be a Canadian Wren, as a woman. Joan Carpenter, Interview notes, 29 Aug 1942, AAAC 6-7. I was alerted to this phenomenon by Joy Parr in The Gender of Breadwinners, Women, Men and Change in Two Industrial Towns 1880-1950, (Toronto, Toronto University Press, 1990), p.184.

to portray herself autobiographically. Disciplined, straightforward, loyal, and hardworking, she is keen to do "that something I can do"[69] to support the allied war effort. Often, she expresses herself using the words of others, collected in her in documents for their personal and historical relevance. Sometimes, however, her own voice provides a more focused and personal interpretation of "loyal service." In an article from a local Halifax newspaper, she represents herself as a dedicated Wren officer who must act as a guardian to the young women in her charge. She is quoted as saying that as Unit Officer, she is "father and mother, uncles and aunts to [my] Wrens... [I] have to guide them, scold them, help them over hard spots...just as a parent has to. If they are good service women, they are good citizens."[70] Conflating ideas about citizenship, service, and gender, she reassures the citizens of Halifax that the daughters, sisters and wives of Canada are in good hands. Similarly, Alvey wrote to her mother from her eastbound train after saying goodbye to the women who had thus been in her charge in Vancouver. She left the West Coast "in a blaze of glory," touched by the emotional display at the station. "Virtue is its own reward," she wrote, "and this sort of loyalty always impresses me and means more than all the stripes and promotions in China."[71] Her overarching allegiance may have been to king and

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[69] Alexis Alvey, journal entry, 29 July - 25 August, 1942, which opens with a quote from Edward Everett Hale: "I am only one - but still I am one. I cannot do everything but still I can do something. And because I cannot do everything I will not refuse to do that something I can do." AAAC 6-7.

[70] From undated clipping, attached to and filed with a letter (also undated) to Alvey from M.A.J. Levesque, the father of a Wren at HMCS Stadacona in Halifax, written to thank Alvey for "caring and counseling our *children* [my emphasis] while they are away from home." AAAC 10-2.

[71] Alexis Alvey, train from Vancouver to Ottawa, to Eva Richards, Seattle Washington, 17 May 1943, AAAC 3-1.

country, but Alexis Alvey wanted her intended reader/writer to know that she would "take many a blow - even below the belt - on behalf of the Wrens."[72] Alvey predicted in 1943 that she would suffer for this belief, because "conscientious folks are always criticized;" as she was to learn a year later, she was at least partly right.[73]

There is another place in the collection where Alexis Alvey's voice can be heard. We do not have Alvey's letters to Grace Brodie because Brodie was not the collector her friend was. By reading Brodie's letters, however, we can listen to one-half of a conversation and hear, as if across a long-distance wire, the echo of Alvey's most private voice. Brodie's responses suggest, for example, that Alvey sometimes felt that she was a "flop," that she hadn't done "a single constructive thing." For all her bravado, Alvey needed her dearest friend to reassure her, to say that she "had been hearing great things."[74]

Other declarations are harder to hear. We can, however, sometimes see the silence Alvey used to attempt to mute the nature of her relationship to Grace Brodie.[75] Heavily blacked-out passages jump off of the page, suggesting that Alvey believed that certain terms of endearment and expressions of love were better left unheard.

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[72] Alexis Alvey, Vancouver, Report to Dorothy Isherwood, Ottawa, 22 February 1943, AAAC 3-1

[73] Alexis Alvey, Vancouver, Report to Dorothy Isherwood, Ottawa, 22 February 1943, AAAC 3-1.

[74] Grace Brodie, Vancouver, to Alexis Alvey, Ottawa, 6 October 1942 , AAAC 2-11.

[75] Nancy Janovicek, in conversation with author, March 1998.

Autobiography is by definition linked to the relationship between the subject and his or her public life. The autobiographical subject is meant to be representative of a period. The model of the genre is male, a valorization of autonomous self-hood; for women, this is an unfeminine and potentially disastrous position. By seizing the authority of narrative, however, women who write autobiographies prove that self-representation can change power relations. Women's texts lie in a spatial no man's land, outside the discursive boundaries of the dominant culture. Venturing into this uncharted territory purchases rhetorical real estate and secures a location from which to be heard.[76]

I have argued in this chapter that subtext and superficies are equally important to a thorough understanding of the Alexis Amelia Alvey Collection. I have argued that to read each and consider both, a hybrid methodology incorporating theories of memory, collecting, and autobiography is required. I have occasionally supported my use of these theories with examples from the text to demonstrate that their selection was suggested to me by my reading of the documents, and not the other way round. Doing so has allowed me to create a rhetorical space in which to explore, in the pages that follow, the subtleties and complex implications of Alvey's multiple, and sometimes contradictory, self-representations.

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[76] See Smith, A Poetics of Women's Autobiography, p. 10. Also Smith and Watson, eds., De/Colonizing the Subject.

Chapter Three

The Margins of Respectability

If it were not lesbian, this text would make no sense.
-Nicole Brossard, L'Amer

The production of knowledge is never innocent of the time and place in which it was created.[1] Women sometimes take on disguises to write about their lives; they lie about their life stories because other agendas lie beneath. That "lying" does not mean that their autobiographies do not tell the truth.[2] On the contrary, the lie told may be very illuminating in the context of the entire account. Alexis Alvey chose to tell her story by making it fit historical and literary traditions that validate male experience. I have already discussed how the resulting text does this. I now propose to consider why.

Within the Alvey Collection issues of respectability and class, and gender and sexuality, are portrayed in ways that suggest that the collector wished to disguise as much as she intended to reveal. One might ask why she seems so concerned to prove her gender and gentility. We might also ask why, during a period we know was one of public and private concern regarding the regulation of female sexuality, does she

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[1] Michael Dear, "Identity, Authenticity and Memory in Place-Time," in Steve Pile and Michael Keith, eds., Geographies of Resistance, (London and New York, Routledge, 1997), p.221. Many thanks to Nancy Janovi□ek for bringing this helpful article to my attention.

[2] Buss, Mapping Ourselves, p. 20.

explicitly elide references to her personal life? The answers to these questions may solve the mystery surrounding the end of Alexis Alvey's military career, but they will not present themselves in a linear, additive string.[3] Rather, we will find them in the spaces between, where issues of respectability, gender, and sexual identity intertwine to tell a story more complete than its author may have intended. Certainly there may be competing narratives, but as I have argued here, they are all made possible by the structure of Alvey's archive.[4]

Alexis Amelia Alvey tells us that she was a member of the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service from 29 August 1942 until 12 January 1945.[5] Alvey began her Naval career as a Sub-Lieutenant, and over the course of the war she was promoted first to Lieutenant, and then in May of 1944 to Acting Lieutenant Commander. It seems apparent that until at least that date, the majority of Alexis Alvey's colleagues and superiors agreed; "there never was a better Unit Officer than Alex, anywhere, anytime."[6]

Opinion, however, was not unanimous. On 14 October 1944, Director Adelaide Sinclair visited Alexis Alvey in her private quarters at Stadacona. On that occasion the newly appointed head of the women's naval service informally offered Alvey a transfer from her responsible and prestigious posting at Halifax, to a clerical

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[3] Joy Parr, informal communication, July 14, 1998.

[4] Dear, "Identity, Authenticity and Memory in Place-Time," p.220.

[5] Certificate of Service, Alexis Amelia Alvey, AAAC 2-1.

position in the photographic division of National Service Headquarters in Ottawa. That night, Alvey documented Sinclair's visit in her journal, noting that she resented Sinclair's suggestion that her motives for the offer were altruistic - Alvey was furious about Sinclair's claim that she was "only thinking about my future."[7] Sinclair's offer had been left open, however, so it was the primary topic of discussion over the next few days, which Alvey spent on-leave, sleeping in and "having breakfast in bed with Gracie."[8]

Two weeks later, on 6 November 1944, Sinclair telephoned Alvey from Ottawa to again suggest a transfer. During the course of that call, Alvey told the Director that she would prefer that any suggestion of either a move or a change in Alvey's status come through official channels. According to her journal, she went on to tell her superior that she believed that "the offering of such a mediocre substitute for my present job is obviously tantamount to putting me out of the service, while having it appear that I have done so at my own request." She asked Sinclair to back up her allegations about Alvey's poor health. Questions on that topic, Alvey stated, should be "left to the medical crowd... [but] even a medical check up would have to

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[6] Nancy Pyper, Ottawa, to Grace Brodie, Toronto, 17 January 1946, AAAC 6-10.

[7] Alexis Alvey, journal entry, 14 October 1944, AAAC 11-3.

[8] Alexis Alvey, journal entry, 17 October 1944, AAAC 11-3.

be requested through service channels."[9] Alvey had prepared carefully for this conversation, which she concluded satisfied that she had "said [her] piece."[10]

Three weeks later, Alvey received an official communication from Adelaide Sinclair. In that letter, the Director declared that "for reasons discussed in our talk in Halifax," Alvey was to be transferred to a position in the Photographic Section of the National Services Headquarters in Ottawa, effective immediately. By the end of November her replacement had arrived at Stadacona, and on 2 December 1944, Alvey cleaned out her desk in Halifax and left to spend Christmas leave in Montreal with Grace Brodie.

Brodie was supportive of her friend's position in this matter. She had her own letter of resignation ready, but she was counting on Alvey to "leave [the Wrens] in such a way that it will never be forgotten!"[11] Brodie had always maintained that Alvey had been far more willing than she had to give herself over to the Navy. "You are infinitely happier - and far keener to be in so-called 'active service' than I am," she wrote in 1943.[12] "The longer this show goes on, and the more you get involved, the

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[9] Alexis Alvey, journal entry, 6 November 1944, AAAC 11-3.

[10] Alvey copied into her journal entry for 6 November 44 a transcription of the call, but also included in the "Post-Service" file are rough notes outlining her thoughts about what she would say during the call. They are very close in content to what Alvey tells us was eventually discussed that day. Journal entry 6 November 44 , AAAC 11-3, and undated handwritten notes, AAAC 2-1.

[11] Grace Brodie, Montreal, to Alexis Alvey, Halifax, 27 November 44, AAAC 2-11.

[12] Grace Brodie, Calgary to Alexis Alvey, Vancouver, 12 February 43 AAAC 2-11. Brodie's reference to "so-called active service" indicates her understanding of the fact that conventional divisions of labor would continue for women in the military. She understood, as Ruth Roach Pierson was to later write, "women had penetrated that sacrosanct male preserve, the military, but had not broken the male monopoly on the primary purpose of the military, the provision of an armed fighting force." The typical Wren was a still a domestic, and the typical CWAC would remain a secretary in uniform. see They're Still Women After All, p. 104.

less I like it," she added. By 1944, Brodie recognized that "if two people as comparatively reasonable and sane as us view the possibilities of the balance of this war...with such trepidation and thoughtful concern, God help the general mob in their adjustment efforts."[13]

While Alvey and Brodie were concerned about the continuation of the war, and its aftermath, like many other war-weary Canadians they couldn't help but look forward to its end. "I'm fed up!" Alvey had written as early as September. "[I] wish I were out and home with Gracie!"[14] Having been so keen to contribute to the war effort two years earlier, by the autumn of 1944 Alvey and Brodie were anxious to be "out" - even before Sinclair's visit to Halifax, Alvey had begun to act on her own behalf to leave the Wrens. On 13 September, Alvey had written to R.L. Hennessey, her Commanding Officer at Stadacona, with a carbon copy to Director Adelaide Sinclair, requesting that she be discharged from the Wrens.[15] Officially, however, the Navy was not yet ready to begin demobilization,[16] and Hennessey declared that they would continue to require the services of Acting Lieutenant Commander Alvey until the end of the war.

Why, then, a mere two months later, would the WRCNS be so quick to accept the resignation of one of its preeminent officers? The answer to this question is far

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[13] Grace Brodie, Montreal, to Alexis Alvey, Halifax. undated hand-delivered note, AAAC 2-11.

[14] Her emphasis. Alexis Alvey, journal entry, 15 September 1944, AAAC 11-3.

[15] Alexis Alvey, Halifax, to Adelaide Sinclair, Ottawa, 13 September 1944, AAAC 7-9.

[16] Clipping from *Halifax Herald*, 8 November 1944, placed by Alexis Alvey in her journal, 8 November 1944, AAAC 11-3.

from simple. It is possible that the end of Alvey's career was related to the widely held belief that the war in Europe was almost over. By the late fall of 1944, the Allies' successful summer campaigns in Italy, and the defeat of Hitler's Eastern European allies made defeat of the Axis powers seem imminent. Another possibility is suggested by a memo, addressed to Adelaide Sinclair, which Alvey attached to Sinclair's carbon copy of the September letter. It read:

> Ma'am:
> In view of your knowledge of our *personal* affairs, you will undoubtedly appreciate the importance of my returning to civilian life at the same time as Lt. Brodie. Anything you can do to expedite our release together would be greatly appreciated.[17] (my emphasis)

This document intimates Sinclair's knowledge of the nature of Alexis Alvey's relationship with Grace Brodie, and it asks that Sinclair allow the two women to depart the Wrens together, with their self-respect intact. As we have seen, however, Sinclair's response was instead to visit Alvey in Halifax to offer her a transfer - a transfer that was tantamount to a demotion. Knowing Alvey to be a woman of strong beliefs, possessed of a conscientious pragmatism regarding service, Sinclair in this way used Alvey's expressed dissatisfaction with her superior's action to maneuver her into an untenable position.[18] During a period when the Navy was not officially

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[17] During this period, the term 'personal', as in 'personal hygiene' products and classes, was widely recognized as code for things sexual or gynecological. While it is also an indication that Sinclair had some knowledge of the *private* affairs of Alvey and Brodie, the use of the word 'personal' suggests that the nature of the knowledge may have involved their sexuality. Alexis Alvey, Halifax, to Adelaide Sinclair, Ottawa, 13 Sept 1944, AAAC 7-9.

[18] Alexis Alvey, journal entry, 14 October 1944, AAAC 11-3.

granting any such requests, Sinclair was thus able to discharge Alvey. Alvey's departure from the WRCNS would not ultimately be the result of her own request, nor would it be due to official naval policy on homosexuality.[19] It would be the outcome of a complex interplay of wartime ideas about citizenship, respectability and female sexuality. It was this interplay that ultimately determined the contours of Alexis Alvey's experience of the war.[20]

It could be argued that it was Alexis Alvey who orchestrated her departure from the Wrens. After Alvey departed Halifax, and was ostensibly on her way to her next posting, she wrote to her new Commanding Officer in Ottawa. In that letter she requested that unless he found an appropriate administrative position for her, suitable to someone with her civilian and military background, he discharge her "Services Complete." To that end, Alvey met personally with her new C/O on 27 December 1944. Lieutenant Commander Miller stated that it was now presumed that Alvey would remain dissatisfied with the service no matter what was done for her. Alvey agreed, and noted in her journal that it was mutually determined that she would be discharged. On 29 December 1944, her request was approved -- "slap, bang, just

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[19] At its most basic level, it could be argued that Sinclair was pressuring Alvey to leave the Wrens because she saw Alvey's popularity and accomplishment, as well as her beliefs on promotion from within the service, as a threat to her authority as Director

[20] This is not to say that Alvey was not an agent of her own experience - far from it. As I will outline below, by joining the Wrens Alvey was able to make important changes to her own life, and to the lives of other women. What it is important to remember, however, is that while individuals may 'push back' against the structural parameters within which they act, the results of their actions are not always predictable, or entirely as they would have preferred. The Alvey Collection clearly demonstrates this phenomenon. It is also an example of the phenomenon referred to by Pearce, who wrote that collections are a way individuals may change the influence of their past by memorializing a narrative of their own design.

like that!"[21] Effective 12 January 1945, seven months before the end of war, Alexis Amelia Alvey got "out".

It is apparent that by the end of 1944, Alvey was very disillusioned with military service. She had long since given up her hope for a true "women's service," separate from and not subjected to the command of the Royal Canadian Navy. After believing earlier that women would have the ultimate authority over their division of the service, it had quickly become apparent to Alvey that men would continue to "hold the whip hand."[22] For Alvey, Adelaide Sinclair's appointment to the Wren's top job had been proof of this; she considered Sinclair to be a "placeman" of the worst sort, a socialite who did not come up from the ranks, but rather was a figurehead who had gotten the job as a political reward.[23] Alvey herself had gone into the service hoping that it would be "the girl herself . . ., and not her social status," that would determine the selection and promotion of officers.[24] She soon learned, however, that no matter what the rhetoric of recruitment might have said, class, gender, and increasingly, sexuality, would continue to matter at least as much during the war as they had done in years previous. And while she may have possessed the

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[21] Alexis Alvey, 29 December 1944, journal entry, AAAC 11-3.

[22] Grace Brodie, Revelstoke, to Alexis Alvey, Vancouver, 12 February 1943, AAAC 2-11.

[23] According to her obituary, published in *The Globe and Mail* in 1981, Adelaide Sinclair was from "one of Toronto's finest families;" prior to being appointed to the Directorship of the WRCNS, she had sat on the Wartime Prices and Trade Board. "Placeman", and its definition as a "rare, chiefly British terms for a persona appointed to a government position...as a political award: usually a contemptuous term", was handwritten by Alexis Alvey on a scrap piece of paper and placed by her in her archival file labeled "Sinclair, Dr. Adelaide". I have drawn the obvious conclusion. AAAC 7-6.

[24] *Toronto Globe and Mail*, 2 July 1942, from Alexis Alvey's scrapbook, AAAC 10-2.

qualities of character initially required by the Canadian military to win the war, Alexis Alvey would not be "girl" enough to serve once the war was nearly won.

Alvey believed the Navy had treated her unfairly, but she was also able to use her situation to achieve her own ends. Thus, her experience typifies the tension between agent and victim that resulted from women's participation in total war. For example, to be included in the war effort, military women found that they were required to be heterosexually attractive while remaining chaste and ladylike.[25] This situation demanded of them a complicity with the conventions of gender that many of them sought to escape.[26] The Wrens in particular, coming late to the task of recruiting Canadian women, emphasized the selective nature of their service, assuring parents and boyfriends that they took only the best sorts of girls. "Girl" and "lady" meant in the case of the Wrens not only appealingly chaste and heterosexual, but also middle to upper class. The Canadian middle-class public, thought recruiters, must be assured that their daughters would be living and working only with those who, like themselves, were of the highest moral character, and came from good family

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[25] In "Female Desires: The Meaning of World War II," Marilyn Lake argues that this redefinition of femininity as a sexual condition began before the war, as advertisers and film makers sought to convince the public that womanhood would be achieved not by propogating the race, but by purchasing commodities designed to make them (heterosexually) attractive. Lake sees the war as opening new opportunities for women to assert this permission to pursue sexual pleasure. Further, she concludes that the post-war triumph of marriage and domesticity was not a conservative retreat, but rather "the triumph of modern femininity." (p.444) She insightfully suggests that the war had put female desire on the political agenda, but closes with an over-simplified statement declaring that since chastity was no longer required of young women, (which I doubt is true to the extent Lake would argue) lesbianism became "the choice of those eschewing sexual relations with men." in J.W. Scott, ed., Feminism and History, (Osford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.446

[26] Eliot-Haynes, "An Enquiry Into the Attitude of the Canadian Civilian Public Towards the Women's Armed Forces," p.33. Directed to look into the drop-off in women's enlistment, this survey found that of women questioned, 43% said that "escape and adventure" would be their primary reason to enlist in the Armed Forces.

backgrounds. While recruits would meet other girls from all over Canada, their "different ideas on personal hygiene" would be "wholesome...and beneficial," not morally threatening, "unsuitable, [or] unladylike."[27] The Navy would act *in loco parentis*, as guardians of the young women's welfare. Not until the public could be convinced that the military was full of neither morally loose, nor sexually deviant women, would the personnel requirement of the war continue to be met.

War is a gendering activity. It marks the gender of those involved not only socially and economically, but symbolically as well. During wartime, militarism and masculinity permeate every level of society as it both draws upon, and reshapes existing gender ideology.[28] Hence the wartime work of women between 1939-1945, both civilian and military, placed new demands on pre-war gender roles. Wartime

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[27] "Morality in the Women's Forces," *New World Illustrated*, Canada, August 1943. Again, the use of the term "'personal' hygiene" suggests things sexual or gynecological, as in "personal hygiene" classes, or products. In using these terms, this article, which addresses almost point by point the findings of the Eliot-Haynes survey, explicitly connects class status and morality. Clipping from AAAC 4-7. See also Leisa D. Meyer, "Creating G.I. Jane: The Regulation of Sexuality and Sexual Behavior in the Women's Army Corps during World War II," in Martha Vicinius, ed., Lesbian Subjects: A Feminist Studies Reader, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), p.69.

[28] Margaret Randolph Higgonnet, Jane Jenson, Sonya Michel, Margaret Collins Weitz, eds., Behind The Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), p.4, 17. Most historians of this period agree that the war altered gender identities enough to allow for some changes in men's and women's attitudes and values, but they stop short of declaring, as did some enthusiasts did during the 1970's, that "many of the attitudes and patterns of employment that developed during the war are with us today." see Katy LeRougetel, "Cats, Mothers, Nut Tappers," *Branching Out*, August 1977. Certainly the war did provide women with ways to change their economic and social status, but historians do not always agree upon whether they uniformly welcomed or fought the opportunities presented by war. Some, like Maureen Honey and M. Susan Bland, maintain that the war did not significantly alter gender relationships, and D'Ann Campbell argues that American women resisted changes to their traditional roles during the war. See Honey, Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender and Propaganda During World War II, (Amherst MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984); Bland, "Henrietta the Homemaker and 'Rosie the Riveter': Images of Women in Advertising in MacLean's Magazine, 1939-1950", *Atlantis*, Vol 8 No 2, Spring 1983; and Campbell, Women at War With America: Private Lives in a Patriotic Era, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984). In ""Pigeon Holed and Forgotten": The Work of the Subcommittee on the Post-War Problems of Women, 1943," *Histoire Social-Social History*, Vol. XV, No.29 (mai-May 1982), Gail Cuthbert-Brandt argues that some Canadian women welcomed, and were ready to institutionalize the changes to women's opportunities that had come with the war. Likewise, Ruth Roach Pierson theorizes that women who responded thus to wartime opportunities did so in ways that were consistent with their ability to redefine older sets of values. She goes on to conclude that for most women, the 'new and improved' versions of femininity were scrapped after the

labour shortages allowed women to move into well-paid jobs, where they could be underfeminized by their employers in order to enhance productivity and cut down on absenteeism. The overalls and bandana of the woman war worker became symbols of patriotic service, and women's duties at home were de-emphasized to allow for shift-work and overtime.[29] In this era of nationalism and economic growth, it became the duty of the Department of Labor and the National Selective Service to convince Canadians that women's labor was required not in the home, but in the war.

The admission of women into the military provided Canadians with the greatest wartime challenge to conventions of femininity. The purpose of the military, in peacetime and in war, is to represent the armed might of the state. The induction of women into the Canadian armed forces in 1942 threatened the traditional division of labor by sex that assigned women to nurturing roles and men to bearing arms. Military traits of patriotism, toughness and self-discipline contrasted sharply with existing ideals of femininity which held that women were passive, fragile, and in need of protection. There was a widespread fear, shared by citizens of all the allied nations, that by enlisting in the army, airforce, or navy, women might cease to be "feminine individuals."[30] Thus it became the task of those charged with the

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war, for the "full-skirted and re-domesticated post-war model." Feminist gains made during the war could not be maintained in the post-war period because feminist demands had not been on the table. See Pierson, They're Still Women After All, p.220.

[29] Pierson, They're Still Women After All, p.44.

[30] L.S.B. Shapiro, *Saturday Night*, 26 September 1942, p.10, cited by Pierson, They're Still Women After All, p.129. This is true not only of the allies. In Mobilizing Women for War, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), Leila Rupp argues that even though German women were less subject to the demands of the wartime economy, temporary adaptations of female images

successful prosecution of the war to reassure the Canadian public that women were needed by the military to do only "women's work," and that even though they were in uniform, they would be "ladies" first, and enlisted personnel second.[31]

The induction of women into the military in 1942 was the result of a serious shortage of personnel, and it had been made easier by the existence of a large number of Canadian women keen to render military service to their country. By the early 1940s, an abundance of women's paramilitary corps had been established across the country, comprised largely of upper-class and professional women who all wanted their organizations to become the Canadian version of the British Auxiliary Territorial Service. Their patriotism, and their loyalty to king and country, motivated them to volunteer their services in the belief that one-day they would be officially recognized by the Canadian government.[32]

Alexis Alvey was among these women. In 1940, she and Grace Brodie had joined the Women's Voluntary Service Corps of the Toronto Red Cross. They served with Transport Division "C" Company, and Alvey was a Commanding Officer in charge of training new volunteers. The Red Cross asked its wartime volunteers to

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allowed for their employment in unwomanly occupations. The Nazi's were also successful at convincing German citizens that the changes were only temporary.

[31] For example, when in public Wrens were not expected to follow the same dress codes as sailors. Wrens in uniform were not required to remove their hats inside public places, as were their male counterparts, because, as an undated clipping, from *The Evening Telegram* suggests "A Wren is a lady before she's in the Navy, so she conducts herself like one." AAAC 1-2.

[32] The earliest of these groups was the British Columbia Women's Service Corps, begun in Victoria in 1939. Its first Commander, Joan Kennedy, went on to be the first Director of the Canadian Women's Army Corps. See Susan Wade, "Joan Kennedy and the British Columbia Women's Service Corps", in Barbara K. Lathan and Roberta J. Pazdro, eds., Not Just Pin Money: Selected Essays on the History of Women's Work in British Columbia, (Victoria: Camosun College, 1984).

wear uniforms, the purpose of which was to "make a crowd solid, dignified, and impersonal; to give it the singleness and tautness of an upstanding man."[33] Alexis Alvey, and all the members of "C" Company, were asked to finance their own on-duty wear. In response to the concerns of one volunteer who wrote that the seventy-five dollars she owed for her uniform could be better spent on war bonds, Alvey replied that she looked upon the cost as a "tuition, for a course of training that will put me in a front line position for service." She added that even though she found the skirt and jacket impractical, Alvey was "tolerant, because of the sure knowledge that when we do get into Active Service, real battle dress, replete with trousers [will be] the prescribed attire."[34] But even though Britain was canvassing the empire for self-financed transport units, by 4 June 1940 Canada had denied its female citizens permission to travel overseas for the duration of the war. "Although we all appreciated the danger of travel in the Atlantic," wrote Alvey, "we all grumbled about the Government's legislation prohibiting women from going overseas."[35] The possibility of "active service" seemed farther away than ever.

Alvey remained in Toronto, where she sometimes lectured "C" Company recruits on the importance of proper behavior in public. She warned them that although women wearing uniforms in the streets were no longer considered a joke,

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[33] "Women's Voluntary Service Corps Committee," in *Red Cross Dispatch*, April/May/June 1941,AAAC 2-1.

[34] Alvey, Toronto, to M. Boulther, Toronto, 14 May 1941, AAAC 2-1.

[35] Alexis Alvey and Grace Brodie, Manuscript chapter, AAAC 5-4.

they must refrain from being seen drinking, because "others are jealous of your opportunity....and are waiting for a chance to criticize."[36] There is evidence that Alvey herself had been told exactly how a lady ought to behave. Alexis Alvey had been warned that if she and Grace Brodie were to continue to live together, neither of them would advance within the Red Cross.[37]

That would have been most unfortunate. In her Red Cross uniform, Alexis Alvey looked immaculate, fresh, and smart; she was military precision and leadership personified. [Fig 1.] "A very able woman" wrote her Navy interviewer, British Wren Joan Carpenter, "suitable for either a training officer or for recruiting and interviewing . . . a downright honest woman, who would not compromise with her conscience."[38] Likewise, upon hearing of Alvey's acceptance into the Navy, a family friend forwarded a quote that reminded her of Alex - "Unbounded courage and compassion joined-tempering each other in the victor's mind/ Alternately proclaim him [sic] good and great/And make the hero and the man [sic] complete."[39] It would seem from these comments that at least

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[36] Alexis Alvey, 7 January 1942, lecture notes. AAAC 2-1.

[37] Alexis Alvey, handwritten note on back of lecture notes 7 January 1942, AAAC 2-1.

[38] Superintendent Joan Carpenter, WRNS, notes from interview with A. Alvey, 29 Aug 1942, AAAC 6-7. The admiration Carpenter expressed for Alvey was mutual. In her journal Alvey wrote that she was "well-impressed with (Carpenter's) seriousness. I feel with Miss Carpenter at the helm the Canadian Wrens are off to a good start." Alexis Alvey, journal entry, 29 July 1942, AAAC 6-7. Alvey's comments demonstrate well Lillian Faderman's assertion that during the war, the armed services presented women outside of stereotypical femininity with a new opportunity to be heroes to one another without male interference and masculine measuring sticks. See Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in the Twentieth Century, (New York; Columbia University Press, 1991), p.122.

[39] J. Addison, quote forwarded by Eva Richards, Seattle, to Alexis Alvey, Toronto, (?) Aug 1942, AAAC 6-7.

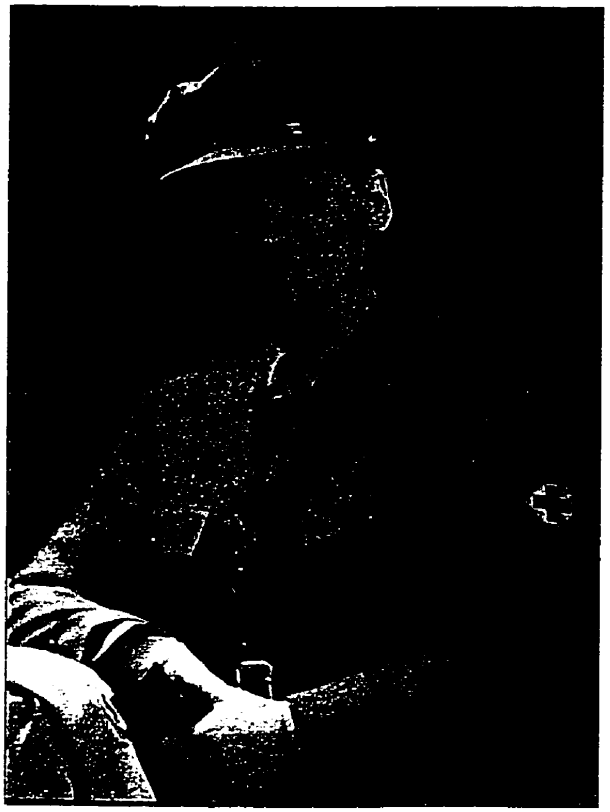

Figure 1: Alexis Amelia Alvey
Officer commanding 'C' Company Women's Red Cross Transport Division, Toronto, 1940. "Strictly for the business women" (sic).
AAAC Box 2 File 2.

Figure 2: Alvey and Grace Brodie
Big Chief Lodge, Orillia, July 1942. "Hair wet, just had a swim."
AAAC Box 6 File 7

initially, Alvey's "mannish" appearance[40] and masculine personality traits would not be an impediment to military service. Her relationship with Grace Brodie could continue, even though for most of the war they would serve on different "ships".

The Wrens were the last of the three women's services to form, and by the completion of their first intake in the fall of 1942, the national personnel shortage which had precipitated the formation of the CWAC's and the WAF's was as bad as it had ever been.[41] Because Alvey had decided that it would be "the Navy or nothing," she was among the last of the pool of women's volunteer corps members to enlist.[42] Independent individuals like Alexis Alvey, outside of the stereotypical femininity of the time, remained among the most likely women to join up, and the labor requirements of the war denied the military the luxury of turning them down. More likely, the masculine characteristics of women like Alexis Alvey may have helped some in their eagerness to serve their country. The military needed those qualities, and it also required the willingness to do non-traditional work that often came along with them. It is possible that Alvey was made an officer in part because other, more

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[40] As a word descriptive of women of questionable sexuality, "mannish" has its origins in the work of Kraft-Ebbing, Freud, and Havelock Ellis. The cross-dresser of the nineteenth century, who combined the inner life of the romantic friendship with a masculine self-representation, became the deviant invert of the 20th century. These three theorists linked normal sexual development to conventional definitions of masculinity and femininity, and argued that any deviation by women from feminine gender norms was evidence of homosexuality. Martha Vicinius, "They Wonder to Which Sex I Belong: The Historical Roots of the Modern Lesbian Identity," *Feminist Studies* 1992, 18 3, p. 248. In "Creating G.I. Jane" Leisa D. Meyer goes on to say that although psychiatric wisdom was moving away from connecting "mannishness" and homosexuality, popular culture in the 1940s still linked the two. p.68.

[41] Pierson, They're Still Women After All, p.107.

[42] Alexis Alvey, Manuscript, AAAC 5-4.

feminine women were inclined to utilize the masculinity of others by placing them in traditionally male roles.[43] Even though mannish women could be troubling to those who sought to redefine the qualifications for military service to include women while preserving "normal" relationships between the sexes, such women were tolerated during the war to allow the state and the wartime economy to utilize the labor of all women. Popular belief at the time held that "any woman who was masculine in appearance or dress" was a lesbian.[44] At the same time, however, that government was developing rationales for why homosexuals should not be in the military, they also understood that they couldn't afford, at least initially, to exclude them.[45]

The Second World War was an opportunity for homosexuals to participate in public life on their own terms. The Alexis Alvey Collection holds many clues that while Alexis Alvey was a citizen and a patriot, she was also a lesbian. While the documents contain no explicit statement of that truth, they provide more than enough evidence to suggest that Alvey's experience of the war, and the premature end of her career, were in large measure determined by her deviant sexuality. A standard of proof that requires incontrovertible evidence of sexual activity would not allow for this assertion; few women, homosexual or otherwise, keep written or photographic

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[43] See Lillian Faderman, Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers, p 122-123, also Alan Berube, Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two, (New York: Free Press, 1990.)

[44] Mattie Treadwell, The United States Army in World War II: The Women's Army Corps, (Washington, D.C., U.S. Army Office of the Chief of Military History, 1953), p. 625, cited by Meyer, "Creating G.I.Jane," p.69.

[45] Berube, Coming Out Under Fire, p.4.

records of their sex lives.[46] Proscribed thus, it would be difficult for historians to uncover even the existence of lesbians in the past. Recognizing the use of all available sources, however, and allowing for the "not said" and the "not seen" as conceptual tools enables us to suppose the experience of lesbians and thus to unravel the complex ways in which these women connect their public lives to their private desires.[47] What is most important here is not whether Alvey's relationship with Grace Brodie included sexual contact, but rather how their lives were censored or self-determining because of their friendship. Whether or not women actually had sex with each other reflects less on the intensity of their involvement than on their relationship to their times.[48]

Unstable though Alexis Alvey's lesbian identity may appear to be, there can be little doubt that it exists. Her archive, although partial and sometimes cryptic in its allusions, suggests that Alvey lived a homoemotional, and perhaps a homosexual, life. Passionate declarations, joint ownership of property, and the recognition by others of the depth of their relationship all intimate that Alexis Alvey was a lesbian. Even though Alvey has blacked out their most personal paragraphs and salutations, letters between Alvey and Brodie demonstrate that their friendship was definable as lesbian,

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[46] The Lesbian History Group, Not a Passing Phase, p.7.

[47] Vicinius, Introduction, Lesbian Subjects, p.2.

[48] Faderman, Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers, p.32.

however narrow one might chose to make that definition.[49] The two women lived together before the war, and they leased their apartment and stored their belongings together for its duration.[50] Furthermore, there are examples of how others in addition to Adelaide Sinclair, both within the Navy and back at home, recognized that theirs was a close and committed relationship. In particular, Dorothy Isherwood, the first Director of the Wrens, often wrote to, and about, Alvey and Brodie as a couple. In January 1943 she sent her regrets when she was forced by naval logistics to separate them. "My dear Alvey," she wrote, "I am afraid we are taking Brodie away from you soon. I hate to do it...please give Brodie my love."[51]

Although the record seems to indicate that Director Isherwood was tolerant of their relationship, it also shows that she was also loathe to post Alvey and Brodie together. Brodie seemed to suffer the separation most deeply, and the two women never stopped trying to work together in the Wrens. "Darling mine," she wrote to Alvey, "I'm counting on you to convince them that we should work together...It's all very fine to talk about being separated from loved ones, but we're in the same

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[49] For example, File 2-11, Brodie's correspondence to Alvey, is full of terms of endearment, censored by Alvey as being too personal. There are passages blacked out, though still legible, that demonstrate a physical affection that goes beyond the chaste nature of a romantic friendship.

[50] Grace Brodie, Victoria, to Alexis Alvey, Ottawa, 30 November 1942. In this letter is a discussion of the disposition of the contents of their Toronto apartment, implying joint ownership. AAAC 2-11.

[51] Dorothy Isherwood, Ottawa, to Alexis Alvey, Vancouver, 10 January 1943 AAAC 3-1. Also, in her condolence note to Alvey, written on the occasion of Grace Brodie's death, Isherwood wrote, "I grieve for you so much, Alex, knowing as I do what it is like to lose a deeply loved companion," comparing Alvey's loss to the death of her own husband. Dorothy Isherwood, London, England, to Alexis Alvey, Seattle, Washington, 28 September 1960. AAAC 5-1.

country and there is no need to do it to us."[52] After the appointment of Adelaide Sinclair as Director, Brodie admitted "it could be that the Director isn't too keen to have us both in the same base, even in such different capacities."[53] This is not surprising, given the priorities to maintain the image of the Wrens as being the most "ladylike" and therefore the most morally unassailable of the three services. Because they continued to require the labour of women like Brodie and Alvey, their superiors insisted that they remain separated for the duration of the war. In other words, the Wrens found ways to manage lesbianism, and to integrate women who were willing to do their part by having their sexuality remain unknown.[54]

Alexis Alvey's tendency to wear men's clothing, even before the war made that provisionally acceptable, made it unlikely that her sexuality would remain unquestioned. [Fig. 2] During the war, Alvey continued to wear trousers, but as the vast majority of women were never issued pants as part of their uniforms, she was only able to do so while on leave. [Fig. 3] She never changed her short haircut over the course of her career as a naval officer, or indeed over the course of her life. Alvey keep her masculine hairstyle above her collar with fortnightly trims, even though navy

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[52] Grace Brodie, Vancouver to Alexis Alvey, Galt, 7 October 1942, AAAC 2-11. Alvey blacked out this passage before donating her papers to UBC.

[53] Grace Brodie, Sydney, to Alexis Alvey, Halifax, undated hand-delivered letter 1944, AAAC 2-11.

[54] Berube, Coming Out Under Fire, p.34. Leisa Meyer also asserts that in the American army, regulations against homosexuality were seldom used to discharge those women whose labor was still deemed necessary to the war effort. Rather than exacerbate personnel shortages, roommates were changed, re-assignments were issued, and women were provided with more opportunities for "wholesome and natural companionship with men." She also writes that a proliferation of proceedings against women for lesbianism would only result in more public scrutiny of the women's forces. See "Creating GI Jane," p.76.

Figure 3: Alexis Alvey
Seigneury Club, Montebello, Quebec, October 1943. "48-hour leave."
AAAC Box 10 File 1.

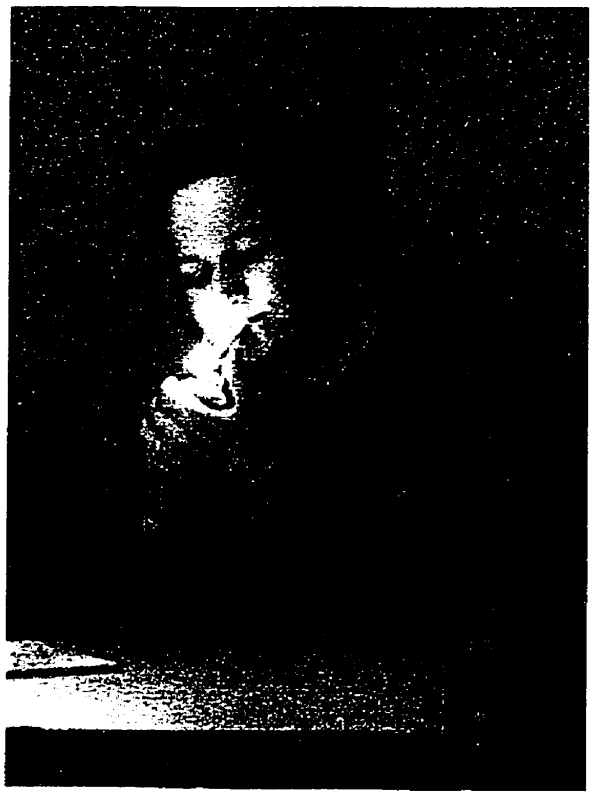

Figure 4: Acting Lieutenant Commander Alvey, HMCS Stadacona, Halifax, early 1943. "The Unit Officer pauses for a cigarette! (A typical, favourite photo study)"
AAAC Box 10 File 1

women were being provided with on-board beauty salons.[55] Along with her short hair, Alvey's craggy features and masculine habits supposed an individual who refused to adopt a stereotypical femininity, making total discretion about her sexuality difficult. [Fig.4] This is particularly true in light of contemporary sexual stereotypes about enlisted women as being either "loose" or "mannish." In spite of the efforts of recruiters, in the minds of Canadian public the military either attracted sexual deviants, or it created them. Individuals were able to regard these conditions as belonging to specific groups of people, (i.e. butch women) but also as being capable of infecting an entire population; popular conceptions of gender inversion and homosexuality were thus both minoritizing *and* universalizing.[56] In simpler terms, segments of the Canadian public believed the military either attracted sexual deviants, or it created them. Alexis Alvey's physical appearance did nothing to convince anyone otherwise.[57]

Since the turn of the century an emerging correlation between class, public appearance and sexuality had prevented many women from claiming lesbian identities. Toleration for genteel ladies and middle-class women living together as

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[55] In Alvey's 1943 journal there are notations approximately every four weeks to indicate that she had a "haircut". AAAC 11-2. Her choice of hairstyle, and her dedication to its neat, trim, and short length is in direct opposition to an unofficial American policy in the WACs, noted by Leisa Meyer, which cautioned women against adopting "mannish" hairstyles, or dancing together in public. "Creating GI Jane," p.76.

[56] This concept has been suggested by Eve Sedgewick, in The Epistemology of the Closet, (p. 40-44, 82-90) and I was reminded of it by George Chauncey in Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940, (New York: Basic Books, 1994), p.116.

[57] Meyer, "Creating G.I. Jane," p.69. While this source is specifically American, Pierson makes a similar argument regarding the wartime renegotiations of female sexuality in Canada. See chapters "Wartime Jitters Over Femininity," and "Ladies or Loose Women," in They're Still Women After All.

partners had evolved into a vilification of such women as gender traitors.[58] The independent upper class woman with a patriotic sense of civic duty was no longer respectable. After Havelock Ellis and Kraft-Ebbing, she became marginalized and suspect, as either a frigid spinster or a sinister lesbian. A woman with masculine traits was perceived to be not only deviant, but also visible as a lesbian. She was also judged to be lower class. This was due in part to a long association between "passing women" and working class soldiers. It also represented an emerging correlation between female sexual deviance and criminal behaviour, and a co-definition of class and sexuality.[59]

In the 1940s, women in nascent lesbian communities were typed as "low-life societal discards and pathetic imitators of heterosexuality," and it is indeed true that the developing lesbian bar scene was working class. Upper-class women didn't need public space in which to meet, and independent middle-class women, whose livelihoods depended upon their respectability, had to be secretive because their jobs

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[58] According to Trisha Franzen, this phenomenon was assisted by the theories of Freud et al who defined a new sexuality system that "denigrated as abnormal the assumed sexuality of genteel women and made dangerous the 'mannish' lesbian." See Spinsters and Lesbians, Independent Womanhood in the United States, (New York: New York Press, 1996), p.6. See also Donna Penn, "The Sexualized Woman: The Lesbian, The Prostitute and the Containment of Female Sexuality in Post-War America." in Joanne Meyerowitz, ed., Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960 (Philadelphia: Temple University Press,1994), p.359.

[59] It is widely recognized that along with Freud, Ellis and Kraft-Ebbing were among the first medical professionals to equate women in previously tolerated same-sex couples with sexual deviance. Donna Penn points out that these definitions came also to link the lives of prostitutes with those of cross-dressed lesbians. Penn states that as early as 1893, experts were arguing that deviance could be read on the body; as prostitutes age, they said, they took on the square, craggy features of 'inverts', or lesbians. Penn goes on to write that by the post-war period, portrayals of prostitutes and lesbians had become fused, as they were constructed to define, bend, and contain the emerging norm. See Penn, "The Sexualized Woman", p.359. In "Lesbians and Prostitutes: A Historical Sisterhood," Joan Nestle demonstrates that to some degree, the connection between these two categories of sexual deviance is appropriate, prostitution being one way marginalized women, such as lesbians, could support themselves. Interestingly for this study, she suggests that although fact is often intertwined with fiction, a rich source of lesbian

depended upon their reputations as morally upstanding.[60] During the war, lesbian women who wanted to do their part understood that their sexuality would have to remain unspoken, and many were willing to have it thus in order to define themselves more certainly as patriotic citizens.[61]

Neither Alexis Alvey nor Grace Brodie would define either herself or her relationship in terms she thought indecent.[62] Their apparent equation of civic duty with genteel womanhood may have included an asexuality that, although outdated by the 1940s, would have made them unlikely to define their relationship in sexual terms.[63] For example, there is ample evidence that Alvey was highly class-conscious. Both she and Brodie considered themselves to be not only "normal", but above the norm. The wartime narrowing of female sexuality, and its conflation with ideas about class and gender therefore prevented middle and aspiring upper-class women like Alvey and Brodie from identifying with a lesbian sub-culture, possibly even to themselves.[64] As Joan Nestle writes, sexual identity is a "rich mixture of class, history,

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history is to be found in the diaries and biographies of sex workers. See A Restricted Country, (Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1987), p.163-4.

[60] Elizabeth Laprovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis, Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community, (London: Routledge, 1993), and p.2-3. George Chauncey and Jonathan Katz detail very well how the seemingly timeless neccessity for descretion on the part of homosexuals is in fact a relatively new phenomenon, closely linked to what Katz terms 'the invention of homosexuality.' Until the decline of the role of work in determining middle-class masculinity, suggests Katz, men were less likely to use their attraction to women as a signifier of 'normal'. Lesbianism also became less tolerable, as women attracted to their own sex also threatened the growing differentiation and isolation of sexuality from gender. Jonathan Ned Katz, The Invention of Heterosexuality, (New York: Plume Books, 1995), p. 7-34, and Chauncey, Gay New York, p.100.

[61] Berube, Coming Out Under Fire, p.4.

[62] Penn, "The Sexualized Woman", p.373.

[63] Franzen, Spinsters and Lesbians, p. 6.

[64] The degree to which lesbians participated in 'the gay world' depended upon many things: their occupations, their family situations, or how much significance they themselves attached to sexuality as a determinant of identity. Many, like Alvey and

and personal integrity."[65] Alvey and Brodie's butch-femme proclivities made them visible as lesbians during a period when there was no protection for them.[66]

Alexis Alvey had hoped that a commission in the military would be her passport to membership in the Canadian elite. When Alvey chose to pursue a commission in the WRCNS, she chose to insure her respectability and to thus keep herself and her relationship with Grace Brodie out of the margins of public life and within the narrative proper. Although weaker in Canada than in some countries, a link did exist between the military, and power and prestige.[67] Alvey believed that she accessed that power structure when she joined the Wrens. It was this tangle of class, gender and sexuality which prevented Alvey and Brodie from claiming lesbian identities, at least until they could find one that did not undermine their perceived social position and their sense of themselves.[68] The silences surrounding sexuality in the Alvey Collection suggest that they never did find that identity.

There were other reasons why Alexis Alvey could have left Halifax. Since her arrival, she had been constantly ill with sinus and bronchial infections. Sinclair had been right in her assertions about Alvey's poor health; in April of 1944 Alvey herself

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Brodie, did not consider their homosexuality to be their only important identity. I argue here, in fact, that for Alvey and Brodie, many other aspects of their lives were given precedence during this period. They gave the greatest credence to their identities as women and as citizens, and therefore saw themselves as Wrens above all, because that identity conflated the two. They did not think of themselves as lesbian in this setting, for reasons noted above. See Chauncey, Gay New York, p. 272.

[65] Nestle, A Restricted Country, p. 108.

[66] Nestle, A Restricted Country, p.108.

[67] Pierson, They're Still Women, After All, p.96.

[68] Franzen, Spinsters and Lesbians, p. 166.

had been told by a doctor that the "impure air" and the coal dust resulting from the heating system of the officers' quarters at Lorne Terrace in Halifax were causing her great difficulties. She wrote to her mother that the doctor's recommendation had been to leave HMCS Stadacona. "However," she added, "I have not let him put through this recommendation yet as I feel there is so much urgently required to be done here with such a short time to do it in."[69] Alvey's dedication to duty and her resolution to "never let down on my commitment to the Service and his Majesty the King" had been important motivations to join the Wrens, and she continued to believe that "to pursue military tradition...is to give one's own life...a lower value than duty."[70] Her commitment to civic duty persisted, even as her belief in the WRCNS as an important new way for women to become better citizens was eroded.

Between 1941 and 1942, thousands of Canadian women had joined the military. Many responded to the National Selective Service's recruitment drives that appealed at least superficially to women's newly notable love of king and country. Magazines and advertisements proclaimed that "Women's place/is Everywhere/with Victory as her Business,"[71] and Alexis Alvey believed that this sort of material signaled a permanent change to the established division of labor. What may have

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[69] Alexis Alvey, Halifax, to Eva Richardson, Seattle, 4 April 44, AAAC 7-8.

[70] Alexis Alvey, unknown source, quote noted in "Administration and Discipline" file, AAAC 1-2.

[71] General Motors advertisement, *Mayfair Magazine*, "Women at War" Special Edition, 1943, AAAC 4-7.

been outside Alvey's personal frame of reference was the profound ambivalence about women's participation in the war embedded within the recruitment material.

In 1943, as anxiety about the role of women in the military soared and enlistment rates plummeted, Wren Director Adelaide Sinclair spelled out the situation more clearly. In her first address to Joint Services Headquarters, she said that the Navy wanted to give jobs to women in order that they may "share the burden of war with the menfolk who carry the weapons of war into battle." After all, she said, "we are fighting for our children, more than for ourselves...The future has always been the particular concern of thinking women, for the future belongs to the children."[72] Statements like Sinclair's, along with publications intended by the NSS to reassure the Canadian public, tended to conflate ideologies of femininity and nationalism. They stated explicitly that while women may "have the stuff of which Freedom is made," they had departed the "comfortable smallness of their little lives" only to ensure its continued survival, to which they would return at the end of the war.[73]

For Alexis Alvey, however, it was patriotism, not gender or sexuality, that was of primary importance to the women who chose to serve their country in the armed forces. She believed that women were capable not only of taking "an active partnership...in shaping the New World," but also that they would be psychologically

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[72] Adelaide Sinclair, Ottawa, Address to Headquarters, 24 Sept 43, AAAC 3-3.

[73] "Women at War," *Mayfair Magazine*, Special Edition, 1943, AAAC 4-7.

and physically better off for doing so."[74] Enlisted women were Wrens first and foremost, having left behind their identities as girlfriends or wives when they enlisted. As stated earlier, even Alvey's partner recognized that Alvey was more able than most women to set aside the other parts of her life to serve in the military. In response to the RCN Commanding Officer of Halifax, who maintained that female defaulters were "mainly married women...[for whom] appeals to their better nature or patriotism are of no use whatsoever," Alvey countered that the causes for their misbehavior were far more pragmatic. In her opinion, it was lower pay and tighter restrictions than their male counterparts, along with little opportunity for advancement or for "normal" mixing with men that contributed to the propensity of some women to go AWOL, not their marital status. Ten years later she was still able to write that for the duration of the war she was "not a woman, [but] a naval officer."[75]

There is proof in the collection that Alvey believed that "deviant" sexuality could likewise be put aside for the duration. In a section of her archive, carefully expanded upon in hindsight, Alvey documents her reaction, when confronted as Unit Officer at Stadacona in1944, with evidence of a(nother) lesbian relationship. On 23 June of that year, she recorded in her journal that there had been rumours concerning

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[74] "Morality in the Women's Forces," *New World Illustrated*, AAAC 4-7. Interestingly, this article provides testimony from a medical doctor stating that far from being a hindrance to an active lifestyle, women's menstrual difficulties would be eliminated by the possibly strenuous activities of military life.

[75] Alexis Alvey and Grace Brodie, draft manuscript, 1951-1980, AAAC 5-4,

the sexuality of two women in her charge - one being another officer and one a rating. She wrote:

> "What am I going to do about it?" "My reply - 'Nothing - unless such behaviour affects their service performance!' - Besides being a private matter - and extremely difficult to prove - often just salacious or misinformation - or misinterpretations of actions - or even service malice."[76]

At an unknown later date, Alvey added a margin note to this paragraph. She refers her reader to an earlier journal entry on 19 March of the same year, indicating that she had had a long talk with one of the women concerned. In other words, she had known about the relationship in question all along, but had chosen to do nothing about it.[77] Alvey believed personal considerations like heterosexual marriage and same-sex relationships equally irrelevant, unless they adversely affected the women's performance as Wrens.

According to her journal entry, Alvey knew that those opposed to women's full participation in the military could use accusations of lesbianism to discredit the women's services. She returned to the subject of "service malice" in a further note, headed "post-war comments re this situation," added in 1985. She wrote:

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[76] Alexis Alvey, Journal entry, 23 June 1944, AAAC 11-3

[77] This suggests that either Alvey's appearance, or perhaps her use of the "code" language used by homosexuals to identify themselves during this period enabled these women to "come out" to one another, without fear of reprisal. See George Chauncey, Gay New York, p. 17-20.

> My own discreet investigation satisfied me that the rumours [about the women] were true. This subject was never included in officers training or advisories. The two individuals...were acquainted pre-service and their encounters were never aboard ship...Any other policy other than my hands off one would have opened a can of worms either to higher male authority - or D/WRCNS - [Director Adelaide Sinclair] - and in my mind an invasion of privacy unrelated to service duties. As noted both parties were excellent service people.[78]

In other words, Alvey chose not to discipline or discharge either of the two women because it would give substance to rumour and proof to her enemies that women's participation in the military could be unwholesome. Both of the women were, in her opinion, "excellent service people" whose personal lives were irrelevant to the job at hand.[79]

Like these and many other Canadian women, Alvey took advantage of the disruptive nature of war to change her life and to re-shape her identity. She had been told that the women's branch of the RCN would be a meritocracy. That being the case, she thought, and with their reputation for taking only the best sorts of girls, the Wrens would recognize her personal qualities and guarantee her the social standing she craved. Joan Carpenter had assured Alvey that officer status would be "something which can be achieved only on evidence of ability and officer-like qualities," and that

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[78] Alexis Alvey, June 1985, note attached to journal entry 23 June 44, AAAC 11-3. Contrary to Alvey's experience, American officers *were* counseled, albeit informally, to expect some degree of homosexuality within their commands. They were told that it was of interest to them "only so far as its manifestations undermine the efficiency of the individuals concerned and the stability of the group." As Alvey correctly assumed north of the border, American servicewomen also understood that any homosexual witch-hunts would "only result in more public scrutiny and disapproval of the women's corps." Leisa Meyer, "Creating GI Jane," p.76.

[79] The photographic record shows that neither woman was as butch as Alvey - they could and did "pass" until the end of the war. See scrapbooks, AAAC 10-1 and 10-2.

"promotion from the lower deck was to be one of the foundation stones of the Canadian Service."[80] Alvey assumed rightly that independent women like her would be able to play a role in the total war economy of the 1940's. For her, participation in the war meant a chance to address looming inequalities, based on her gender and sexuality, via class.

What Alvey did not understand, at least initially, was that if the war was won, and the state's personnel needs began to decline, women like her would be among the first to be "demobilized."[81] As a "mannish" woman in uniform, Alexis Alvey was doubly vulnerable; not only had she transgressed gender norms by enlisting, but she had also refused to work at proving her femininity.[82] Her trespass upon male preserves was compounded by her personal appearance and perceived sexual deviance; butch women were seen as especially threatening because they seemed to desire male privilege and power as much as they desired women.[83]

Before the war, same-sex relationships like Alvey's and Brodie's had been provisionally tolerable. Later, war fatigue and a generalized nostalgia for normalcy allowed for fears surrounding deviant female sexuality to grow. In the late 1940's, psychoanalyst Clara Thompson summed it up:

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[80] Joan Carpenter, 1942, quoted by Alexis Alvey in her 1952 account of her first days with the Wrens. AAAC 5-4.

[81] Berube, Coming Out Under Fire, p.55.

[82] Meyer, "The Sexualized Woman," p.77.

[83] Vicinius, "They Wonder to Which Sex I Belong," p.248.

> Two overt homosexual women may live together in complete intimacy in many communities without social disapproval if they do not flaunt their inversion, for example the assumption of masculine dress or mannerisms on the part of one. [84]

During the war, relationships in which one woman was masculine and therefore perceived to be sexually motivated had already begun to raise the suspicions of others. By 1944, a declining need for war personnel allowed them to act on those suspicions.

Alexis Alvey was sexualized by her appearance. Her primary motivations in joining the navy had been twofold; she wished to serve her country, but she also hoped to assure for herself a class-based identity that was threatened by her visibility as a lesbian. There is indication that she thought of herself in almost asexual terms during the war, but there is also evidence that her superiors were not inclined to think of her in that same way. Overwhelming concerns about uncontrolled female sexuality, which were being played out across the continent, would not allow the Navy to overlook Alexis Alvey's bodily, and therefore sexual, deviance. People make their own identities, it is true, but as in the case of Alexis Alvey, it is also true that they can very rarely make them just as they please.[85] In the pages that follow, I will conclude by suggesting that because of the nature of her experience during the war,

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[84] Clara Thompson, "Changing Concepts of Homosexuality in Psychoanalysis," in A Study of Interpersonal Relations, ed. Patrick Mullahy (New York, Hermitage Press, 1949), cited by Penn in "The Sexualized Woman," p.365.

Alexis Alvey used her collection to re-make her identity. In so doing, Alvey created a nostalgic space in which to vindicate herself and her career, and to remember the way it (never) was.

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[85] Vicinius, "They Wonder to Which Sex I Belong," p.235.

Chapter Four

Conclusion

But remember. Make an effort to remember.
Or, failing that, invent.
-Monique Wittig

in reality, there is no fiction
-Nicole Brossard, Lovhers[1]

The past, it is said, continues to speak to us.[2] This project has been an experiment in new ways of listening to what the past has to say. Yesterday is always constructed, whether through memory, narrative, myth, or desire. In the memory of the individual the real, the imaginary, and the nostalgic past become entangled. Individual recollection, therefore, is often a way of weaving a narrative plot out of the many layers of identity that form our personhood.[3]

Alexis Alvey made her memories of the Second World War by collecting materials related to her wartime participation in the military. She knew, and rightly so, that as one of Canada's first enlisted women, her personal experience had profound historical significance. I have used the Alexis Alvey Collection here to add

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[1] Both quotes are from Nicole Brossard, Lovhers, trans., Barbara Godard, (Montreal: Guernica, 1986), p. 56 and 17. Brossard provides no citation for Wittig.

[2] Gonzalez, "Autotopographies," p.143.

[3] Joan Nestle, A Restricted Country, (Ithaca, Firebrand, 1987), p.186.

to the historical record, but I have also used it to demonstrate ways one may read archival sources to redefine the contours of historical truth.

Alexis Alvey has allowed for the redefinition of history by collecting and donating her papers to a public archive. Just as in Marilyn Frye's feminist parable about cultural reality as a phallocentric stage play, my reading of Alvey's collection shows what can happen when a traditionally invisible stagehand dares to think of herself as an actor, and begins to participate visibly in the play.[4] Those who do not see their own reality on stage, (women/feminists/lesbians) look to the background for evidence of their experience. By bringing attention to herself and her activities in the war, Alexis Alvey has allowed us to see "behind the scenes," and to include in our story those who provide the labor and material reproduction necessary to the survival of the play. In this way, the Alvey collection allows for both a main stage historical narrative and a more personal, backstage perspective.

As a "site of memory," the Alvey Collection therefore presents two opportunities. First, it provides documentary evidence of the roles Canadian women played in the Second World War. Second, it furnishes that evidence in a way that allows for a flexibility of interpretation of great value to historians of consciousness and self-representation. Read as an autobiographical text, the Alvey Collection is a nostalgic representation of a reality that may or may not have transpired. Souvenirs

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[4] Marilyn Frye, "To Be and to Be Seen," in Marilyn Frye, The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory, (Trumansburg: New York, The Crossing Press, 1983), p. 166-173.

collected by Alvey as embodiments of her past are more than just the material remains of an historical narrative. Such things tell, among other things, the story of the subject for whom they are "things".[5] It is in the tension between the material traces of history and the subjectivity of individual memory that we find Alexis Alvey's narrative of the self.[6]

There is a reality embedded within the documents that must be respected; Alvey has constructed her collection around the facts of her landmark participation in the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service between 1942-1945. That much is certain. What is less certain is what exactly Alvey wished to say about her experience in the Wrens, and why she wished to say it. By choosing artifacts from a field of possibilities, Alvey refashioned them into "subjective objects," capable of representing not only the material reality of the time, but also the emotional state of the collector.[7] I have asked here what story suggested these collected objects, and what feelings and beliefs do they betray?

There is evidence that Alvey's collection emerged in part from a nostalgic longing for an imaginary place and time. Within her collection she has represented herself as an important and necessary actor within the drama of the Second World War, and her donation of her papers to a public archive underscores this belief. At

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[5] Gonzalez, "Autotopographies," p.144.

[6] Gonzalez, "Autotopographies," p.142.

[7] Gonzalez, "Autotopographies," p.146.

first glance, the collection tells of a time when women were able to participate in public life to fulfill their own needs, and the needs of their nation's wartime economy.

It is true that during the war, women were invited to take on new gender roles. These new roles allowed them to change their lives and the way they thought about them. For the great majority of women, however, these changes would only be for the duration of the war. Lesbian women especially would find the apparent expansion of women's roles short-lived. This was particularly true for those women whose physical appearance challenged the wartime codes that demanded an appealing, yet virginal, heterosexuality.

Alexis Alvey could not have predicted this turn in 1942, as she began her career with the Wrens. Her early journal entries indicate that she believed the early nationalistic rhetoric that redefined women as citizen-patriots; she saw in the war the opportunity to live the life she felt she was born to lead. She believed that becoming an officer in the Wrens would claim for her a class position unrelated to her sexuality. Alvey has left behind an historical source to document her belief in these possibilities. In doing so, she has also provided evidence that the promise was not fulfilled.

Alvey's eventual recognition that she would not claim upper class status through the military makes her collection "nostalgic;" as Mary Jacobus writes, nostalgia is a memory of that which never was.[8] An autobiography such as this is

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[8] Mary Jacobus, "Freud's Mnemonic: Women, Screen Memories and Feminist Nostalgia," Women and Memory special issue, *Michigan Quarterly Review* 26, no.1 (Winter 1987), p.138.

frequently a "recreation of an idealized self, as it relates to a larger social reality."[9] Paradoxically, it also represents a nostalgic longing, born of the awareness that the gap between the souvenir and the narrative it supposedly represents can never be crossed.[10]

The postmodern concern with difference has resulted in an intense focus on the subject, the body, and personal identity.[11] Arguably, self-representation is related to experience in ways that can be connected by time and place. During the 1930s and 1940s, to claim a lesbian identity would have demanded that Alvey assert an identity she had been taught to despise.[12] Growing popular associations of homosexuality with lower class and criminal behaviour made it improbable that middle-class ladies such as Alvey and Brodie would wish to proclaim themselves lesbian. As unmarried and independent women, their post-war livelihoods' would depend upon their personal respectability.[13] While they made no secret of their friendship, Alvey and her partner understood that in order to serve their country in the military, they would have to remain circumspect about its true nature. Thus, Alexis Alvey's archive is a

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[9] Gonzalez, p.145.

[10] Gonzalez, p.137.

[11] Dear, "Identity, Authenticity and Memory in Time-Place," p.220.

[12] I am not referring here to what George Chauncey calls "the myth of internalization." According to Chauncey, this popular misconception holds that gay people in the past hid their homosexuality not only because of social pressure, but also because they had internalized a deep-seated self-loathing. I am referring rather to my assertion that Alvey abhorred the idea that she may be labeled low-class. She felt herself to be superior to the majority, not inferior. And while she may have been "out" to some individuals, for Alvey the personal and professional cost of not "passing" was too great. And as Chauncey points out, gay persons in the past did not necessarily think of themselves as 'in the closet'. It is important therefore to use the term cautiously. George Chauncey, Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940, (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

revelation of her wartime experience that uses materials first created to disguise her self.

"Passing" demands quiet. By keeping Alvey and Brodie apart, the Wrens attempted to enforce a silence about female sexuality that Alvey's mannish appearance belied. Combined with her trespass into a traditionally male domain, Alvey's inability to perform wartime femininity led to the failure of her class-based military aspirations. Grace Brodie, a Wren whose appearance was more typically feminine, was never demoted or asked to resign - on the contrary, all of her requests to leave the service after Alvey's discharge were denied. During this period gender was so closely identified with sexuality that it was less the choice of partner that indicated a dangerous and threatening sexuality, but more the taking on of the role of the opposite sex.[14] As a butch woman, Alvey was considered the greater sexual and class transgressor.[15] Kennedy and Davis point out that old beliefs about passing peasant soldiers and new ideas about dykes as "low-life societal discards and pathetic imitators of heterosexuality" both worked against the class aspirations of women like Alexis Alvey.[16] Hence it transpired that the Wrens, who wanted within their ranks

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[13] Kennedy and Davis, Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold, p.2.

[14] Kennedy and Davis, Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold, p.325.

[15] As Martha Vicinius points out in her introduction to Lesbian Subjects, a femme like Brodie is visible as a lesbian only on the arm of her lover. p.7.

[16] Kennedy and Davis, Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold, p. 2.

"only the best sorts of girls," should decide that they had no further use for Alexis Alvey.

It is not surprising that Alexis Alvey should attempt to disguise her sexuality within her collection, as it pertained to her wartime experience. What is more interesting is the way in which Alvey has managed to insert her relationship with Grace Brodie into an otherwise straightforward text, with implicit and explicit clues left ready and waiting for her "future researcher-writer." It almost seems as if she knew that some later researcher would feel less reticent about expressing her subject's sexuality than she herself did. That reader might also be more prepared to write a narrative that included that part of Alvey's identity she herself was reluctant to disclose.

I have written that representation is specifically related to experience in time and place. What is also true is that these codes reach both ways. As the writer or collector records her experience in historically available forms of representation, so too does the reader access that text through her own historical context. Subjectivity works both ways; every reading re-writes the text.[17] It is therefore legitimate, and indeed necessary, that historians and biographers insert editorial positions and reflections on process into their work.[18] Person, text, and politics cannot be

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[17] Teresa de Lauretis, "Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation." *Theatre Journal* 40 (May 1988), p.159.

[18] For example, see Ruth Behar, Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

separated, either for the writer or for the reader. To acknowledge this is to allow for communication across time, place, and ideology, to learn each other's historical truths.[19]

Disguise, therefore, is twofold. There is the disguise, whether deliberate or unconscious, which is inserted by authors into their work. As we have seen with the Alvey Collection, this strategy can be employed to move a work from the margins into the mainstream of historiography. But disguise can also be a consequence of what happens once a text is read and interpreted by others; it is possible for multiple layers of disguise or interpretation to reify a person or thought, regardless of the intentions of the author.

That has not been my intention here. I must pause, however, to examine my role as historian and as Alvey's "collaborative autobiographer."[20] If, as some would suggest, it is my purpose as a critical reader to tease out "the warring forces of signification" within the text, then I must also ask questions about the implications of my editorial intervention in the production of a life story.[21] This approach can lead to a focus on the reader as the creator of the text, and that is not my aim. Readers do bring their own cultural codes and identities to their work, it is true. Given my own temporal and social positioning, I can no more remain deaf to Alvey's homosexuality

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[19] Dear, "Identity, Authenticity and Memory in Time-Place," deLaurentis, "Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation," Nestle, A Restricted Country, and Martin, Introduction to Femininity Played Straight.

[20] I borrow this term from Carole Boyce Davies, "Collaboration and the Ordering Imperative in Life Stories," in Smith and Watson De/Colonizing the Subject, p.6.

than could she pronounce it. I am not prepared, however, to argue here for a relocation of authenticity from my sources to me. Rather, I would like to recognize, as Alexis Alvey recognized, that "truth" lies in the process by which both collector and reader/writer translate information into production.[22] I make this claim as part of the project to recapture subjectivity for both the historian and her subject, at once deepening our knowledge of the past and provisioning our struggle to change the future.

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[21] Smith, A Poetics of Women's Autobiography, p.5.

[22] Crane, "(Not) Writing History," p. 23.

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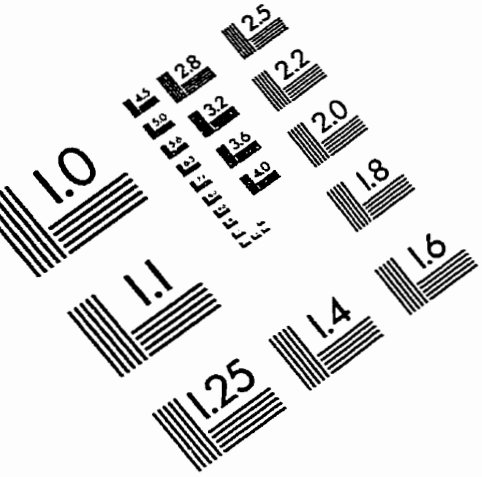

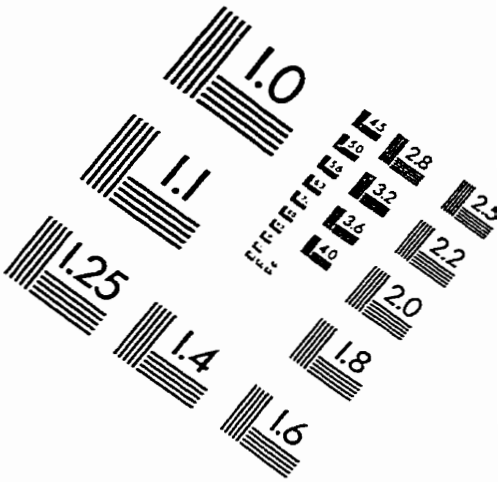

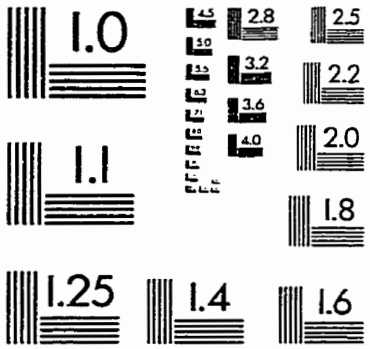

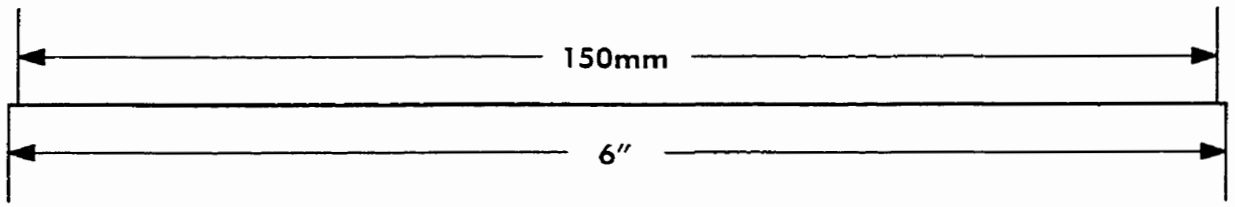

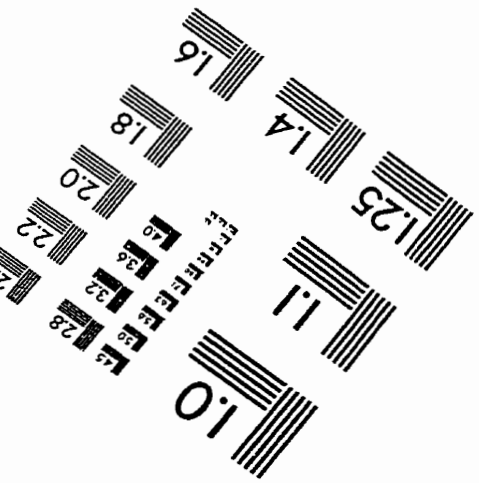

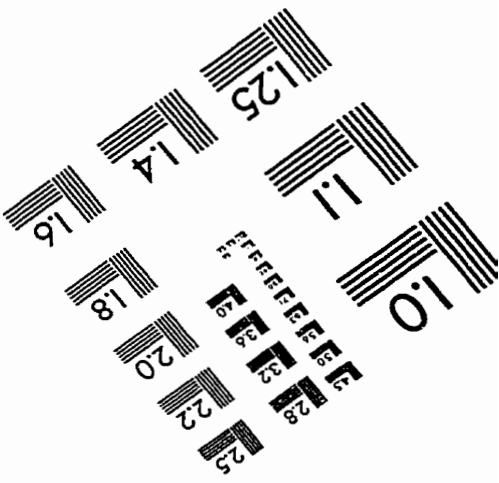

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