

CHAPTER 1

THE MAKING OF AN UN/POPULAR CULTURE:

FROM LESBIAN FEMINISM TO LESBIAN POSTMODERNISM

Recent work in lesbian and gay studies recycles the same story about how the American feminist sex wars over sexual representation in the early 1980s created lesbian category trouble, broke up the feminist cultural consensus, realigned lesbians with gay men and then brought forth the newest kid on the block: lesbian postmodernism. Penelope Engelbrecht was the first to use the term, in her 1990 article, "'Lifting Belly is a Language': The Postmodern Lesbian Subject."¹ In 1994, a critical collection of essays using and refusing the term appeared under the editorship of Laura Doan; the title, *The Lesbian Postmodern*, beginning as it does with the definite article, is, ironically enough, most unpostmodern. While the most insightful analyses of the sex wars and their aftermath, such as B. Ruby Rich's "Feminism and Sexuality in the 1980s," Catharine R. Stimpson's "Nancy Reagan Wears a Hat: Feminism and Its Cultural Consensus," and Arlene Stein's "Sisters and Queers: the Decentering of Lesbian Feminism," suggest that the story in its broad outlines is correct, what is becoming the received version fails to do justice to the theoretical complexity and the contradictions of lesbian-feminism. In particular, it occludes the part that social and especially cultural differences played in stirring up lesbian category trouble and in instigating a new phase of lesbian creative and critical expression. What fascinates me is the part of the story that hasn't been given much attention; namely, how lesbian-feminism became an un/popular culture. How lesbian-feminism

changed from being a political vanguard into a cultural neo-avant-garde is the subject of this book.

The simplest version of the transformation of the category “lesbian” goes like this: thesis—lesbian-feminism—antithesis—the feminist sex wars—synthesis—lesbian postmodernism. The chain reaction is summed up in one recent and typically provocative title, a collection of essays edited by Arlene Stein—*Sisters, Sexperts, Queers: Beyond the Lesbian Nation*.² It’s a story, a myth of origins³ about a generational changing of the guards, marking and almost always celebrating a shift from the alleged inclusivity of the boast that “any woman can be a lesbian” to the much more exclusive and unabashed elitism of lesbian (cultural, theoretical, and most of all, sexual) chic. The project of accessibility shifted to a more disturbing one of excessibility.

THEORIZING ACCESSIBILITY TO EXCESSIBILITY

Three intellectual events shaped this shift: the publication in 1980 of the powerful polemical essay by the poet-critic Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” which theorized lesbianism as not only inside but central to feminism; the sex wars within feminism from 1982 on, which displaced lesbianism either above or below feminism as a set of sex-cultural practices not necessarily bounded by the realm of “the political”; and then, from the late 1980s on, the emergence of lesbian postmodernism, which destabilized, disjoined, and deconstructed the relationship between lesbianism and feminism. In the process, both lost their coherence, uniqueness, and authenticity. The new hybrid, however, has achieved a greater degree of theoretical and cultural prestige—as a sexy new avant-garde at a time too “post” to believe in the possibility or usefulness of either lesbianism or feminism.

Rich’s text shows lesbian and feminist theoretical practices at a moment of consolidation and legitimation. If one article has achieved canonical status both in the literature of women’s studies and lesbian and gay studies, it is this classic. Still widely anthologized, Rich wrote her poetic polemic with women’s studies students and faculty as her intended audience. She wrote to change minds: to decrease heterosexism in the women’s movement and its scholarship, and to build bridges between heterosexual and lesbian feminists.⁴ Rich successfully used the ideological work of 1970s feminist culture which had transformed the image of lesbians from sexual outlaws to respectable citizens. Her chief

stroke of brilliance in this rhetorical takeover was to make lesbianism inherently natural, womanly, and feminist.

Legitimizing lesbianism this way is tricky. Obviously, it requires rewriting all the myths, popular and scholarly, about ugly man-hating lesbians. Less obviously, it requires rewriting the twentieth-century history of relationships among feminists, lesbians, and gay men. Given the revolutionary task she set herself, it's not surprising that Rich's argument is frequently contradictory, unsupported by evidence, or simply incredible at key points. Rich argues that lesbianism is a choice and, therefore, any woman can become a lesbian. Lesbians are made, not born. In making this choice, women aren't choosing a sexuality so much as they are choosing to reject patriarchy. Heterosexuality isn't a choice for women but collaboration with the enemy in the interests of survival. While any resisting woman is entitled to take a spot on the "lesbian continuum," the patriarchy will try to destroy her if she does so. Therefore, feminists make the best lesbians; lesbian/feminism is industrial strength feminism (unlike earlier pre-feminist lesbians who were sex-crazed and therefore not really political). If all women became lesbians, the patriarchy would crumble.

"Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" exemplifies what Katie King calls an "origin story," an interested tale about the relationship between lesbianism and feminism.⁵ Since Rich wants to unite the two, to make lesbianism feminism's "magical sign," she sometimes forges the link visually as well as rhetorically—"lesbian/feminism."⁶ Throughout this account—another interested tale—of shifts in the relationship between these terms, I will use the typography that the theorist or writer under discussion used. My own standard will be the simple juxtapositioning. Since there is no standard form, usage varies, probably reflecting the relationship the writer imagines as existing between lesbianism and feminism. For theorists and others who are lesbian and feminist but not "lesbian feminist," I will use the term "feminist lesbian."

The tensions between feminism and lesbianism are suppressed by Adrienne Rich because she sought to unify them. Her position builds from a view typical of lesbians active in the 1970s who saw lesbianism as a solution to the problems of female heterosexuality.⁷ Because of what she forced underground, Rich's article is probably much more often cited for the memorable phrases she introduced into feminist culture than read as an extended argument. While the latter part of the title is often forgotten or misquoted, perhaps because Rich's argument about the all-encompassing, transhistorical and transcultural nature of "lesbian existence" has been largely discredited by historians, the first

and most shocking part of the title, the notion of "compulsory heterosexuality," has become a cornerstone of feminist and lesbian theorizing.

Rich's insight that heterosexuality should be considered by all women as an institution, a frequently violent and always coercive social construction, rather than as a natural state, has had some acceptance in other academic disciplines such as literature, psychology, sociology, and cultural studies, and has even made its way into the larger world outside the academy. For many feminist readers, who typically encounter this text as the token lesbian reading in an otherwise heterosexist women's studies syllabus, Rich is lesbian theory. Lesbian theorists, however, have largely rejected her arguments. It's important to recall that the most significant and most immediate critiques of Rich anticipate the sex wars and their aftermath.

Feminist scholars responded in various ways to Rich's controversial essay and, in fact, the debate about it remains ongoing. One of the most important responses to Rich, by the socialist-feminist lesbian Ann Ferguson, is crucial in understanding the directions that lesbian theorizing took during and after the sex wars, and the role that theorizing played in the break-up of what Catharine Stimpson called the North American feminist "cultural consensus."⁸ Ironically, though Ferguson has the better and more historically grounded argument, and later theorists have largely followed her lead by applying her methodology and asking similar questions about lesbian identity, her response has been forgotten while Rich's polemic has been canonized.

Rich's article holds this pride of place because it creates an appealing myth of the lesbian/feminist as a present-day freedom fighter against patriarchy who has a mystical connection to all the heroic women who have ever lived. In its scope and imaginative grandeur, Rich's article is a manifesto of lesbian modernism. Sharing the bonds of women-identification with non-lesbians rather than isolated as a pervert because she performs deviant sex acts, Rich's lesbian is a romantic though respectable figure. Naturalizing the lesbian, freeing her to float free from historical impurities and taints, linking her oppression to the oppression of all women, Rich makes lesbianism intelligible and seductive in normative heterosexual terms. That is, she desexualizes lesbianism.

In the *Signs* 1981 issue, Ferguson includes a section in the "Viewpoint" essay, "On 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence': Defining the Issues." Entitled "Patriarchy, Sexual Identity, and the Sexual Revolution," Ferguson's critique is a response to Rich that pricks the romantic bubble by finding Rich's vision ahistoric,

exclusionary, and utopian.⁹ Unconvinced by Rich's totalizing claims that compulsory heterosexuality is the motor driving patriarchy and the lesbian continuum is the nestling place for all women, Ferguson questions Rich's definitional strategies and her broadly inclusive claims about lesbian identity. She does this by setting out five different definitions of lesbian identity, including Rich's and her own, that reflect changes in ways of being sexual and thinking about sexual identity.

The major difference between Rich and Ferguson is that Ferguson reestablishes the importance of the creation of "an explicit lesbian identity connected to genital sexuality," though she admits that no one definition fits all cases.¹⁰ The question of lesbian identity must remain open-ended, demanding self-conscious reflexivity and a grounding in material and cultural specificities. Ferguson's is a far narrower and less romantic view of lesbianism, one not so easily assimilable into heterosexual feminism. Unlike Rich, Ferguson neither overlooks the significant political differences that divide women nor puts the lesbian into the vanguard position. At two places in her counter-argument, Ferguson asks who is excluded from or devalued by Rich's redefinition of lesbian existence. In contrast to Rich, Ferguson observes:

any definitional strategy which seeks to drop the sexual component of "lesbian" in favor of an emotional commitment to, or preference for, women tends to lead feminists to downplay the historical importance of the movement for sexual liberation. The negative results of that movement...do not justify dismissal of the real advances that were made for women, not the least being the possibility of a lesbian identity in the sexual sense of the term.¹¹

In its rejection of the political vanguardism of lesbian-feminism and acknowledgement of sexual diversity within the lesbian community, Ferguson's essay prefigures not only the sex wars, but the emergence of lesbianism in a postmodern mode.

FROM THE SEX WARS TO THE TEXT WARS

Every scholar who has discussed this period agrees that "The Scholar and The Feminist IX" conference in April, 1982 at Barnard College in New York on the subject "Towards a Politics of Sexuality" marked the official outbreak of the sex wars. These were disputes about the meanings

of lesbian life in large American cities in the 1970s, although they also troubled lesbian and feminist communities in urban areas elsewhere. To illustrate, here are two versions of what they involved.

Janice G. Raymond has a celebratory but sorrowful view of a lesbian feminist paradise lost:

There was a time when this movement called lesbian feminism had a passion, principles, and politics. Without romanticizing that period as the golden age of lesbian feminism, I would like to recall for us what that movement was and what it stood for. This movement was the strongest challenge to hetero-reality that feminism embodied. It challenged the worldview that women exist for men and primarily in relation to them. It challenged the history of women as primarily revealed in the family ...It challenged that seemingly eternal truth that "Thou as a woman must bond with a man," forever seeking our lost halves in the complementarity of hetero-relations. It even challenged the definition of feminism itself as the equality of women with men. Instead, it made real a vision of the equality of women with our Selves. It defined equality as being equal to those women who have been for women, those who have lived for women's freedom and those who have died for it; those who have fought for women and survived by women's strength; those who have loved women and who have realized that without the consciousness and conviction that women are primary in each other's lives, nothing else is in perspective. This movement worked on behalf of all women. ...But then something happened. Women—often other lesbians—began to define things differently.¹²

By contrast, Joan Nestle has a very critical view of what lesbian-feminism suppressed:

We Lesbians from the fifties made a mistake in the early seventies: we allowed our lives to be trivialized and reinterpreted by feminists who did not share our culture. The slogan "Lesbianism is the practice and feminism is the theory" was a good rallying cry, but it cheated our history. The early writings need to be reexamined to see why so many of us dedicated ourselves to understanding the homophobia of straight feminists rather than the life-realities of Lesbian women "who were not feminists" (an empty phrase which comes too easily to the

lips). Why did we expect and need Lesbians of earlier generations and differing backgrounds to call their struggle by our name? I am afraid of the answer because I shared both worlds and know how respectable feminism made me feel, how less dirty, less ugly, less butch and femme. But the pain and anger at hearing so much of my past judged unacceptable have begun to surface.¹³

These visions are compelling polemics. They show how the sex wars divided lesbian from lesbian and led to the proliferation of lesbianisms and the legitimating of other sexual minorities who have more tenuous connections to feminism. The breakdown of the grand narrative of sexuality which offered two flavors—heterosexual and lesbian—ushered in the new age of postmodern sexuality, with its twin offer to end the policing of sexual boundaries and expand the variety of sexual expressions.

But this is getting ahead of the narrative. What were the sex wars about? The immediate catalyst was the picketing and leafletting at the conference by what Lillian Faderman called “cultural feminists”¹⁴ (this descriptor is generally used derogatorily, but Faderman’s usage is neutral to positive) who were offended by the presence of lesbian sex radicals at a feminist event. By attempting to stop the conference, since they regarded the radicals’ presence as part of the backlash against feminism, the demonstrators made it legendary. The fate of feminism itself seemed to hang in the hands of those who were there or wrote analyses of it. Since the sex wars were largely fought by (white, American) intellectuals over books and ideas and then were rehashed in more books and scholarly articles, the whole affair might seem like a tempest in a teapot. Perhaps, as it recedes from view, that will be the way feminist history will regard it. Looked at from the vantage point of another decade, however, this highly cerebral and ironically disembodied struggle set the terms and the agenda for contemporary feminist and lesbian discourses on sexuality and sexual representation.

Scholars differ about the extent to which this was almost entirely a lesbian dispute over unconventional sexual practices such as sado-masochism, public sex, the use and production of pornography, and butch-femme role-playing. Lesbian social historian Lillian Faderman, in her study of twentieth-century lesbianism, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America*, is of two minds about this. In one of the most concise analyses, Faderman claims that “the lesbian sex wars of the 1980s between those lesbians who were cultural feminists and those who were sex radicals reflected the

conflicting perceptions of the basic meaning of femaleness and lesbianism with which women have long struggled."¹⁵ If she's right, then the issue is a large one, with a potential for involving a very large number of women, even though the number of actual combatants who argued publicly was small.

Though in the quotation just cited she indicates that the sex wars engaged profound issues, the thesis driving most of Faderman's chapter about them suggests something quite different—the sex wars were a momentary blip. They weren't about the naturalness or constructedness of lesbian sexuality, relationships with heterosexual feminism, or representational politics. They were about what lesbians do in bed. Faderman concludes, based on her interview data, that the attempt by lesbian sex radicals to change lesbians' sexual behavior largely failed because lesbians, like other women, share the same female socialization which emphasizes tenderness, love, romance, and sexual safety above the pleasures and dangers of adventuring on the fringes, let alone outside the borders of sexual respectability.¹⁶

If the sex wars are looked at less concretely, however, the immediate outcome was not what Faderman reports—the cultural feminists, or the "lesbian essentialists," as she names them, won the battle and the sex radicals, or "lesbian existentialists," lost.¹⁷ Looked at in larger terms, the sex wars are only the latest round in a two hundred year long struggle over the boundaries between normalcy and sexual deviance, in which feminists have tended to play the role of regulators as well as the regulated.¹⁸ Critiquing feminism's historic role as sexual regulator drives lesbian sex radical and anthropologist Gayle Rubin's article, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," the most cited and important piece in the influential anthology of papers from the Barnard conference, *Pleasure and Danger*. If Adrienne Rich's essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," is the first contemporary classic of lesbian culture, then Gayle Rubin's article is the second. Using a Foucauldian analysis of modern sexual history, Rubin argues that the sex wars should be studied as a symbolic contest between feminists and sex radicals over a stratified and unitary sexual system.

Like Rich before her, Rubin is a powerful polemicist who is trying to legitimize and naturalize her preferred form of lesbian identity, namely lesbian sado-masochism. Unlike Rich, who tried to valorize hers by blurring the boundaries between heterosexuality and lesbianism, Rubin privileges hers by attacking the very notion of sexual hierarchy.¹⁹ Calling lesbian-feminists on their habit of legitimizing themselves by demonizing the sexual practices of other sexual minorities, Rubin

knocked lesbian-feminism off the throne of transcendental signifier and the pedestal of sexual purity. Now that some historical distance has been put on the most inflammatory aspects of these rhetorical battles, this part of Rubin's argument has come to be regarded as more significant than her sexual libertarianism.²⁰

While Lillian Faderman regards the adoption or rejection of kinky sexual practices for lesbians as a blip in the pattern of female sexual socialization, Rubin treats the sex wars as a crucial moment in the history of sexuality. The sex wars, like the period in the late eighteenth century when homosexuality was "invented," were a time of "sexual ethnogenesis," in which new sexual minorities were created and communities forged.²¹ For those living through it, this moment is hard to comprehend because anything having to do with sex is highly mystified in western culture. Sex wars and moral panics are "often fought at oblique angles, aimed at phony targets, conducted with misplaced passions, and are highly, intensely symbolic" because they are territorial conflicts over sexual and ethical values.²²

For many feminists, Rubin's article makes uncomfortable reading. Not only does she resexualize lesbians, removing the halo of respectability that 1970s feminism had worked so hard to create, she also unties feminism as a theory of gender oppression from lesbianism as a sexual identity and practice. By prying apart the categories of gender and sexuality, Rubin laid the theoretical groundwork for a new disciplinary formation, lesbian studies, which parallels but does not overlap with women's studies.

Rubin makes a compelling argument that feminism should no longer be seen as the "privileged site of a theory of sexuality"²³ and that it is of limited usefulness for lesbians and other sexual minorities:

Feminist conceptual tools were developed to detect and analyze gender-based hierarchies. To the extent that these overlap with erotic stratifications, feminist theory has some explanatory power. But as issues become less those of gender and more those of sexuality, feminist analysis becomes irrelevant and often misleading. Feminist thought simply lacks angles of vision which can encompass the social organization of sexuality. The criteria of relevance in feminist thought do not allow it to see or assess critical power relations in the area of sexuality.²⁴

Whereas, in her earlier and equally influential essay, "The Traffic in Women," she had suggested that the concept of a "sex/gender system" allowed the best ways of understanding the structural links

between sex and gender, Rubin here repudiates her previous work.²⁵ "Thinking Sex" helped to rupture the fragile theoretical unity between heterosexual and lesbian feminists. By providing the theoretical foundations and justifications for another "gay/straight" split within feminism, Rubin's essay should be seen as the opening round in a still ongoing legitimization crisis over sexuality.

In retrospect, because of the insightful deconstructive analyses offered first by B. Ruby Rich to feminist and lesbian audiences in 1986 and then by Catharine Stimpson to literary critics in 1988, it has become clearer that the sex wars were primarily intramural disputes or "family romances." Taken to a higher interpretive ground, "sex" was something of a pretext. Critics like Ruby Rich and Stimpson refigured the sex wars neither as catfights nor conspiracies but as infights over the meanings of feminist and lesbian sexual and cultural practices. In Ruby Rich's case they are competing romanticisms, and in Stimpson's they concern differing theories of representation.

While sexual issues provided the conflagration point, questions of style, particularly with respect to cultural as well as sexual respectability and visibility, were profoundly divisive. Stimpson locates the emergence of a new feminist subculture at an earlier and less controversial Barnard conference, the 1979 session on "The Future of Difference." What she terms "feminist postmodernism" (and she may have been the first to use the phrase) is a mix of "revisionary psychoanalysis, European poststructuralism, and feminism."²⁶ As a result, feminists and lesbians had to choose: be pure but old-fashioned, or become trendy but difficult. In effect, the sex wars became the text wars. If you didn't keep up with your reading, you couldn't play.²⁷ Though the sex wars burnt themselves and most of their combatants out some time ago, by the time they subsided in the late 1980s it had become apparent that the antagonists were so opposed on questions of representation, subjectivity, and culture as to be mutually unintelligible.

More and more, the sex wars seem like the first round of feminist cultural wars. One side, which included most lesbian-feminist critics and academics, many of the latter associated with women's studies, had the numbers and the other, a much smaller grouping of lesbian intellectuals who considered themselves poststructuralists or materialist feminists, had the greater institutional prestige and cultural capital. Notwithstanding, feminist lesbian critics such as Catharine Stimpson, Teresa de Lauretis, Sue-Ellen Case, and Elizabeth Meese,²⁸ who have written candidly and lucidly about the implications and consequences—theoretical, literary, and political—of the cultural conflicts within American feminist and lesbian communities as a first step to

breaking the stalemate and moving the discussion forward, have not been very successful. Academic feminism still continues to ignore or otherwise marginalize lesbian postmodernist culture, and lesbian postmodernists have largely given up on women's studies in favor of lesbian and gay studies or queer theory.

LESBIAN POSTMODERNISM: CATEGORY TROUBLE OR TROUBLING CATEGORY?

Not everyone has found the makeover cause for rejoicing. The dissenters include lesbians who are skeptical about claiming that deep links exist between sexual identities and postmodernism as an aesthetic or a philosophical critique;²⁹ lesbians who are critical of postmodernism for political reasons,³⁰ and lesbians who dismiss the sexy new avant-garde as "lifestyle lesbians."³¹ Though I too use the apparently unstoppable narrative of lesbian postmodernism, I subject it to a symptomatic reading: From lesbian category troubling to troubled category, what is enabled and what made more difficult under the aegis of this new un/popular culture?

It's important to acknowledge that the category "lesbian" was in trouble both before and after the sex wars for cultural and political reasons that were only loosely linked to those debates. One of the chief reasons "lesbian" is a troubled category is that as a name and a notion it's so limited and limiting. The lesbian philosopher Marilyn Frye has ruefully analyzed its baffling etymology, its negating ontology, and its implicit ethnocentrism.³² When the word is uninflected, it can be taken to mean white, euroamerican, and middle-class.³³ Because it seems disembodied and euphemistic, some of those it names reject "lesbian" as not only racially and culturally exclusive, but as inappropriately cerebral, preferring instead the more visceral and down to earth "dyke" or "queer."³⁴ While one solution to such category trouble is to choose a name to fit the occasion, whatever will keep its critical edge critical, the dis-ease around the category underscores the cultural and political reality that there is no such thing as a monolithic or international lesbian culture.

"Lesbian" was a category in trouble for cultural reasons well before the outbreak of the sex wars in 1982. As early as 1974, the experimental lesbian novelist Bertha Harris complained about lesbian-feminist attempts to make lesbians and lesbian literature "palatable and 'speakable'...universally acceptable and welcome."³⁵ Lamenting that literary lesbian-feminists and those who preferred to read their banal

writing had successfully assimilated themselves into ordinary people, she feared that they had lost the chance of becoming great—as monsters. “Lesbians, instead, might have been great, as some literature is: unassimilable, awesome, dangerous, outrageous, different: *distinguished*.”³⁶ As early as 1978, for different reasons but with a similar iconoclastic bravado, Monique Wittig stunned academics at the Modern Language Association (MLA) annual conference by declaring that lesbians are not women.³⁷ Then as well as now, such claims disturbed many lesbians. Those who want to pass as “women” or to be assimilated as the girls next door still reject the claims of a Harris or a Wittig as queer and incomprehensible.

By the beginning of the 1990s, when lesbian-feminism was thought by some feminists and lesbians to have gone the way of the dodo, observers of American feminist communities voiced yet other reasons why the category of the lesbian was in trouble. Some were delighted, others were perplexed or worried. Was the category “lesbian” empty or ineffective as a descriptive or discursive tool, on the one hand, or too totalizing, on the other?³⁸ If lesbianism, by the mid-1980s, had lost the political aura it had just barely managed to achieve as feminism’s “magical sign,” what had a decade’s worth of theoretical elaboration turned it into? In a little over ten years, lesbianism may have refigured itself from being the “rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion,” to its lust.³⁹ In 1992, Michael Warner fantasized that Judith Butler’s anti-figuration might be that a “lesbian is the incoherence of gender binarism and heterosexuality condensed to the point of parody.”⁴⁰ By the 1990s, the lesbian had imploded into a subject position, a performance, a space, a metaphor, or an instability in the system of signification.⁴¹ As a consequence of this theoretical efflorescence, all of it undertaken during the longest period of economic depression and political reaction in the western world since the 1930s, it’s unclear whether “lesbian” should be understood now primarily in political, sexual, or cultural terms. “Lesbian” has gone from something any and all women supposedly could be, to a politicized sexual identity, to something wild and *recherché* that perhaps only an outlaw elite with the right clothes, sex toys, and reading lists could fantasize being. Currently, the category is undergoing a shift as dramatic, as seismic, and as controversial in terms of its potential cultural and political consequences as the one attributed to the nineteenth-century sexologists. Though this shift as yet directly involves only a minority of a minority, its manifestations and consequences will be of interest not only to lesbians but to all those following the debates about postmodernism, feminism, and the development of lesbian and gay studies.

THE MAKING OF AN UN/POPULAR CULTURE

As a shaper of how both lesbians and other people thought about lesbians, lesbian-feminism has played a contradictory and important mediating role in the making of this un/popular culture. Lesbian-feminism was successful, to a degree, in removing the stigma attached to lesbianism as a clinical category of psychopathology that seemed as exotic and vaguely un-American as it was erotic. Lesbian-feminists promoted themselves as the respectable deviants who may have had sex less often than other groups, but did so more high-mindedly and with greater revolutionary impact. And, while lesbian-feminism was never exactly popular as a political subculture—the most common adjective used to describe adherents was “strident”—there was something vaguely warm and fuzzy about its countercultural populism. Though obviously (and unfortunately) not every woman, it turned out, *wanted* to be a lesbian, there was that welcoming invitation extended to all women to claim a place on “the lesbian continuum.” Culturally speaking, however, the continuum had the same affectations and limitations it largely shared and inherited from the new left and hippie countercultures: an uncritical soft spot for amateurish, accessible, and affirmative cultural expressions such as folk music, social realism, and veneration for all things natural. Not surprisingly, the cultural legacy of lesbian-feminism seems restricted to softball and Holly Near. (In fact, an unapologetic disdain for “women’s music” and preference for almost anything else, whether opera, jazz, or dance music, may have been the first cultural marker of the emergence of lesbian postmodernism.)

As a stance toward culture, lesbian-feminism was and is suspicious, tending to reject high culture as elitist, popular or mass culture as mindless, and both as sexist and misogynist. Hence, lesbian-feminists have largely been uninterested in theorizing culture except as an obstacle or a tool for individual and social transformation. Lesbians writing as lesbians have until quite recently made few interventions about lesbian investments in mainstream or mass culture. (One powerful exception to this general rule is Patricia White’s “Female Spectator, Lesbian Specter: The Haunting.”)⁴² In a recent and fairly inclusive overview of critical approaches to cultural studies entitled, *An Introductory Guide to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, by John Storey, it’s revealing but not surprising that in his informed and sympathetic chapter on feminist work, there is no mention of either lesbian-feminism or lesbian-feminist work in these areas.⁴³

The writing produced by or preferred by lesbian-feminists, such as the coming out story, the romance, and various forms of didactic fic-

tion, from the detective story to speculative fiction, was designed to convey subversive ideas in realist modes that were affirming of lesbian lives as well as formally and linguistically accessible. Lesbian-feminism as a stance toward art and culture was suspicious about or opposed to what it perceived as artistic or formal innovation, unnecessarily difficult or challenging modes of expression, and anything that smacked of critical, negative, or nihilistic attitudes toward lesbians. Because aesthetically, lesbian-feminism rejects not just lesbian postmodernism but lesbian modernism as well, lesbians who loved art or music that was considered difficult, challenging, or elitist were regarded with suspicion or outright contempt.⁴⁴

I term lesbian theorizing and other cultural productions in a post-modern mode an “un/popular culture” not only because the highly contested terms “lesbian” and “culture” are charged with unpopularity, especially in the current American context, but because it’s apparently difficult to think “lesbian” in the same frame with respect to “culture”—of any sort. That lesbians *have* a culture is itself an unpopular idea, partially because any way you look at it, how “lesbian” modifies “culture” is contentious. For example, according to the subject headings in library online catalogues and various databases, “lesbian culture” and “lesbian intellectuals” do not exist. If you look for them, you will be informed that “no entries [are to be] found.” Citations to scholarly writing about lesbianism are largely relegated to the *Social Sciences Citation Index*, in the areas of deviancy and psychopathology. Unlike our (white) gay brothers, we have yet to make much of a dent in the more culturally oriented *Arts and Humanities Citation Index*. If you look for lesbians in a recent and supposedly comprehensive reference work about contemporary literary and cultural theory published and promoted by the MLA, Donald G. Marshall’s *Contemporary Critical Theory*, which their promotional material calls a “concise bibliographic overview of major critical theories and theorists” from Adorno to Wimsatt—yes, Wimsatt—you will find none.⁴⁵

Before looking at the ways the words complicate each other when juxtaposed, let’s take each term separately, starting with “culture,” which as Raymond Williams in *Keywords* reminds readers, is one of the two or three most complicated words in English.⁴⁶ Culture isn’t an object to be described but is rather, as Williams treats it, a process word for the activity of tending. Culture connotes approximation as well as self-fashioning. In consideration of both connotations, I will use the concept in this materialist sense throughout this book, but in addition, I will attempt to hear its always gendered, raced, and sexed inflections.

Culture originally referred to the concrete tending or honoring with worship of things and animals and was then extended and abstracted to refer to the development, especially the higher development—that is, intellectual, spiritual and artistic tending—of human beings. Awareness that culture is a “contested, temporal, and emergent” term⁴⁷ is implied in the second main line of usage, the ethnographic and anthropological, in which the word refers to particular and changing ways of life of different peoples during different periods. Williams places the class associations in the foreground and hints at the racial and imperialist ones which became more obvious to progressives from the eighteenth century onward. He argues that the central question underlying disputes over the concept is how material and symbolic productions are to be related. Though he ends by noting the blatant hostility which began to be directed at the concept of culture and related words such as “aesthete,” “aesthetic,” and “intellectual” in English during the Victorian era, he fails to connect this disdain to “culture’s” gendered or sexual connotations.

Several years later, in a lengthy and provocative review of the *Cultural Studies* anthology edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler, Fredric Jameson also ignored the gender of culture, but used psychoanalytic insights to develop and deepen Williams’s Marxist observations about the fear, loathing, and even violence that “culture” inspires. Like Freud’s view of civilization as an achievement that not only requires renunciation of instinctual life but recognizes that “others” refuse to do this, Jameson’s perspective makes “culture” a site of aggression. Jameson accordingly stresses that cultural studies “will also entail its quotient of the libidinal, will release violent waves of affect—narcissistic wounds, feelings of envy and inferiority, the intermittent repugnance for the others’ groups.”⁴⁸ While Jameson, like Williams, can hardly imagine women’s let alone lesbians’ contributions to the study or production of culture, his insight deserves consideration. Because of the stress he places on unmasking culture as an always relational and violent objectification of and fantasy about the Other, an “objective mirage that arises out of the relationship between at least two groups,”⁴⁹ his remarks are suggestive for theorizing the intrications and detours between culture and lesbians, whether as imagined, contested, or ignored, by lesbians as well as non-lesbians.

As Danae Clark summarizes, in the relationship between lesbians and culture, lesbian subjects have been positioned with respect to hegemonic cultural practices by a “history of struggle, invisibility and ambivalence.”⁵⁰ As if by way of providing evidence, Camille Paglia says, unselfconsciously and unironically, “[t]he lesbian aesthete does

not exist."⁵¹ Hence, and not unsurprisingly, the more self-conscious and visible lesbians become, the more contentious (and fantastic) will their relationships with culture appear to be. If cultural studies is always in some sense a border dispute in which no one owns the real thing, then the claims and counter-claims by lesbian-feminists, feminist lesbians, and lesbians who are not feminists about who is policing whom or regulating ingress and egress from lesbian cultures and identities are not only unresolvable but construct the conditions of possibility for forming and reforming our imagined communities. Groups and cultural formations, moreover, such as "the lesbian-feminist" or "the lesbian post-modern," are imaginary, as Jameson, who alludes to the work of Mary Douglas, Benedict Anderson, and Erving Goffman, realizes. If Jameson were to contemplate these changing manifestations of lesbian life, he would regard them as abstractions and fantasies about purity and danger that promote themselves rather unattractively, but inevitably, via envy and loathing of the Other and abusive generalizing.⁵² While I'd prefer to avoid such behavior in carrying out this project, I recognize with regret that it could be construed as coming with the territory and acknowledge my own responsibility in perpetrating categorical and other theoretical violences.

Lesbians themselves not only disagree about the senses in which it could be considered that "we" have a "culture," high or popular, but some ignore what we do have and thus help to maintain the historical relationship of invisibility, struggle, and ambivalence. Whether or not for reasons as malign as those Jameson gives, lesbians frequently fail to cite each other's work and otherwise treat it fairly casually. That we no longer have to like everything about it is one of the strongest pieces of evidence that we do indeed have a culture. The chief attitudes expressed by lesbian cultural critics are these: that there is at present nothing worthy of the name; that lesbian cultural productions tend to be non-canonical, under-read, and unknown; and that a culture popular among (some) lesbians currently exists and deserves study.⁵³

Current resistances to formulating the links between lesbians and culture persist, however, even among lesbians who are open to the possibility that queering gayness will produce a more inclusive cultural and political practice. For example, *Village Voice* journalist Alisa Solomon found more to critique than to celebrate in the Cultural Festival of Gay Games IV during New York City's recognition of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Stonewall riot. Solomon criticizes the absorption and cooptation of gay and largely male culture via commodification, but is much more concerned, in a way recalling

Jameson's argument, with the political dangers of adopting a multiculturalist model, which she sees as intrinsically essentialist and most likely racist:

for it buys into the *reductio ad absurdum* of all identity movements: that one *inherits* a culture by being born into it. In this model, gays and lesbians are pushed into an essentialist corner, in which we end up asserting, "Yes. We're a culture, just like the others." Inevitably, this leads to the impossible assertion of gayness as an ethnicity. And that, in turn, leads to an assumption of whiteness, as queer culture positions itself *against* African, Latino, and Asian cultures. The distinction is ludicrous. (The Harlem Renaissance, Henry Louis Gates has suggested, could be described as *either* a black movement or a gay one.)⁵⁴

Like Jameson, Solomon refuses to maintain the separation between culture and politics, and like him too, she sees cultural politics as inevitably nasty and othering, but of course, her fears about adopting a multicultural—actually a monocultural model—originate in the contemporary gay and lesbian concern about repudiating and avoiding essentialism. Meritorious as this attempt might be, I have no interest in taking it up yet again because I regard it as something of a red herring, a pseudoproblem of the 1980s which distracted and enervated oppressed groups while dominants either passed over it in silence or used the old nature/culture controversy to maintain their own hegemony. Clearly, Solomon's formulation about inheriting a culture by being "born into it" is absurdly inapplicable to gays and lesbians, who, like everyone else, are raised within heterosexist social and cultural relations. Furthermore, if one simply assumes lesbianism, as I do and as the writers, artists, and activists who are the subject of this book do, rather than arguing, explaining or defending its marginalized status, one effectively shortcircuits the whole tired debate between essentialism and constructionism.

Though Williams is probably right in claiming that the extension of notions of culture via ethnographic analysis to include the productions of subcultures has lessened some of the hostility directed at the supposed refinement of (high) culture, most notions of popular culture are still caught up with cultural discourse's other ugly twin, anxiety.⁵⁵ Is a group or subculture attractive enough, affluent enough, recognizable enough, or even oppositional enough, to find its niche in popular culture? Whether popular culture is regarded neutrally (or not so neutrally)

as what is left over and out from high culture, most definitions seem to exclude lesbians. By that I mean that lesbians, outside of the discourses of pornography, are not popular, if by that one means "liked by the public or by people in general."

Lesbians are still usually regarded, when they are regarded at all, as invisible women, or as the ladies' auxiliary of the gay movement, not as consumers or creators of culture. For example, here's a passage from a fairly progressive Canadian political satire magazine deploring the presence of fat and ugly lesbians on public television:

Of course, these women are all very well in their place—the pretty ones in pornographic films, the ugly types in the armed forces, lacrosse teams and so on—but surely not on a television screen at 6:00 in the evening, disturbing the family dinner and terrifying the cat.⁵⁶

At the same time that "lipstick lesbians" and "lesbian chic" were discovered and promoted by the popular press, there were rumors about attempts at appropriation and reverse passing by "male lesbians" and "queer straights," but these phenomena were so rare that they failed to elicit much comment among lesbians.⁵⁷ By comparison, Camille Roy's contemporaneous judgment about the contradictory implications of lesbian invisibility in popular culture seems to still hold: Lesbians have difficulty being taken up by popular culture because "a community of female sexual perverts resemble nobody, and nobody desires to resemble us."⁵⁸

Though we claim that "we are everywhere," we are not generally thought of as being popular in another sense, of being "of the people." Since lesbians haven't been accorded the privilege of being thought of as having an "everyday," lesbians don't seem capable of having a popular culture in the ordinary meaning of the term. Lesbians among ourselves may worry or joke about what it means to go off to Yale to play at being a lesbian, but the rest of the world thinks of us exclusively in sexual terms. A *Guardian* book review offers an example of how lesbians are excluded from the everyday:

Helen Dunmore's new novel is about a relationship between a 16-year-old prostitute and a cabinet minister with a fetish for bondage and urination. Let's face it. If you were picking a team of sleazy novel plots for the nineties, this one would be first-choice captain. And that's before you even mention the lesbian subplot (yes there really is one).⁵⁹

Because the triplet "lesbian/popular/culture" names a space where several lacks overlap, it's difficult to locate contemporary lesbian cultural productions securely either in high or in popular culture. As a sexual culture, it is too low to be genuinely high, but as a culture created by women it is too genteel or too marginal to be genuinely popular. While the arguments of feminist literary historians against the exclusion of "women," that is, apparently heterosexual women, from both canonical modernism and postmodernism have attained some critical credibility, their work largely ignores or subsumes lesbians.⁶⁰ Moreover, most of the common claims about postmodernism's tendency to efface the differences between high and popular culture or to promote itself as a new avant-garde which can successfully appeal both to the left and the right, neither fit nor offer much illumination of lesbian culture. Even an emerging lesbian postmodernism seems not to fit the description of male or mainstream postmodernism, perhaps because its peculiar overlap of high theory and low culture is neither formally experimental enough to attract theoretical interest nor popular enough to attract mass attention. To my knowledge, Charles Russell's recognition of the avant-garde potential of radical feminism, which frequently subsumes or overlaps with lesbian-feminism, is unique because of the tendency to define the avant-garde as a falsely autonomous and virtually content-free expression of shock and outrage, and so to exclude any kind of work tainted by feminism. According to Russell,

the radical feminist investigations of literary form and social discourse have the potential to be the most significant expression of a revitalized avant-garde sensibility in the postmodern era, precisely because they bring together an aggressive aesthetic activism and a social collectivity that sees itself acting in society and its history.⁶¹

"WITHOUT YOU (LESBIAN/FEMINISM), I'M (LESBIAN POSTMODERNISM) NOTHING"

Postmodern lesbianism is at once a marketing strategy, a legitimizing tool, and a necessary fiction emerging from the current crisis in representation, in particular the identity crises and border disputes within 1980s feminism and lesbianism. It both creates and assuages anxieties about lesbian identities, sexual practices, and cultural productions.⁶² It

is perhaps most useful and illuminating to consider postmodern lesbianism as a complicitous critique of lesbian-feminism. As the comedian Sandra Bernhard, herself an extremely complicitous and not so critical postmodern lesbian, remarked in another context, "without you, I'm nothing."⁶³

Just as postmodernism divided feminist intellectuals in the late 1980s, so too the more recent conjuncture of lesbianism and postmodernism has begun to inspire another and, one hopes, a more useful or interesting round of debates, grounds for which can be found in the collection, *The Lesbian Postmodern*, edited by Laura Doan in 1994.⁶⁴ Given that the critical establishment's interest in the first round of debates has long peaked, with the celebrators of postmodernism or those wearily resigned to it having "won," and given that the feminism/postmodernism rematch essentially had the same outcome (as illustrated, for example, in the collection entitled *Feminism/Postmodernism*, edited by Linda J. Nicholson in 1990)⁶⁵ there will probably be few surprises this time around. Nonetheless, it must be said that, while the theorists, writers, and artists I study are delighted that perhaps with postmodernism's help, older notions of the lesbian as victim, respectable deviant, and invisible woman are finally being parodied or rejected utterly by lesbians themselves, they are ambivalent about the tendency of some lesbian postmodernists, more accurately post-feminist lesbian postmodernists, to sever lesbianism completely from feminism and so to disconnect sexuality and aesthetics utterly from politics. (Even if, as in the dethronement of lesbian-feminism from its position as feminism's magical sign, sexuality is understood as not necessarily linked to any particular political stance, fundamental questions about the relationship between sex and politics remain to be asked.)

In spite of the claim that postmodernism is supposed to display incredulity toward metanarratives, it's tempting to tell the tale of the development of lesbian postmodernism as the narrative of the evolution of a subculture in which lesbian-feminism, a political perspective, is not only decentered but frequently demonized. The political and cultural accomplishments of lesbian-feminism in the 1980s, including the creation of alternative institutions ranging from battered women's shelters to women's centers and bookstores, and their promotion of more inclusive women's studies programs, "women's" music festivals, and publishing houses, tend to drop out of the picture. Instead, there's a fascination with the lesbian and gay cultures of the pre-feminist 1950s or the campier aspects of the gay liberationist 1970s. The hyphen connecting lesbianism and feminism then comes undone. Lesbianism next reemerges not merely as a resexualized identity, but as a set of increas-