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A

**ENTERTAINING LESBIANS  
CELEBRITY, VISIBILITY, PERSONHOOD, POLITICS**

**BY  
MARTHA GEVER**

**A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Sociology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, the City University of New York.**

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Sociology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

July 17, 2000  
Date

Patricia L. Clough  
Chair of Examining Committee  
PROFESSOR PATRICIA CLOUGH

July 17, 2000  
Date

Julia Wrigley  
Executive Officer  
PROFESSOR JULIA WRIGLEY

Serafina Bathrick  
PROFESSOR SERAFINA BATHRICK

Douglas Crimp  
PROFESSOR DOUGLAS CRIMP

Stuart Ewen  
Supervisory Committee  
PROFESSOR STUART EWEN

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

/uw.

**Abstract****ENTERTAINING LESBIANS: CELEBRITY, VISIBILITY, PERSONHOOD, POLITICS**

by

**Martha Gever**

adviser: Dr. Patricia Clough

The phenomenon of lesbian celebrity — instances where a celebrity is known to be and does not deny being a lesbian — like celebrity in general, crystallizes moral definitions and redefinitions of personhood. Yet for lesbians, this cultural form takes on a decidedly political import, insofar as questions concerning social membership are raised with every appearance of a lesbian celebrity and the ensuing controversy. Certainly, the entire category of celebrity is extremely mutable and telling of more general features of social organization and cultural reproduction. But from the perspective of lesbian celebrity, these characteristics demand an inquiry into various intersections of popular conceptions of sexuality and gender with the representational practices and structures of the mass media. Moreover, these encounters are dynamic and thus point toward various cultural changes that work upon and may alter the definitions of homosexuality and femininity, the two factors that conjoin in configurations of lesbians and lesbianism.

The dissertation considers five aspects of lesbian celebrity. The first chapter deals with visibility politics and the place accorded celebrities as symbolic representatives of lesbian personhood. Another considers the cultural, economic, and technological changes in the past two centuries that provide the preconditions for lesbian celebrity. A third examines the opposition to celebrity

during the formative years of the gay and women's liberation movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and its effective reversal due to a politics of self-invention, which involves attention to one's self-image. Another analyzes revisionist attempts to find precedents for lesbian celebrity in the biographies of women who lived before contemporary definitions of lesbian identity existed, or before the concept of liberation was applied to homosexuality. The final chapter investigates various techniques for image management that have been deployed in the process of producing lesbian celebrity, as exemplified by Martina Navratilova.

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## **Introduction: celebrity talk, lesbian style**

Ever since I began researching lesbian celebrity I have been surprised at the interest this work provokes among friends and colleagues. I assume that they will think it a subject too frivolous for an academic study, barely worthy of serious discussion, and I may have not been entirely successful in convincing them otherwise. Just the same, I routinely find that social occasions have become opportunities for intense discussions when I mention the topic. What has intrigued me most, though, is the kind of curiosity I most frequently encounter. The typical question concerns who I'm doing, as in, "Are you doing Ellen? k.d.? Lily Tomlin? Are you going to deal with Jodie's refusal to admit she's a dyke? And what about Whitney?" After a couple of awkward attempts to answer queries of this sort I adopted a standard reply — explaining that my project isn't intended as a series of biographical sketches but rather involves an inquiry into the social factors that inform lesbian celebrity.

The existing literature dealing with celebrity can be divided roughly into two kinds that parallel the distinction I attempted to convey in these conversations: biography and social critique.<sup>1</sup> My project belongs in the second category, although biographical materials often provided points of departure for my analysis. I also devote considerable attention to problems presented by biographical representations, both self-representations in autobiographical texts and other writers' descriptions and interpretations of the lives of celebrities. Biographical material also contributed to my research in a less academic manner,

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<sup>1</sup> In his important survey of the scholarly literature on celebrity phenomena, *Stars* (London: British Film Institute, 1979), Richard Dyer divides the second approach into two additional sets of concerns: sociological and semiotic. This work is situated on the sociological side of the dividing line between these but borrows paradigms and techniques from semiotics from time to time.

insofar as I have been able to regale friends with gossipy tidbits or provocative interpretations I discovered in my reading and their responses often triggered ideas for directions I might take with the project.

One suggested direction that I eventually did not take is related to a third important component of most studies of celebrity — conceptualization and/or application of psychological theories pertaining to celebrity. How do celebrities feel about fame? What emotional satisfactions do they get from fans' attention and adoration that make the demands upon them worthwhile? What attracts fans to a celebrity? Indeed, many of the questions posed in the discussions I've had about celebrity — aside from the request to name names — involved why we are drawn to them, want to know more and concoct fantasies about them. Sociologists, too, have pondered the identifications and desires that bind fans to their favorite performers. And, beginning in the 1970s, the use of the rigorous paradigms of psychoanalytic theory in cinema studies were applied increasingly in the study of stars and the star system by media scholars.

This is not the place to recap the entire history of this line of intellectual inquiry or describe its contributions to cinema studies and related disciplines, but an explanation of why psychoanalysis, or psychology in general, receives little attention in my study is necessary. The omission is not a matter of conceptual sloth but stems from more substantial problems with privileging the psyche as the organizing principle of cultural life. I agree that the problem central to psychoanalytic theory, subjectivity, is a major question for any serious inquiry concerning celebrity culture. However, I find more convincing the proposition that the psychological bedrock of subjectivity is not a primary structure of the human organism but rather a set of effects, historically situated social discourses

and practices — as Michel Foucault and others have argued and elaborated.<sup>2</sup> From this perspective, psychological precepts and explanations prove severely limited, which suggests a radical redirection of the critical project, away from psychological structures and processes, towards historical studies of the production of particular kinds of persons and concepts of selves.

I have chosen, therefore, to set aside questions of desire and identification — the province of psychoanalytic paradigms — in order to concentrate on dimensions of lesbian celebrity related to cultural institutions, discursive configurations, and political debates and developments. I find this approach more suitable for my investigations of lesbian celebrity because the kind of people involved, both celebrities and lesbians, pose suggestive questions concerning the way personhood has been constituted in contemporary western societies — how people are made up, as Ian Hacking says, or selves are invented, to adopt Nikolas Rose's idiom. Understanding subjectivity from this perspective involves placing it in the context of cultural reproduction: the way cultural norms and systems of meaning are maintained and undergo change, how social structures regulate individual conduct and, in turn, how conduct is interpreted and specific kinds of subjects and subjectivity become legible. These questions underwrite a central motif in this study: transformations of the legibility — and visibility — of lesbian subjects over the past 150 years and in the wake of significant changes during the past few decades.

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<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1994); Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller, eds., The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Nikolas Rose, Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Ian Hacking, "Making Up People," ed. Thomas C. Heller, Morton Sosna, and David E. Wellbery, Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality, and the Self in Western Thought (Sanford: Stanford University Press).

The first chapter poses these questions in terms of present-day concerns with lesbian visibility in the United States, since this has been advocated repeatedly as an important political project and advanced by lesbian celebrity. The visibility of increased numbers of lesbian celebrities, it is said, fosters greater freedom for all lesbians. According to this logic, the proliferation of images of lesbians in the media provides evidence of our existence, refutes stereotypes, and provides role models for those who suffer from inadequate self-esteem. Since these political claims and related concepts of representation provoked my initial curiosity about the phenomenon of lesbian celebrity, it seems appropriate that a survey of visibility politics should introduce the discussion. Chapter three returns to these issues, although in terms of their articulation at a previous historical moment — the late 1960s and early 1970s — when lesbian subjectivity in the U.S. was radically reconfigured within the crucible of the gay and women's liberation movements. Fueled by ideals of equality and freedom, to be achieved by contesting regimes of heterosexual normalcy and male domination, campaigns for visibility became inextricably linked to coming out. At first, celebrity seemed antithetical to the democratic ethos of liberation. Eventually, though, a rapprochement between the two utopian ideals was effected — the glorious star reconciled with the noble lesbian — on the basis of the shared investment in an ethic of self-fashioning and self-management. Lesbian celebrities, I argue, are an effect of this alliance.

However, before going any further I should define lesbian celebrity. Stated succinctly, lesbian celebrity is limited to instances where a celebrity is known to be and does not deny being a lesbian. To be more precise, the stardom of these lesbians is achieved and authorized within the institutions of popular culture, endorsed by the mainstream media. In other words, I am not dealing

with so-called “closeted” stars and have no interest in debating the pros and cons of “outing.” Even in its most sophisticated form, in Larry Gross’s Contested Closets for example, the discussion of “outing” presumes that the parameters of lesbian identity have been settled once and for all.<sup>3</sup> Far too much empirical and theoretical work contradicts this assumption for it to remain viable; the political significance of the “outing” controversy dissipates as soon as social identities are recognized as contingent and frequently contradictory. It is the shifting modulations and mutations in the constitution of lesbian identity that produce the possibility of lesbian celebrity.

Despite the restrictions I have imposed on lesbian celebrity by ruling out those who would refuse the title, my definition by no means reduces the scope of my study to a tiny group of exceptional individuals. Indeed, this critique of lesbian celebrity attempts to take into account myriad phenomena frequently invoked by commentators on the cultural scene in the late twentieth-century U.S. Just naming a few of these — spectacle, mass media, commercialization, sexual politics, socialization — hints at the breadth of the territory visited. Organizing the eclectic combination are questions concerning the emergence and expression of lesbian celebrity, which may seem peculiar because the idea, if not the fact, seems, at first, so negligible as far as important social developments are concerned. Indeed, the pairing of the two words just a decade ago would have required lengthy explanations for anyone who was not privy to lesbian gossip. A couple of decades before that, lesbian celebrity would have been an oxymoron, nonsensical.

Of course, there have been a handful of famous lesbians. Think, for example, of Gertrude Stein. I do not dispute the existence of lesbian celebrities

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<sup>3</sup> Larry Gross, Contested Closets: The Politics and Ethics of Outing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993)

before the 1990s. However, until that time the lesbian side of the equation was valued negatively in every corner of popular culture. My interest lies in the profound political changes that have occurred so that the almost certain erasure of one of the two terms — lesbian or celebrity — is no longer guaranteed. Every dimension of these transformations is not necessarily recent; many are related to cultural formations with lengthy histories. I employ 1990 as the decisive date because that is when the various strands converge to make lesbian celebrity a practical possibility. And, as it turns out, one of the most productive encounters represented by lesbian celebrity occurs where political technologies and concepts of the self intersect.

As soon as the possibility of lesbian celebrity is proposed, other problems begin to surface. Can there be lesbian celebrity prior to the conception of a lesbian person who might qualify? Are changes in the criteria for celebrity related to the acceptance of lesbians into the charmed circle? These are questions I take up in chapter two, which presents a historical overview of cultural, economic, and technological changes in the past 150 or so years that set the stage for recent lesbian celebrity. Performing an about-face, chapter four contemplates revisionist histories of celebrities who were lesbians — Alla Nazimova, Eva Le Gallienne, Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, and the woman who consorted with all them, Mercedes de Acosta, as well as the wider circle of lesbians she knew, befriended, and maybe slept with — but who never described themselves in those terms. Rather than producing yet another breathless exposé of their love and sex lives, I am concerned with the rhetorical and social mechanisms that produce knowledge about ancestral lesbian celebrities in the name of historical truth, often reproducing worn-out clichés as a result.

The question remains: who counts as a lesbian celebrity? Perhaps the best example is Martina Navratilova, whose international fame was earned in a cultural domain — sports — where lesbianism has long been, and continues to be, assumed, even if not acknowledged or accepted. Others are engaged in more traditional female occupations in entertainment — for example theater actress Cherry Jones — but depart from convention by refusing to hide or deny their lesbianism, as Jones did when she acknowledged her lover in her acceptance speech when awarded the Tony for best actress in 1995. Television actresses Amanda Bearse (Married...With Children) and Ellen DeGeneres, whose splashy coming out in 1997 was heralded as a groundbreaking media event, have been equally forthright. And at a time when fashion models may attain the celebrity status and thus have not only their bodies but also their private lives and personalities scrutinized, such lesbian supermodels as Jenny Shimizu and Gia Carangi complicate the traditional notions of idealized femininity that fashion models are said to epitomize.

Popular music provides plentiful examples of lesbian celebrity — for example, lang and Etheridge, of course, but also Me'Shell NdegéCello, Albita, the Indigo Girls, and Sinéad O'Connor. Indeed, lesbian celebrities seem to crop up regularly in this arguably more freewheeling cultural field, and the lesbian histories of such eminent singers from earlier generations as Ma Rainey, Carmen MacRae, Janis Joplin, and Dusty Springfield have not been entirely suppressed. Moreover, this is the only entertainment sector that has consistently produced celebrities who are lesbians of color. I explore some of the historical factors that contribute to the overwhelming — one could say overdetermined — whiteness of lesbian celebrity in the discussion of visibility politics in chapter one. The absence of a more extensive discussion of this cultural sector could be repaired by a thorough examination of sexual politics in popular music, but that will have

to wait for a writer with more musical knowledge, as well as a more musical sensibility, than I am able to profess.

Out of the increasing number of lesbian celebrities, I selected only Navratilova for an extensive case study of the production of lesbian celebrity, although I devote considerable space to de Acosta's posthumous reproduction as a lesbian celebrity. The reasons for choosing Navratilova can be summed up in two words: image management. Since celebrity is synonymous with celebrity image, lesbian celebrity — or any celebrity, for that matter — becomes in effect an image management project. The self-fashioning practices used to fabricate a celebrity image are well known, epitomized perhaps by the techniques perfected by Hollywood studio publicity departments in the 1920s and thirties but now performed by a plethora of specialists employed to manage a star's career — personal agents, publicists, stylists, and trainers, to name a few. But until very recently, such projects involved primarily cosmetic enhancements. Although a review Navratilova's circuitous itinerary on the way to lesbian celebrity provides an account of an elaborate experiment with such techniques, her efforts to redesign her image were not confined to her looks alone. She also undertook an extensive makeover of her physique, while developing ancillary techniques and theories of that involved reconfigurations of her entire physique. The result was a body described in terms of apparatuses and mechanical, cyborg metaphors — an ambiguously gendered, perhaps nongendered, clearly human, but also somewhat inhuman or superhuman, lesbian person. I chose Navratilova, therefore, because her lesbian celebrity represents the paradoxical definitions of lesbian personhood and struggles over what this means in the arena of popular culture.

**Lesbian celebrities embody these encounters and conflicts but do not decide the issue once and for all. These figures demonstrate that individual sexual identity, like a celebrity image, is articulated through interactions with social norms and systems of signification. Likewise, lesbian culture — including the celebrities who galvanize ideas about and inklings of lesbian personhood — is by definition political. In short, lesbian celebrity is about power and knowledge, and that may be why everyone seems so eager to talk about it.**

## 1 **Visibility now! the sexual politics of seeing**

Chastity Bono, national media director of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) and daughter of pop singer-actress Cher and the late singer-songwriter turned Republican congressman Sonny Bono, is talking to a New York Times reporter in 1997 about her first lesbian love affair in the late 1980s. "No one was out then," she says. "It was before k.d. lang and Melissa Etheridge. I was really afraid."<sup>1</sup> Appearing in the final paragraphs of a breezy profile, the suppositions implied by the historical benchmarks Bono mentions when recalling her personal distress could easily pass unnoticed. At the same time, her version of the past could be a show stopper. No one? And this was when? For a reader who came out in 1975, and perhaps for countless others whose acceptance or embrace of lesbian identification predates k.d.'s in 1992 or Melissa's the following year, Bono's version of history seems sadly misinformed. But maybe it's not surprising for someone whose knowledge of lesbians seems to rely upon the mainstream media and for whom the possibility of describing herself as a lesbian — accepting the fact that it's all right to say so — was itself constituted as a media event. Bono's first coming out in 1990 was involuntary, insofar as it was engineered by the editors of the Star, a supermarket tabloid, who capitalized on her parents' fame by emblazoning her name and face, accompanied by eye-catching headlines that screamed "lesbian" and "gay," on its cover and inside pages. Only five years after this exposé did she enact her "official" coming out by granting the gay and lesbian magazine the Advocate an interview.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Alex Witchell, "Growing Up in Public: From Babe in Arms to Gay Advocate." New York Times, July 9, 1997, sec. C.

<sup>2</sup> Judy Wieder, "Virtuous Reality," Advocate 679 (April 18, 1995): 43-52.

No doubt, Bono's faulty historical knowledge can be attributed to the fact that she has lived her entire life within the shelter or, if you prefer, the fish bowl of celebrity culture, which may be why she used entertainers as the references that authenticated her social identity. But her background also provided her with outstanding qualifications for a post at GLAAD, an organization dedicated to the promotion of "fair, accurate and inclusive representation of individuals and events in the media as a means of combating homophobia and all forms of discrimination based on sexual orientation or identity."<sup>3</sup> Bono's easy familiarity with the entertainment business was surely an advantage, as she spells out in a GLAAD fundraising appeal, reproduced in the form of a note written on her personal stationery:

Some of my friends — even some of my family — wonder what I hoped to achieve by joining the staff of GLAAD....

Here's how I explained it to USA Today: "This sweet little blond girl from The Sonny & Cher show turned out to be a big dyke. There's something wonderful about that, because that's life."

But getting people's attention to my identity as a lesbian is only the beginning. Converting that attention to real, positive change is the bottom line....

This is an exciting, historic time for gay and lesbian visibility in the media. After decades of being ignored, then defamed, by Hollywood, we're beginning to get meaningful visibility. But we still have a long way to go.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, GLAAD Dispatch 4:7 (October 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, direct mail appeal, 1997.

The mere fact of Bono's lesbianism coupled with her membership in a pop culture incarnation of the American family circa 1972, when at age two she made her screen debut on her parents' weekly television program, may yield an extremely solipsistic view of what kind of "meaningful visibility" she has in mind. But there is no doubt that the conflation of her own biography with a political program aimed at making lesbianism respectable represents an attempt to engage the media in its own game. She is able to work both sides of the street, appearing as a guest on Rosie O'Donnell and then mailing out more fundraising letters citing this kind of attention as an indication of progress.

It is important to point out here that the recurrence of "visibility" in the GLAAD promo piece — elsewhere Bono's note mentions "the struggle for gay and lesbian visibility" — does not result from an editorial oversight of redundant word usage. Instead, it can be read as an emphatic statement that visibility is the primary goal as well as the fundamental rationale for GLAAD's organizing efforts. (Bono's departure from her GLAAD post in 1998 did nothing to alter this emphasis.<sup>5</sup>) Furthermore, if we interpret the number and quality of representations in the mass media as a measure of social status, as GLAAD literature routinely urges us to do, popular visual culture becomes an important, perhaps the most important, focal point for the lesbian and gay political movement.<sup>6</sup> This is where lesbian celebrity and lesbian politics converge.

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<sup>5</sup> Although Bono left GLAAD soon after Daily Variety printed a story quoting her opinion that Ellen had become "too gay" during the 1998 season following the famous coming out episode, Bono denied that she spoke these words although not the sentiment and vowed to remain an activist for lesbian and gay visibility. See Gabriel Rotello, "The Sudden Adulthood of Chastity Bono," Advocate 770 (October 13, 1998): 32-48, an interview with her devoted mainly to this topic.

<sup>6</sup> Additional text in the Bono's fundraising letter reads: "I came aboard GLAAD because I knew it was the best way I could help make a difference in the way

### **Star power**

Unlike Bono, whose career as a rock musician never took off, lesbians whose celebrity is based on reputations acquired as professional performers seem unlikely candidates for this kind of political work, indebted as they are to the power brokers responsible for designating, grooming, and providing platforms for stars in the entertainment business. These obligations apply considerable pressure to avoid controversy, especially the kind that tabloid journalists can exploit. More common are cases when the substance of lesbian politics and celebrity manifestly intersect or overlap, for example when women enter the public arena as participants in challenges to homophobic laws, legal judgments, or regulations, becoming public figures as a result. Probably the most high profile instance of this kind of coincidence in recent years is Margarethe Cammermeyer, a decorated colonel in the U.S. Army, whose lawsuit for being summarily discharged following her assertion of lesbianism was memorialized in her autobiography, Serving in Silence, then produced as a much publicized made-for-TV movie by CBS.<sup>7</sup> What put Cammermeyer on the celebrity map, in addition to the numerous interviews she gave to the press and on the television talk show circuit, was that her story attracted the attention of a bona fide megastar, Barbra Streisand, who produced the broadcast version, and the fact that she was personified on screen by another prominent actress, Glenn Close. Indeed, it may be that Cammermeyer's star image is indelibly imprinted with Close's likeness.

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lesbians and gay men are reflected in the mass media — as well as the way we're all treated in society at large" (emphasis added).

<sup>7</sup> Margarethe Cammermeyer, with Chris Fisher, Serving in Silence (New York: Penguin, 1994).

Other examples of a direct link between lesbian celebrity and politics are provided by lesbians whose renown can be attributed to their familial proximity to fame and/or political power. Chastity Bono is a charter member of this group, but it is epitomized better by Newt Gingrich's sister Candace. Like Bono, Gingrich explicitly linked her effectiveness as a spokesperson for lesbian issues to her family ties. But while Bono chose to remain close to her show business roots, attempting to convince media moguls and minions alike that homophobia is not good public relations, Gingrich acted as a vocal exponent of lesbian and gay rights in less tony circles, traveling the country on behalf of the Human Rights Campaign's Coming Out Project and criticizing her brother whenever he took a public position against gay and lesbian rights. Yet Gingrich was not above a little glitzy celebrity bonding à la Hollywood, as when she teamed up with Bono during the 1996 presidential election for a series of print ads intended to induce lesbians and gay men to vote, which netted them coverage in the celebrity press.<sup>8</sup> She also made a cameo appearance on a 1996 episode of the sitcom Friends, playing a minister who performs a lesbian wedding. By taking this baby step into popular entertainment, she elicited a particularly snide public put-down from brother Newt and thus produced another opportunity for her to mock him for his reactionary views.<sup>9</sup> These and other outbreaks of lesbian politics on the stage of celebrity culture offer ample evidence of an increase in the sort of

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<sup>8</sup> People ran a half-page photo and brief caption on its "Star Tracks" page, People 45:18 (May 6, 1996): 13.

<sup>9</sup> In her autobiography, Gingrich quotes her brother as telling the press, "I'm glad Candace has a day job. I have another sister, Susan, who's a member of the Christian Coalition. You don't see Hollywood glorifying her, you don't see TV shows calling her up." Candace Gingrich, with Chris Bull, The Accidental Activist: A Personal and Political Memoir (New York: Scribner, 1996), 160.

visibility Chastity Bono, GLAAD, and various others have worked hard to achieve.

Less obvious, perhaps, are the political dimensions of lesbian celebrity in popular entertainment — theater, movies, television, music, popular magazines, sports — yet this is where the stakes in what can be called visibility politics are raised to the highest levels. The reasons for this are not too mysterious: entertainment media in late-twentieth-century Western societies are predominantly visual, and the images they produce and broadcast are associated with the power to set cultural agendas. So far, attempts to coax eligible movie stars, arguably the most visible of all celebrities, to come out have failed (film star Anne Heche's public declaration of love for another woman was exceptional, in many respects), but famous lesbians who work in other arenas of the entertainment industries have been less timid: prime examples include Cherry Jones and Lea DeLaria in theater; Ellen DeGeneres in television; Martina Navratilova, Missy Giove, and Muffin Spencer-Devlin in sports; Etheridge, lang, Me'Shell Ndegéocello, Albita, and Ani DiFranco in popular music. In appreciation of their visibility as self-identified lesbians, they are now celebrated by myriad lesbian fans not just for their virtuosity as performers but also for their political contributions. But there is something strangely nebulous about the newfound measure as a political achievement. What, we need to ask, is meant by visibility? What, exactly, are the political gains that will follow from it? And are these sufficient to put it high on the list of priorities of politically aware and active lesbians and gay men?

Not only in GLAAD's propaganda but in almost every instance where lesbian visibility is evoked it is presented without elaboration. Indeed, one of the consistent assumptions made is that whatever constitutes visibility is, literally, self-evident: To be seen is to be represented, to be accorded social agency, while

to be refused such recognition is to be denied personhood. Visibility confers authority, and it guarantees authenticity. It is transparent, insofar as the thing seen — in this case, a lesbian person — conforms perfectly to a objective category of social identity, while the historical and cultural structures that make that identity possible disappear.<sup>10</sup> There are, however, several contradictions contained in the apparent truisms encountered whenever visibility is invoked uncritically. My purpose here is to outline these, examining how visibility has been articulated as a political goal in the ongoing debates over lesbian representation — in both symbolic and political domains.<sup>11</sup>

Lesbian celebrities have come to figure prominently in this discussion as the result of several developments. One of these, the flourishing industry of celebrity journalism in the latter decades of the twentieth century, is not a direct effect of sexual politics. However, as of 1990 the tremendous amount of attention paid to the intimate lives of famous people in the mass media had effectively annulled tacit rules that forbade revelations of homosexual identities and

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<sup>10</sup> For an analysis of how visibility is used in historical studies as a metaphor for transparent meaning, see Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," in The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993): 397-415. At one point, Scott describes how this operates in accounts of lesbian and gay history: "History is a chronology that makes experience visible, but in which the categories appear as nonetheless ahistorical: desire, homosexuality, heterosexuality, femininity, masculinity, sex, and even sexual practices become so many fixed entities being played out over time, but not themselves historicized" (400).

<sup>11</sup> This distinction, made by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (in Marxism and Interpretations of Culture, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988], 271-313), is an important one. Spivak notes Marx's differing use of two words both commonly translated into English as "representation": "speaking for," as in politics (darstellen), and "representing," as in art or philosophy (vertreten); rhetoric-as-persuasion vs. rhetoric-as-trope. The problem that arises when these two meanings are confused, Spivak argues, is that the conflation of these two meanings by intellectuals "forecloses the necessity for counterhegemonic ideological production" (275). 12

practices of eminent public figures, at least those applied in the “respectable” press.<sup>12</sup> If stars demonstrate what it means to be an individual in modern societies, as Richard Dyer contends, and crucial to their representative character is our access to knowledge concerning their private lives, then the acknowledgment of lesbian personae among the pantheon of cultural luminaries could signal a change in definitions of the individual and categories of personhood.<sup>13</sup>

I begin, then, with the premise that changes in the parameters of lesbian visibility — as well as the prominent attention given to lesbian celebrities that both results from and defines these changes — suggests a broader critique than an empiricist equation of what is visually perceptible with knowledge or truth can ever provide. When not only what can be represented but also what can be seen is understood as a feature of cultural and political institutions, we are

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<sup>12</sup> On the connection between celebrity journalism and factors affecting gay/lesbian representation, see Larry Gross, Contested Closets: The Politics and Ethics of Outing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). Among the developments that Gross cites are ruptures in the code of silence imposed on homosexual practices of public figures, which was seriously undermined by revelations concerning the homosexuality of actively anti-gay right-wing politicians and political operatives — Rep. Robert Bauman and Terry Dolan, in particular — in the 1980s. This then motivated various gay political strategists to call for exposure of others who campaigned against gay and lesbian rights while secretly carrying on same-sex relationships.

Now, it is entirely possible that the newer standards of openness may satisfy a kind of voyeurism that in no way results in diminished social censure of homosexuality. Or such revelations may be cited to affirm pernicious ideas about the inherent characteristics of homosexuals. Douglas Crimp makes this point in his essay “Right On, Girlfriend!” (in Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory, ed. Michael Warner [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994]: 300-320), where he discusses how Roy Cohn’s homosexuality has been offered as an explanation for Cohn’s duplicity and cruelty once this became public knowledge following his death in 1986. (308).

<sup>13</sup> Richard Dyer, Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1986). As his title indicates, Dyer’s analysis is devoted to movie stars, but many of his observations and statements about celebrity phenomena in general can be applied to other forms of stardom, as I argue in chapter 2.

encouraged to refocus our attention away from any fixed notions concerning truthful, objectively accurate representations of lesbians and toward the socially constituted "conditions for visibility," as Teresa de Lauretis has proposed.<sup>14</sup>

### **Over exposure**

The rule of thumb of visibility — visibility is everything; without it your existence is threatened — appears to be confirmed by the desire for recognition among those who are frequently objects, much more rarely subjects, of the visual representations that circulate in contemporary Western cultures. Not surprisingly, the ability of visibility to confer personhood is rarely disputed by those in a position to grant it in the first place, including journalists who cover the culture beat in the mainstream media. Yet, paradoxically, it has become commonplace in these same contexts to treat celebrity, the consummate model of visibility, with extreme disdain, although the popularity of any particular star is generated and maintained by these very scribes and the media that employ them.

It's not just that celebrity occupies an increasing amount of space and time in the cultural environment — exemplified by People and US magazines, as well as television programs like Entertainment Tonight and Access Hollywood, for example, as well as every early morning, mid-afternoon, and late night talk show — but complaints abound about how celebrity has infiltrated other areas of social life, politics in particular, as well as all branches of cultural activity, from

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<sup>14</sup> De Lauretis has explored this distinction in various essays, among them "Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation," Theatre Journal 40:2 (May 1988): 155-177, and "Film and the Visible," in How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video, ed. Bad Object Choices (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991): 223-264.

sports to scholarship.<sup>15</sup> Most common are critiques that analyze celebrity — the institution as well as the individuals — as symptoms of social pathology produced by an over-emphasis on image-consciousness and -crafting. A choice example of this analytic bent appeared a few years ago in a New York Times piece commenting on the marriage of another second-generation celebrity, John F. Kennedy Jr., to Calvin Klein publicist Carolyn Bessette. Op-ed columnist Maureen Dowd presents the couple as an illustration of a postmodern paradigm à la Baudrillard: “all image and no substance ... the content is gone.” And she sums up her perspective on the takeover of politics by celebrity culture thus: “Jackie Kennedy invented Camelot as public relations packaging after her husband’s death. So it follows that its new princess has the perfect lineage for the age. She was a publicist, and spiritual daughter, of the reigning king of fashion public relations. She is our new Obsession.”<sup>16</sup> For Dowd, the apparently frivolous interest in celebrity generates serious consequences, since it distorts rational political understanding and judgment.

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<sup>15</sup> On the celebrity of certain academics and how this results in extreme economic disparities and other kinds of stratification in institutions of higher education see, Janny Scott, “Academostars Find Sky’s the Limit as Schools Woo Talented Professors,” New York Times, December 20, 1997 (I thank Jack Levinson for bringing this article to my attention); Cary Nelson, “Superstars,” Academe 83:1 (January-February 1997): 38-43, 54; David R. Shumway, “The Star System in Literary Studies,” Publications of the Modern Language Association 112:1 (January 1997): 85-99. As far as professional sports are concerned, there is a much longer tradition of celebrity players, although in this cultural sector, too, the stakes continue to be raised, as signaled by the enormous salaries paid to big name stars. Perhaps the best example of how this is understood is provided by press coverage of Michael Jordan’s celebrity, although Michael Eric Dyson’s metacommentary on this phenomenon, “Be Like Mike? Michael Jordan and the Pedagogy of Desire,” in Reflecting Black: African-American Cultural Criticism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993): 64-75, is considerably more thoughtful than that offered by the popular press.

<sup>16</sup> Maureen Dowd, “The No Frontier,” New York Times, October 3, 1996, sec. A.

Consider, too, what another Times critic, Michiko Kakutani, has to say about the cultural changes wrought by everyone's favorite icon of celebrity, Andy Warhol. His aesthetic, the author avers, has "become the way we look at the world"; his success in the art market conveys a simple maxim: "The lesson is the same one taught by television: you can sell anything with the right spin — silk-screened prints of race riots, Mao wallpaper, even painting made by urinating on canvases coated with bronze — and with the right spin anything can be art."<sup>17</sup> The "right spin" in this case is the artist's signature. Thus, for Kakutani and innumerable pundits, "Warhol" is employed as shorthand for celebrity worship that encourages anomie and avarice, and therefore corrupts social discourse.<sup>18</sup> Dowd and Kakutani are hardly alone in their concern. For instance, they are joined by another regular columnist for the Times, Frank Rich, whose year-end summary for 1997 invokes the flourishing of celebrity gossip — which he attributes to "peace, prosperity, and falling crime rates" — in order to draw conclusions about the vapidness of fin-de-siècle culture.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, celebrity news, gossip, and imagery is regularly cited as the common denominator of public culture, suffusing everything, from speculations about the culpability of the paparazzi in the death of Princess Diana to debates over O. J. Simpson's trial for murder.

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<sup>17</sup> Michiko Kakutani, "The United States of Andy," New York Times Magazine, November 17, 1996, 34, 36.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Simon Watney, "The Warhol Effect," The Work of Andy Warhol, ed. Gary Garrells (Seattle, Bay Press, 1989): 115-123.

<sup>19</sup> Frank Rich, "Ring Out the Old Celebs" New York Times, January 3, 1998, sec. A. I have used the New York Times as a primary source for commentary on celebrity culture because it is widely regarded as the newspaper of record and therefore immune to sensationalism characteristic of celebrity gossip and adulation, but this image may be changing. In 1998, the paper instituted a regular column of celebrity news and flattering profiles in its daily edition.

What seems to be most troubling is the tautological nature of the relationship between celebrities and the media: What happens to celebrities is news. Anyone who makes news is a candidate for celebrity. In these and so many other assessments of the Zeitgeist, visibility and its first cousin, celebrity, are presented as evidence of the total surrender to the “society of the spectacle,”<sup>20</sup> and the “cancerous growth of vision, measuring everything by its ability to show or be shown”<sup>21</sup> that cultural theorists have been forecasting for decades, with no respite in sight. Media critics protest the colonization of the public sphere by celebrities, while those engaged in marshaling the flow of information on an everyday basis — magazine publishers and editors, for instance — complain that economic factors compel them to pay great attention to celebrities. They are therefore forced to sacrifice journalistic standards of objectivity in order to secure the cooperation of publicists and celebrities upon whom sales depend.<sup>22</sup> Critical or complicit, few in the media business dispute the

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<sup>20</sup> Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Swerve Editions, 1990).

<sup>21</sup> Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), xxi.

<sup>22</sup> Although concerns about increasing space devoted to entertainment celebrities in the press is nothing new (see, in this regard, my overview of this issue in chapter 2, as well as the discussion of the development of movie fan magazines in early twentieth century in chapter 4), reporters’ and editors’ willingness to allow stars and their representatives approval of texts and photos prior to publication has come under scrutiny recently. See, e.g., Robin Pogrebin, “Magazines Bowing to Demands for Star Treatment,” New York Times, May 18, 1998, sec. A. Following a review of differing perspectives on the issue Pogrebin concludes, “The bottom line is that neither magazines or stars can live without each other.” It may be telling that the Times chose to run this story on their front page, indicating again the embrace of celebrity journalism by this pillar of respectability that I mentioned above. And again, on May 3, 1999, the Times featured a story about the machinations of Pat Kingsley, publicist for Ellen DeGeneres among others, on the first page of the Arts section.

understanding of visibility as cultural capital, and many of those who have little or none are clamoring for more.

### **Pro-visional**

A skeptical attitude toward celebrity culture, as the critics cited above recommend, is often accompanied by the argument that fascination with fame and the famous is fundamentally undemocratic. Thus, champions of lesbian visibility who regard the acknowledgment of lesbian images in popular culture as a marker of greater social acceptance would seem to be hopelessly naïve or, worse, in thrall to the mass media. If the media's exaltation of images represents a hollowing out of cultural meaning, why would we want to endorse this enterprise? In particular, why are gay and lesbian activists pursuing — with encouragement from all sorts of sympathetic allies in the entertainment industries, such as those honored by GLAAD's annual Media Awards<sup>23</sup> — a political strategy aimed at influencing institutions so often associated with superficiality and elitism: the Hollywood star system and all of its latter day offshoots? Is doing so a surrender to the most venal, crass tendencies of late capitalist culture?

To answer these questions, we need to examine how visibility figures in discussions about and strategies employed in lesbian politics. In addition to Bono

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<sup>23</sup> GLAAD honorees with no primary lesbian or gay commitment have included obvious choices, like the television series Thirtysomething, which broadcast an episode featuring a gay male couple in 1989 (i.e., before the inclusion of gay and lesbian characters on network television became widespread), and major Hollywood films with gay themes and central characters like Philadelphia and In & Out. But they also have been awarded to less likely candidates like 20/20, Geraldo, Entertainment Tonight, presumably in recognition of their airing of lesbian and gay perspectives without too much moralizing. A full list of all GLAAD Media Awards recipients is available at: <http://www.glaad.org/glaad/media-awards/past-winners.html>.

and her comrades at GLAAD, legions of lesbian spokeswomen have included visibility as a plank in their political platforms. To cite just one example, in 1993 Torie Osborn, former director of the National Lesbian and Gay Task Force, was quoted in the infamous New York magazine cover story on "lesbian chic" as saying that visibility constitutes a "big lesbian issue."<sup>24</sup> More specifically, this article and a similar piece in Newsweek that appeared around the same time outline various phenomena that support the assertion that lesbian visibility has increased: the growing numbers of lesbians who appear at street demonstrations and others who may not be politically active but are open about their sexuality with coworkers, neighbors, and family members, as well as a marked decline in the secrecy and subterfuge associated with lesbian cultural venues like bars.<sup>25</sup> According to both magazines, visibility is both cause and effect of lesbians' greater political clout in the U.S., although how lesbians portrayed in magazines, movies, and television translate into political power is not spelled out in any detail. Rather, these articles indicate that their editors and publishers take the equation of visibility with power for granted, and no further discussion is necessary.

But lesbian and gay advocates of visibility politics are more precise. They foresee three basic advantages that will ensue. First, images of lesbians in popular culture proclaim our substantial presence within the population, contrary to any concept that lesbianism is characteristic of a small minority. In addition, images of lesbians whose lives are not scandalous, apart from their lovers' gender refute notions that homosexual desires and/or identities are

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<sup>24</sup> Jean Russell Kasindorf, "Lesbian Chic: The Bold, Brave New World of Gay Women," New York 26:19 (May 10, 1993), 35.

<sup>25</sup>Eloise Salholz, "The Power and the Pride," Newsweek 121:25 (June 21, 1993): 54-60.

caused by psychosexual deficiencies. Such “positive images,” it is argued, contradict stereotypes that define lesbianism as a form of psychological and social deviance. Lastly, visible lesbians offer role models for young women who are unable or unwilling to conform to heterosexual norms but find no affirmation for their lesbian identities and same-sex desires, suffering from self-destructive emotional disorders as a result.<sup>26</sup>

And these claims are often articulated together. For instance, in her book surveying the history of gay and lesbian politics in the U.S., Margaret Cruikshank posits visibility as a key factor in cultivating self-acceptance and a condition for emancipation from social oppression. The representations she favors are not premised on a definition of lesbianism as radical otherness but rather on those that treat lesbianism as “common and ordinary.”<sup>27</sup> Instead of news items on lesbian practices of artificial insemination, she writes, “Lesbians would be better understood if the mass media portrayed civic leaders like the two lesbians elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors.”<sup>28</sup> What Cruikshank would like to see is less sensationalist, less spectacular imagery — an unlikely prospect insofar as the mainstream press is predicated on sensation and

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<sup>26</sup> The first three items in this catalogue of pro-visibility arguments have been articulated by Larry Gross in his article “Out of the Mainstream: Sexual Minorities and the Mass Media,” in Remote Control: Television, Audiences, and Cultural Power, ed. Ellen Seiter et al. (London: Routledge, 1989): 130-149. The role model is a familiar feature in writings on lesbian and gay celebrities, living and dead, and a typical expression of this can be found in Martin Duberman’s text “On Being Different,” which introduces the various volumes in the biography series for teenage readers, Lives of Notable Gay Men and Lesbians, he has edited for Chelsea House Publishers (New York). The same rationale is also offered by defenders of “outing,” whose arguments are amply documented and supported by Gross in Contested Closets.

<sup>27</sup> Margaret Cruikshank, The Lesbian and Gay Liberation Movement (New York: Routledge, 1992), 164.

<sup>28</sup> Cruikshank, 163.

spectacle. However, a compromise of sorts has been forged in media coverage during the past decade. Splashy coming out declarations by celebrities attract immediate attention, but the likely emphasis in the coverage is on their prosaic, “real” lives. In a reciprocal move, vocal, already visible lesbians are just as likely to applaud these normalizing gestures.

### **Unruly disturbances**

The view offered by the networks, movie studios, and glossy news magazines can be heady indeed, but this isn’t the only perspective available. The interpretation of the attention lavished on lesbians in the 1990s as an assimilation into popular culture accounts for only one segment or one tendency of the pro-visibility contingent. Even New York magazine’s celebration of lesbian visibility takes notice of activists and cultural producers interested in taking advantage of visual culture to make radical political statements. One example cited is the direct action collective Lesbian Avengers, whose name alone announces its in-your-face challenge to mainstream values. Such groups do not eschew popular media as uniformly compromising but rather attempt to tap into the unruly potential often associated with them.

For much of this century, popular cultural forms — like comic books, music (first rock and roll, later punk, heavy metal, and hip-hop), movies, television, and, lately, the Internet and computer games — have been suspected of moral sabotage and inspired appeals for state regulation to curtail their supposedly pernicious effects. From this perspective, popular culture provides an ideal point of departure from which to launch an oppositional critique of sexual and gender norms. And lesbians have been active in this arena: unambiguous examples of this tendency are the lesbian producers and readers of lesbian

pornography; comic strips like Hothead Paisan, which chronicles the exploits of a fiendish lesbian terrorist; and an abundance of irreverent fanzines and websites.

This dimension of visibility politics is significant, since it underscores the absence of any static configuration of culture itself, especially in those areas often referred to collectively as popular culture, which more and more commands the cultural field as a whole. As Stuart Hall observes, "Popular culture is one of the sites where [the] struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also a stake to be won or lost in that struggle. It is the arena of contest and resistance." Struggle is the operative term in Hall's discussion of the antagonisms that render popular culture a politically volatile domain. Thus, visibility may disrupt or contradict received ideas and accepted beliefs; it may propose new kinds of social categories or inject new meanings into old ones. On the other hand, such contests often extend the reach of dominant forces, insofar as this arena "is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured."<sup>29</sup>

The latter dimension of visibility takes a decidedly sinister form in technologies of surveillance, akin to the Panopticon described by Foucault, transforming newly visible homosexual women and men into ideal targets for social control.<sup>30</sup> From this perspective, it is difficult to disagree with Leo Bersani's acerbic assessment of the emphasis on visibility politics in lesbian and gay circles: "[V]isibility is a precondition of surveillance, disciplinary invention, and, at the limit, gender-cleansing.... Once we agreed to be seen, we also agreed to being

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<sup>29</sup> Stuart Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular,'" in People's History and Socialist Theory, ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 239.

<sup>30</sup> Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1977).

policed."<sup>31</sup> The Panopticon metaphor is a powerful one, and Bersani's warning should not be deemed irrelevant by lesbians considering a bid for visibility. Yet, given how often contradictions and ambiguities crop up whenever the visibility question arises, Hall's description of cultural friction and mutability seems more applicable than one that understands visibility as a unilateral exercise of power.<sup>32</sup> In fact, the concept of popular culture as a contested field seems closer to Foucault's rejection of the idea of power as property. Power, he proposes, is not something that can be possessed; neither is it a repressive exercise but instead a resource that is affirmative, inventive, even pleasurable.<sup>33</sup>

In her study of technologies of gender de Lauretis extends and modifies Foucault's critique of disciplinary power. The technologies to which she refers are practical techniques that "control the field of social meaning and thus produce, promote and 'implant' representations of gender," but not absolutely. For, she writes, "the terms of a different construction of gender [and sexuality] also exist, in the margins of hegemonic discourses ... outside the heterosexual social contract, and inscribed in micropolitical practices."<sup>34</sup> Alongside Hall's

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<sup>31</sup> Leo Bersani, Homos (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 11-12.

<sup>32</sup> The historical literature on sexuality in the U.S. since the mid-nineteenth century suggests a similar dynamic tension between lesbian forays into public culture and increased scrutiny and strategies for containment. This double movement is discussed by George Chauncey Jr. in his essay "From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality: Medicine and the Changing Conceptualization of Female Deviance" (Salgundi 58/59 [Fall 1982/Winter 1983]: 114-146), but is also evident in the broader history traced by John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman in Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America (New York: Harper and Row, 1988).

<sup>33</sup> Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality: Volume 1. An Introduction, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978), 86.

<sup>34</sup> Teresa de Lauretis, Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 18. I do not want to give the impression that de Lauretis accepts Foucault's interpretation of the discourse

assessment of popular culture as sometimes disorderly and always mutable, de Lauretis's comment offers conceptual support for a politics of lesbian visibility — but only if this is conceived as different from the incorporation of lesbians into already existing symbolic configurations, such as that promoted by GLAAD and others standard-bearers who treat visibility as synonymous with validation, social integration, legitimacy, reality. What is required, then, is a political understanding of culture as an aggregate of interconnected but not always coordinated institutions and practices that routinely reproduce social identities and relations. These mechanisms (for want of a better word) are inherently conservative and quite resilient but, because these are socially produced, also susceptible to reinterpretation, redefinition, appropriation, and, on rare occasions, sabotage.

### **Blind spots**

The appearance of lesbians in such prestigious media as broadcast television and large-circulation news magazines is generally interpreted as indication that we have arrived (after all, that is the plot-line common to these reports), but it may also generate skepticism or amusement. As a participant in myriad conversations where reference were made to “lesbian chic,” I cannot recall any mention of the phrase that was not accompanied by the gestural equivalent of ironic quotation marks — a guffaw or, at least, raised eyebrows. Having become accustomed to the idea that lesbianism is inherently unfashionable, always in bad taste, it's easy to strike a cynical pose when told that we are suddenly in vogue, that someone who shares what has been a stigmatized identity has been anointed a star. Still, if mainstream culture is

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of sexuality and its relation to power uncritically. Several times in this collection of essays she points out how his inability to incorporate gender constitutes a crucial oversight, with implications for feminists interested in related questions.

indeed the arbiter of social reality and status, shouldn't these be read as success stories?

Defenders of lesbian visibility may find the attention gratifying, but there are others who recommend closer scrutiny of the interests involved, as well as the images produced. For instance, in their study of the relationship between the increase in lesbian imagery in popular culture and advertising practices, Amy Gluckman and Betsy Reed question the market surveys used by advertisers to rationalize gay- and lesbian-themed ads, which glossy gay publications like Out and the Advocate rely upon to convince account executives to buy space.<sup>35</sup> Much of this data, the critics maintain, is skewed in its portrayal of lesbians and gay men as relatively affluent compared to their heterosexual peers. The article cites one set of statistics, published by the gay marketing firm Overlooked Opinions, which presents an average annual gay male household income of \$51,624 and \$45,755 for lesbian households in the U.S., compared to the national average of \$36,800.<sup>36</sup> The authors contend that these numbers are inflated because the extent of the lesbian and gay population is unknown; moreover, lesbians and gay men willing to be included in such research projects are only those who can afford to be out. Gluckman and Reed also mention a similar survey, which projected even higher income averages but was just as questionable because the data reflect only responses from the readers of upscale gay magazines.

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<sup>35</sup> Amy Gluckman and Betsy Reed, "The Gay Marketing Moment: Leaving Diversity in the Dust," Dollars and Sense 190 (November/December 1993): 16-19, 34-35.

<sup>36</sup> The authors don't say what year these numbers represent but from related information I assume that it is 1992. As a counterpoint, they cite economist Lee Badgett's study showing that the earnings of gay men and lesbians are significantly lower than those of heterosexuals.

Gluckman and Reed's point is that attempts to lure advertisers with this kind of faulty information is short-sighted. Presenting inflated income figures as empirically accurate may persuade media professionals that an investment in lesbian and gay imagery is not as risky as they imagine, but these "facts" also provide fodder for right-wing, homophobic political organizations. Such groups and sympathetic politicians have used these same marketing statistics as evidence that there is no need for legislation that offers protection against homophobic violence or discrimination in employment and housing, since moneyed gay men and lesbians cannot claim to be social victims.<sup>37</sup> Hence, Bersani's dire warnings about the minefields of visibility appear to be well founded. But the success of these strategies is not assured. In some cases the corporate sector's embrace of lesbians and gay men as a potentially lucrative pool of buyers, as well as producers, of goods and services, has proved immune to reactionary attempts to authorize homophobia. For example, when the ultra-conservative American Family Association and Southern Baptist Convention declared a boycott of Disney Corporation properties and products in 1997 — on account of the annual Gay Day gathering at Disney World and their ownership of ABC television, which was responsible for the lesbian-friendly sitcom *Ellen* — Disney refused to respond and seemed to suffer few economic or social repercussions.

No doubt the most important measure of value in capitalist culture is economic. Recognition within the economic sphere secures and reaffirms social identities, while routinely upsetting traditional social conventions whenever these get in the way of increased earnings. This, as Gluckman and Reed indicate,

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<sup>37</sup> E.g., Gluckman and Reed point out that this strategy has been a cornerstone of arguments against any legal guarantees of what right-wing fundamentalists call "special rights" crafted during the rash of anti-gay rights initiatives in the early 1990s.

is why visibility under these conditions is contradictory: we are interpellated as lesbian subjects, as Althusser would say, but also as lesbian consumers.

However, we should not presume that economic forces will inevitably bring about the collapse of a social identity carved out of political struggles into a consumer identity drained of political content. At the same time, we cannot ignore the possibility that this version of visibility may produce a new form of invisibility; it can be conscripted for a program of normalization whereby women who have been regarded as unnatural perverts will be newly perceived and accepted as ordinary and inoffensive, therefore not especially different from heterosexual women.

### **Sex symbols**

Once we accept that visibility is not an empirical, self-evident fact or inherently progressive, it cannot be understood as a guarantee of admittance to the citadels of power. Indeed, as Peggy Phelan wryly observes, "If representational visibility equals power, then almost-naked young white women should be running Western culture."<sup>38</sup> According to her analysis, political strategies intended to affirm any sort of marginalized identity by means of amplified representations are easily frustrated. This occurs because such schemes fail to take into account the symbiotic relationship between dominant ideology and symbolic constructs that represent certain identities as positively valued — men, whites, heterosexuals, the economically prosperous — and remain the standard against which others are judged. Especially germane to the current discussion is Phelan's incisive list of premises that characterize visibility politics, among them: "The relationship between representation and identity is linear and

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<sup>38</sup> Peggy Phelan, Unmarked: The Politics of Performance (London: Routledge, 1993), 11.

smoothly mimetic. What one sees is what one is," and, "If one's mimetic likeness is not represented, one is not addressed."<sup>39</sup>

The problem with these and related precepts common to visibility politics, Phelan points out, is that they perpetuate the idea that symbolic representations will redress power imbalances. In the process, they neglect how such social categories as gender, race, sexuality, and class always posit a relationship between two asymmetrical terms — man/woman, white/non-white, hetero/homo, upper class/lower class — where the second group is always defined as the opposite and inferior to the first. In other words, the power relations entailed in disparities between terms within each category are reinforced every time they are reproduced. Phelan allows that visibility politics may create feelings of pride among members of under-represented groups and at times furthers practical political goals but cautions that "the ideology of the visible ... erases the power of the unmarked, unspoken, and unseen."<sup>40</sup> Invisibility is characteristic of what passes without notice, what qualifies as normal and hence is unremarkable.

There is a further wrinkle encountered when the problem of lesbian and gay representation is posed in terms of an invisibility that will be remedied by inclusion in mainstream culture. As Cindy Patton writes in her 1994 introduction to a collection of articles and essays from the early years of the gay and lesbian liberation movement, "[M]ainstream culture has already been queered by us: Liberace, certainly, but also "voguing"; the adoption by male country and western singers of k.d. lang's butch-pastiche of male country and western singers; Pee Wee Herman's playhouse and its transformation into the pee-pee-

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<sup>39</sup> Phelan, 7.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

peep show; Cindy Crawford and Richard Gere's marriage (not)."<sup>41</sup> These comments appear to contradict sweeping statements about lesbian and gay invisibility, that result from a consistent, well enforced policy of exclusion. There is no quarrel here with the basic logic of visibility politics. Indeed, Patton's information provides yet another reason to applaud lesbian celebrities and campaign for an increase in their numbers, since acknowledgment of queer contributions to popular culture will further subvert smug notions of heterosexual cultural hegemony.

Such conclusions may be too hasty, though, if the paucity of lesbians on Patton's list is registered (her last reference alludes to rumors about Gere but not, as far as I know, Crawford). Indeed, this only confirms the oft-cited handicap suffered by lesbians, as compared to gay men, where visibility is concerned. Consider, for instance, a newspaper report by Natalie Angier on hostility toward gay men and lesbians during the 1993 gays-in-the-military debate. In one sense, Angier's article is exceptional in acknowledging the oversight of lesbians. Still, the author then searches for a rational explanation for her acceptance of this apparent truism, citing the parallels between homophobia and sexism to explain hostility toward gay men, as compared to lesbians: "[M]any social critics and gay-rights advocates ... say that people are much likelier to express animosity toward gay men than toward homosexual women, and that a reason for this is a distaste for anything smacking of effeminate behavior in men."<sup>42</sup> Not just homophobia but any aspect of gay culture, it would seem, is largely a male affair, despite frequent efforts to include lesbians

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<sup>41</sup> Cindy Patton, Preface to Karla Jay and Allen Young, eds., Lavender Culture (New York: New York University Press, 1994), xxv.

<sup>42</sup> Natalie Angier, "Bias against Gay People: Hatred of a Special Kind," New York Times, December 26, 1993, sec. E.

nominally. Another writer on gay cultural phenomena does not even bother with a gesture of parity, informing readers of a 1996 issue of New York magazine, "By 'gay culture' I mean gay male culture. For various historical reasons, lesbian culture has, until just recently, had neither the visibility nor the impact on the larger mainstream culture of its male counterpart."<sup>43</sup> This assessment seems well founded in popular perception, although only if the logic that measures influence in terms of visibility is left unquestioned.

Curiously, media commentators often invoke another, equally clichéd, but apparently contradictory idea about the differential meanings of gay male vs. lesbian visibility — that it is less onerous for a female performer to be forthright about homosexuality, more visible as it were, than for her male counterpart. For instance, when rap artist Queen Pen recorded "Girlfriend," a song that brags about stealing a woman away from her boyfriend, cultural critic Michael Eric Dyson was quoted as saying, "This is really going to be a bomb she's dropping. But the real thing is going to be when you get some brother coming out."<sup>44</sup> Similar comments were made during the brouhaha over Ellen DeGeneres in 1997, when critics routinely asserted that a gay male sitcom star and/or character remained out of bounds for television programmers, but when that day arrived visibility would be advanced to a new height.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Daniel Mendelsohn, "We're Here! We're Queer! Let's Get Coffee!" New York 29:38 (Sept. 30, 1996), 26. Interestingly, this article in an upscale magazine bemoans the embourgeoisment of gay male culture, which, according to Mendelsohn has lost its transgressive edge as a result.

<sup>44</sup> Laura Jamison, "A Feisty Female Rapper Breaks a Hip-Hop Taboo," New York Times, January 18, 1998, sec. AR; emphasis added.

<sup>45</sup> They were wrong. The NBC comedy show Will and Grace, which features a gay <sup>45</sup> They were wrong. The NBC comedy show Will and Grace, which features a yeagay male lead character (played by a heterosexual actor) premiered in 1998, the year Ellen was ditched by ABC.

Is visibility more meaningful for gay men simply because they are men? When one group of gay men, African-Americans, say, is still not included within the redrawn boundaries of visibility that can accommodate white gay men, do the risks they incur by staking a claim in this domain make their efforts all the more important? These are not minor questions. Rather, in a world where visibility is understood as the criterion for reality and gay men represent the “real thing,” the real homosexual disturbance, the privilege accorded male subjectivity in the field of visual representation comes to the fore. Accordingly, lesbians can be said to occupy an extremely tenuous position: neither “real” (heterosexual) women nor “real” homosexuals — i.e., visible to the extent that gay men are.

Whether they believe that gay men are more culturally influential or more likely to be despised, journalists’ off-hand treatment of the disparity between gay men and lesbians indicates that any discussion of lesbian visibility calls for a more considered analysis of how gender ideology inflects visibility. An important resource for this endeavor is the work of feminist scholars who employ critical methods that deconstruct systems of meaning understood as binary oppositions — not only the structuring of gender as exclusively male or female, but also myriad dichotomies metaphorically linked to this, such as active/passive, culture/nature, and the like.<sup>46</sup> Theoretical work dealing with identifications and desires has also adopted these techniques to analyze sexual norms, according to which homosexuality is defined as the inverse or converse of heterosexuality. Thus, femininity appears as the antithesis of and support for

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<sup>46</sup> An excellent overview of this area of feminist research and theory can be found in Joan W. Scott, “Deconstructing Equality-Versus-Difference: Or the Use of Poststructuralist Theory for Feminism,” in *Conflicts in Feminism*, ed. Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (New York: Routledge, 1990): 134-148.

normative masculinity, just as the understanding of homosexuality as abnormal or deviant affirms the normalcy of heterosexuality.

### **Double bind**

Beginning in the mid-1970s, feminists also began to outline and then elaborate psychoanalytic theories, which they employed to dismantle the phallogentric logic that informs how women are depicted in practically all dimensions of Western culture. Luce Irigaray and others feminists working in this vein trace such representations to the unconscious formation of gender identity predicated on phallic superiority within systems of symbolic representation.<sup>47</sup> When the phallus operates as the primary signifier of sexuality, masculinity is established as superior to female sexuality, which is castrated, “nothing,” marked by an absence, a lack.<sup>48</sup> At the same time, the “proof” of castration seemingly offered by the sight of female bodies produces elaborate psychological defenses against the threat of emasculation in the minds of little boys and is preserved in the unconscious psyches of adult men. Thus, a masculine / phallic sexual economy generates images of “woman” and “feminine sexuality” that allay fears of castrations, rendering all such images merely reflections of male fantasies.

A number of features of the representational practices found in Western cultures can be interpreted in this fashion, including those that constitute

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<sup>47</sup> Much of this work is indebted to Irigaray’s insights concerning the failure of Freud and the psychoanalytic profession in general to adequately explain female subjectivity. See, especially, Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

<sup>48</sup> This aspect of the theory of sexual difference is not Irigaray’s, but that of Jacques Lacan, whose emendations of Freud’s ideas provided feminist cultural theorists with key concepts that they then employed to craft their critique of the psychic structures of patriarchy.

celebrity images. Laura Mulvey does this in her landmark essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in which she discusses how Marlene Dietrich’s carefully fabricated image in the films directed by Joseph von Sternberg in the 1930s “produces the ultimate fetish.”<sup>49</sup> Von Sternberg’s precise orchestration of various cinematic elements — framing, lighting, costume — present isolated parts of Dietrich’s body (e.g., legs, face) or her entire body as perfect objects. On screen, she becomes a phallic substitute, a “phallic woman,” who wards off the association between a female body and the “fact” of her castration. According to this line of reasoning, the spectacular quality of feminine display is no more — and no less — than a masculine defense.

Despite the tremendous impact this critique has had within academic precincts, lesbian commentary on the iconic image of Dietrich has suggested a form of cinematic pleasure available to women. For instance, in both Morocco and Blond Venus the actress appears wearing a top hat and tuxedo, and in the former film she flirts outrageously with a woman in the audience while performing a cabaret act. Such representations have been interpreted as references to the mannish outfits worn by stylish lesbians around the time the film was made (1930) and perhaps to Dietrich’s own penchant for wearing tailored, trousered suits and sexual nonconformity — a bit of lesbian visibility if you like.<sup>50</sup> But Mulvey declares outright that the visual pleasures of which she

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<sup>49</sup> Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in Visual and Other Pleasures (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 22. Freud’s definition of a psycho-sexual fetish is: “a substitute for the woman’s (mother’s) phallus which the little boy once believed in and does not wish to forego ... for if a woman can be castrated his own penis is in danger.” Sigmund Freud, “Fetishism,” in Sexuality and the Psychology of Love (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 215.

<sup>50</sup> Judith Mayne cites this and other iconic lesbian images from the Hollywood archive, as well as the stunning oversight of this aspect of female spectatorship in what have become the classic texts for 1970s and 1980s feminist film theory in “Lesbian Looks: Dorothy Arzner and Female Authorship,” in How Do I Look?

writes are only those that provoke and play to fantasies and desires defined as masculine and heterosexual, because the social identities of all men and women in Western cultures are unconsciously produced and maintained on this basis.<sup>51</sup>

Clearly, there's something wrong with this picture, a problem which Mulvey and others have made efforts to address from within the psychoanalytic paradigm. "[W]hat about the women in the audience?" Mulvey inquires in her "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.'" Or, as E. Ann Kaplan asks, "Is the gaze male?"<sup>52</sup> Although these feminists propose various cinematic techniques that might elicit feminine identifications and desires, in most cases these remain well entrenched in heterosexual notions of gender. This is true even when lesbian sexuality is proposed as a conceivable solution for the enigma of female pleasure in the cinematic setting.<sup>53</sup> For instance, when Mary Ann Doane describes the "convolutions" of a female spectator's conflicting

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Queer Film and Video, ed. Bad Object Choices (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991): 103-135. See also, Patricia White, Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representation (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

<sup>51</sup> I should point out that in her oft-reprinted and cited essay Mulvey limits her observations to classical narrative cinema, that is, Hollywood movies produced during the years when the studio system dominated the industry — the 1930s through the 1950s — although the analysis she works through in this article has been applied by others to a wide range of representational practices and different historical periods.

<sup>52</sup> The full title of Mulvey's essay is "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' Inspired by King Vidor's Duel in the Sun (1946)," also in Visual and Other Pleasures: 29-38. E. Ann Kaplan, "Is the Gaze Male?" in Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera (New York: Methuen, 1983): 23-35. See also Mary Ann Doane, "Woman's Stake: Filming the Female Body," October 17 (Summer 1981): 23-36, and Teresa de Lauretis, "Desire in Narrative," in Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984): 103-157.

<sup>53</sup> For an extended discussion of how feminist film theorists tend to reinstate binary gender in discussions of lesbian desire, see Judith Roof, A Lure of Knowledge: Lesbian Sexuality and Theory (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 37-66.

identifications — with either the female object/image or the subject who has fantasies of possessing the same object/image — she quotes Julia Kristeva's belabored characterization of "what we commonly call female homosexuality": "I am looking, as a man would, for a woman'; or else, 'I submit myself, as if I were a man who thought he was a woman, to a woman who thinks she is a man.'"<sup>54</sup> Similarly, when Mulvey considers the same problem, she discerns an "oscillation between 'passive' femininity and regressive [i.e., narcissistic] 'masculinity.'"<sup>55</sup> This unconscious and irresolute dilemma results in a habitual "trans-sex identification" with the hero, which "does not sit easily and shifts restlessly in its borrowed transvestite clothes."<sup>56</sup> Clearly, it is but a short step from the idea of a woman filmgoer as one occupying "the masculine position"<sup>57</sup> and "who, in buying her ticket, must deny her sex,"<sup>58</sup> to metaphors of dissonance between female gender and sexual desire. This is hardly breaking new analytic ground. What these feminist critics have reproduced is the all-too-familiar gender inversion model of lesbianism, rendered visible by cross-dressing.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Julia Kristeva quoted in Mary Ann Doane, The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 157.

<sup>55</sup> Mulvey, "Afterthoughts," 35.

<sup>56</sup> Mulvey, "Afterthoughts," 33.

<sup>57</sup> Kaplan qualifies the idea of the male gaze, in an attempt to rid her analysis of any essentialist connotations, but is not entirely successful: "The gaze is not necessarily male (literally), but to own and activate the gaze, given our language and the structure of the unconscious, is to be in the 'masculine' position" (30).

<sup>58</sup> Doane, "Woman's Stake," 23.

<sup>59</sup> In A Lure of Knowledge Judith Roof points out the heterosexual bias in the analyses of female subjectivity produced by Mulvey et al., which "tends to conflate biological gender with the activity/passivity stereotypes it finds operant

### **Dress codes**

Perhaps what confuses feminist film theorists is the irrevocable association in the twentieth-century Euro-American cultural lexicon between lesbian visibility and a certain set of stylistic markers generally associated with masculinity — short hair; austere, tailored clothing; accessories like neckties and men's hats, leather jackets, sensible shoes; and such gestural traits as a purposeful stride and robust handshake. Certainly every woman who fits this description is not a lesbian, but it remains difficult to imagine how a lesbian could be visible without at least several of these accouterments or mannerisms. In fact, the telltale correspondence between “mannish” — butch — fashion and lesbian personality constituted an article of faith among the social researchers who attempted to catalogue the distinguishing features of the members of this sexual minority over a century ago. For instance, one of the most prominent, Havelock Ellis, believed that an “actively inverted woman” — a lesbian who courted and seduced other women — exhibits “one fairly essential character: a more or less distinct trace of masculinity,” while her typical partner would be always be “womanly,” if “plain” in appearance compared to a heterosexual woman.<sup>60</sup> Such ideas survive into the present but reworked in ways that transform a hegemonic signifier of stigma into a symbolic rallying point for challenges to normative gender and sexuality.

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in cultural expressions of sexual difference.” (46). Teresa de Lauretis also uses psychoanalytic frameworks to make the argument that lesbian desire is not merely a second-hand version of the heterosexual male variety. See, her “Film and the Visible,” as well as The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

<sup>60</sup> Havelock Ellis, quoted in Esther Newton, “The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman,” in Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past, ed. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey Jr. (New York: Penguin, 1989), 288.

Described as pathology by professionals concerned with classifying deviant sexualities while celebrated by supporters of social legitimation, the butch look is interpreted by both as a self-conscious appropriation of male insignia and therefore different from the quotidian masculinity displayed by men. As such, this particular mode of transvestism might be seen as the antithesis of the masquerade associated with femininity in psychoanalytic discourse. The concept of feminine comportment as a masquerade was first developed by Joan Rivière to explain a distinct type of woman she encountered in her psychoanalytic practice: intellectuals who exhibited the kind of aggression and rationality in their work generally associated with men but were otherwise paragons of femininity. Rivière's conclusion was that feminine masquerade is adopted as an unconscious defense by "women who wish for masculinity [and] may put on a mask of womanliness to avert anxiety and the retribution feared by men."<sup>61</sup> She did not stop there, but continued, "The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the 'masquerade.'" Her reply: "My suggestion is not ... that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing."<sup>62</sup> Rivière conceived her theory of femininity in the late 1920s, when lesbianism and femininity were generally believed to be antithetical. A lesbian participant in a post-sixties political movement who is critical of heterosexual normalcy and the gender stereotypes that go with it might be quite comfortable with her womanliness but want to tear off the mask and flaunt her masculine wishes. Still,

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<sup>61</sup> Joan Rivière, "Womanliness as a Masquerade," in *Formations of Fantasy*, ed. Victor Burgin, James Donald, and Cora Kaplan (London: Methuen, 1986), 35. The article was first published in the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 10 (1929).

<sup>62</sup> Rivière, 38.

when butchness is seen as a political statement the limitations of visibility politics are underscored by what might be described as the femme problem.

In the scenario sketched above, where lesbianism is interpreted as a rejection of femininity, there remains the question of lesbians who don't have masculine wishes. An article by Lisa Walker, titled suggestively "How to Recognize a Lesbian: The Cultural Politics of Looking Like What You Are," presents this dilemma as pivotal: "The glorification of the butch as authentic lesbian is based on her 'blatant' representation of sexual deviance, and this in turn implies ambiguity and confusion around the femme's sexual identity."<sup>63</sup> In other words, when the lesbian in question looks unambiguously like a heterosexual woman, the difference from heterosexual femininity disappears, becomes invisible. Sue-Ellen Case offers a solution to the visibility problems that arise when lesbians do not favor butch style and find femme identity more agreeable by pointing out that "the butch-femme couple inhabit the subject position together.... The two roles never appear as ... discrete."<sup>64</sup> Since femme and butch are interrelated, both can be incorporated in Case's interpretation of this particular lesbian style as a camp send-up of normative gender.

A butch-femme couple shows up gender for what it is — a mythic edifice that supports the power and authority of men at the expense of women — by highlighting the artifice involved in producing any performance of gender. Case maintains that subversive or transgressive meaning is generated by the unsettling butch image, not the femme, which is not a satisfactory resolution if one is not interested in placing the femme in the background. As Bidy Martin

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<sup>63</sup> Lisa M. Walker, "How to Recognize a Lesbian: The Cultural Politics of Looking Like What You Are," *Signs* 18:4 (1993), 882.

<sup>64</sup> Sue-Ellen Case, "Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetic," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michéle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 295.

remarks, “[W]hen [femininity] is not camped up or disavowed, it constitutes a capitulation, a swamp, something maternal, ensnared and ensnaring.”<sup>65</sup> Thus, the quest for lesbian visibility must come to grips with the devaluation or repudiation of women that produces and reproduces our subordinate position in the gender hierarchy, since (pace Monique Wittig) lesbians are also women. When femininity is “played straight,” to borrow Martin’s excellent pun, femme dress and demeanor become inaccessible as a resource for lesbian visibility.<sup>66</sup>

The problem might be solved if hyperbolic femininity is enacted as burlesque — e.g., super red and shiny lips, long polished nails, ultra-high heels, low-cut blouses and tight skirts that accentuate breasts and buttocks, in other words, the look of a drag queen. Such a performance is said to indicate a critical attitude equal to any butch’s. But difficulties also arise with this notion of gender subversion as a visual enterprise, which have been helpfully commented upon by Carol-Anne Tyler. One is that parodic femininity may easily be mistaken for the serious variety. Indeed, she points out, “Sometimes ... one is ironic without having intended it, and sometimes, despite one’s best intentions, no one gets the joke.”<sup>67</sup> Additionally, she remarks that it would be difficult to demonstrate how feminine hyperbole as a political maneuver has challenged men’s ability to incorporate these images in their symbolic repertoire. Think of any “sex symbol,” Monroe or Madonna.

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<sup>65</sup> Biddy Martin, “Sexualities without Gender and Other Queer Utopias,” *Diacritics* 24:2-3 (Summer/Fall 1994), 105.

<sup>66</sup> Martin uses this phrase as the title of her collected essays, *Femininity Played Straight: The Significance of Being Lesbian* (New York: Routledge, 1996), which includes “Sexualities without Gender.”

<sup>67</sup> Carol-Anne Tyler, “Boys Will Be Girls,” *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), 54.

Tyler considers a further paradox produced by this kind of mimicry and Rivière's concept of masquerade — both playful and straight renditions of femininity — which bears directly on the class and racial dimensions of lesbian visibility, and of lesbian celebrity as well. She points out that feminine mimicry is exemplified by female impersonators (her prototype is Dolly Parton, who she calls a "female female impersonator") whose feminine drag draws attention to itself through an excessive display of "bad taste" — "too frilly or flashy"<sup>68</sup> — which is associated with ethnic or lower-class, white women. The critical or subversive meaning that may be attributed to an "overdressed" feminine outfit is therefore measured by its distance from "real" femininity, symbolized by white, Anglo, middle-class styles that attract little notice precisely because they signify "good taste." Of course, the idea of bad versus good taste implies a moral judgment, and there's no mistaking whose morality is deemed worthy and whose is not, an appraisal of value that is left unchallenged whenever displays of femininity are deemed in bad taste, no matter how intentionally "bad" they may be. Thus, ironic femininity may easily miss its target — heterosexual gender ideology — and instead make fun of women who do not look like proper ladies, do not embody "genuine femininity."<sup>69</sup>

In contrast, butch style is already marked as deviant because worn by an inappropriately gendered person, but its classic forms are also coded according to class status: either upper-class men's wear — finely tailored suits, in subtle patterns and colors, made from expensive fabrics, and maybe a diamond tie clip and gold cuff links to complete the ensemble — or working-class fashions like

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<sup>68</sup> Carol-Anne Tyler, "The Feminine Look," in *Theory between the Disciplines: Authority/Vision/Politics*, ed. Martin Kreiswirth and Mark A. Cheetham (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 209.

<sup>69</sup> Tyler, "The Feminine Look," 202.

tee shirts, jeans, and motorcycle jackets: in other words, Fred Astaire or James Dean. And both are indelibly inscribed with cultural codes of white masculinity. That is not to say that men with cultural identities other than white surrender these when they don such apparel. But it does seem to be the case that the rare representation of a black lesbian in the mass media is automatically assigned an aggressive butch persona almost indistinguishable from a stereotypically dangerous black man, who deserves obliteration. To take an example from popular culture: in the spate of movies featuring likable lesbian killers released in the past decade none swaggers and curses as much nor incites such extreme violence as the bank robber played by Queen Latifah in Set It Off, who is dispatched by a barrage of gunfire à la Bonnie and Clyde when the police finally catch up with her. None of the white lesbian murderers in comparable films provoke such sadistic and bloody punishment, not Gina Gershon in Bound (gets the girl and the money), Sharon Stone in Basic Instinct (last seen in bed with the hero, Michael Douglas), or Kate Winslet and Melanie Lynskey in Heavenly Creatures (they receive five-year prison sentences).

True, none of these actors are lesbian celebrities; they just play lesbian characters. Yet the same treatment applies when it comes to entertainers who play themselves, so to speak. Jackie Goldsby recalls how the mere hint of lesbianism torpedoed the career of Vanessa Williams and relates this to racial differences in representations of lesbian sexuality. Around the same time that Penthouse published pornographic photographs of Williams in staged lesbian sex scenes during her reign as Miss America in the mid-1980s, Madonna was capitalizing on lesbian innuendo in her scripted and impromptu performances. During an appearance on Late Night with David Letterman Madonna and Sandra Bernhard teased the host and his audience with hints of a lesbian affair, and Madonna's music video for "Justify My Love" included vignettes of the

singer engaged in sex play with a woman. "Why is it," Goldsby asks, "that Williams paid such a high price for striking her poses, and that Madonna, appropriating the practices of marginal cultures in her stage act, is rewarded so generously?"<sup>70</sup> It may be tempting to explain the different meanings of visibility for Williams during her Miss America reign and Madonna during her transgressive period as evidence of the moral categories applied to women — good-girl/bad-girl. Williams tripped up when her good-girl image was challenged by photographs that indicated this was a sham. Madonna's continued to increase her popularity and her income by exploiting the bad-girl image she had cultivated from day one. However, this implies that race has nothing whatever to do with the difference between the two women and their predicaments, but the more convincing hypothesis is that it has a great deal to do with it.

Williams had to be purer than pure in order to be awarded the supreme prize of ideal femininity, American-style, firmly anchored by white bourgeois cultural standards. Indeed, in the moral rhetoric of racial categorization outlined by Richard Dyer, "white" connotes purity, innocence, chastity, peace, modesty, honesty, and femininity. Although white is not a skin color (no skin tone is actually white), it is symbolically entangled with domination, a system of demarcation between "us" and "them," good and bad.<sup>71</sup> Williams's double provocation — dark complexion and lesbianism — threatened the entire edifice. Madonna could capitalize on the same naughtiness that tainted Miss America — remember, both women were play-acting lesbianism — precisely because

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<sup>70</sup> Jackie Goldsby, "Queen for 307 Days: Looking B[l]ack at Vanessa Williams and the Sex Wars," in Sisters, Sexperts, Queers: Beyond the Lesbian Nation, ed. Arlene Stein (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 124.

<sup>71</sup> Richard Dyer, White (London: Routledge, 1997), 41-81.

whiteness guaranteed her social superiority, even if she mocked its values. Visibility may be the common denominator in both instances, but the comparison indicates emphatically that this term cannot be applied in any universal sense. Specifically, it cannot be understood without considering how race and sexuality are articulated together in U.S. culture. It is no coincidence that, to date, lesbian visibility and, concomitantly, lesbian celebrity, has been almost exclusively a middle-class, white preserve.

### **New looks**

Because celebrity is a representational, reproductive enterprise constituted through images, the emergence of lesbian celebrities represents the amalgamation of two previously incompatible categories: female celebrity, which involves an ability to project some form of consummate femininity, and identifiable lesbianism, indicated by some kind of display of nonconformity to gender norms by means of stylistic markers associated with masculinity. Thus, lesbian celebrity requires a superimposition of these two images, much like photographic negatives of two faces overlaid to yield a composite portrait. Productive confusion of expectations concerning sexuality and gender may occur in the process, but if more negatives are added the blurry picture becomes unreadable. In other words, the frame can only accommodate one departure from the standard codes of female celebrity — young, white, thin, and preferably blond and maybe lesbian, too.

An exemplar of the basic configuration is popular musician k.d. lang, who appeared as the cover girl for New York magazine's "Lesbian Chic" issue in 1993, was featured in Vanity Fair a few months later, and served as a model and

spokesperson for M.A.C. cosmetics in 1996.<sup>72</sup> Of all these pictures of lang, the photographs by Herb Ritts illustrating the Vanity Fair article seem to rely most upon the old codes of lesbian visibility — or at least use gender inversion as a reference point. The cover and the opening spread of the lang profile show the singer wearing a pin-striped suit, involved in a soft-core shaving fantasy, while supermodel Cindy Crawford plays barber, dressed in a skimpy leotard and high-heeled boots. These photos announce themselves immediately as a camp take-off on classic butch-femme iconography, because they are rendered tongue-in-cheek by the exaggerated poses of the two major celebrities.

In contrast, the article suggests that lang's gender ambiguity is an indication of her sexual nature, a serious matter and not just an amusing past-time. Readers are informed that "[s]he is as different from a female icon like Dolly Parton as if she were another species."<sup>73</sup> Ritts's photos, on the other hand, suggest that the only difference between lang and Parton is the gender each chooses to impersonate. This tension between image and text underscores how lesbian visibility may be conscripted for two incompatible ideas: a lesbian proclaims herself by using the vocabulary of normative gender, or a lesbian's mannish guise makes a mockery of normative gender. On the basis of this particular example, I'd say neither interpretation is definitive, as if the phenomenon of lesbian celebrity provokes confusion and contradiction — which at first may seem a dubious outcome but is surely an improvement on narrow, rigid, immobilizing stereotypes.

It is instructive, then, to compare the treatment of lang in Vanity Fair with her portrait on the New York cover. Here lang is presented in an earnest but

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<sup>72</sup> Dennis Rodman was the other celebrity rep employed by M.A.C.

<sup>73</sup> Leslie Bennetts, "k.d. lang Cuts It Close," Vanity Fair 56:8 (August 1993), 98; emphasis added.

humorless portrait, where she looks directly at the photographer, and thus at the reader, as if to underline "The Bold, Brave New World of Gay Women" announced in the accompanying headline. Yet another aspect of lang is presented in the M.A.C. ads, which are fairly standard glamour-girl fare, despite an understated but explicit reference to her lesbian identity — the imprint of a woman's kiss signified by lipstick on her cheek. Again, the disparate imagery and associations that they invoke suggests a departure from earlier one-dimensional stereotypes. However, the common denominator in all these images — as well as those of numerous other lesbians illustrating the New York article and the concurrent story in Newsweek — is that they are notable for their glamour.<sup>74</sup> Gone are the L.L. Bean outfits, work boots, and make-up free faces associated with a lesbian-feminist righteousness and high-minded disregard for male approval.

These are members of a new generation characterized as "lifestyle lesbians" by the mainstream press, as well as by more serious commentators. If understated mannish garments and bearing could be said to constitute lesbian visibility in the past, the 1990s witnessed the arrival of a lesbian style that is decidedly more spectacular and, as a result, feminized if not always conventionally feminine — flashy but not necessarily frilly. Lifestyle lesbians revel in shopping and mastering the codes of seduction, although their objects of desire are not men but women, and they may assume butch or femme aspects, or a pastiche of both. In her study of this phenomenon, Arlene Stein observes that these younger lesbians may interpret their concern with appearances as a political criticism of cultural norms that equate image and identity — both norms that dictate acceptable female attire and behavior and lesbian-feminist,

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<sup>74</sup> Jeanne Russell Kasindorf, "Lesbian Chic: The Bold, Brave New World of Gay Women," New York 26:19 (May 10, 1993): 30-37.

countercultural alternatives that implicitly ratify the same notion of correspondence.<sup>75</sup> According to the protocol adopted by the many members of the older generation of lesbian-feminists, femme style, in particular, signals a retreat from radical political engagement. Challenging this notion, Stein reports that young, urban lesbians disagree with the reductive notion that apparel reflects political consciousness and justify their miniskirts, et cetera as an enactment of personal choice, an assertion of personal freedom in the face of cultural domination. The problem with this formulation for Stein is that “style itself is an insufficient basis for a lesbian politic” that will convincingly challenge the various ways in which lesbians are defined and treated as pariahs.<sup>76</sup> Without dismissing such practices out of hand, she nevertheless expresses a concern with lesbian practices concerned mainly with consumption — shopping and showing off the goods thus acquired — that makes lesbian style a function of the marketplace, weakening any claims to radicality.

A more worrisome danger, which Stein hints at and other analysts have dealt with in greater detail, is that lesbian style may readily be appropriated by what Danae Clark calls “commodity lesbianism.”<sup>77</sup> Clark uses this phrase to characterize the growing number of lesbian images in commercial contexts, which she attributes to the slow awakening of advertising account executives to the potential riches to be mined in gay and lesbian niche markets. The most prevalent method developed for these purposes is an advertising technique that

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<sup>75</sup> Arlene Stein, “All Dressed Up but No Place to Go? Style Wars and the New Lesbianism,” *Out/Look* 1:4 (Winter 1989): 34-42.

<sup>76</sup> Stein, 41.

<sup>77</sup> Danae Clark, “Commodity Lesbianism,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993): 186-201.

employs lesbian-coded imagery — butchy models and poses, for instance — but never making unambiguous references to lesbianism, as in the k.d. lang M.A.C. ad. This strategy, dubbed “gay window” advertising by those who invented it, “consciously disavows any clean-cut connection to lesbianism for fear of offending or losing potential customers. At the same time, an appropriation of lesbian styles or appeal to lesbian desires can also assure a lesbian market.”<sup>78</sup> In other words, fashion-conscious lesbian consumers may easily become handmaidens of capitalist exploitation and alienation. Yet, as Clark points out, resistance to the regimentation of social life that occurs in many self-fashioning practices may also provoke political debates about forms and contents of lesbian identity.

Taking this suggestion a step further, we might question if economic rationality — the mode of social action that characterizes money exchange and the workings of capitalist markets — always trumps cultural meanings and practices. Or, to put this another way, what if, as Arjun Appadurai contends, consumer “demand is the economic expression of a political logic of consumption”?<sup>79</sup> Implied in this question is an inversion of a central tenet of Marxist political economy, which maintains that modes of production determines forms of cultural reproduction, including consumer practices, at least “in the last instance.” Not so, says Chandra Mukerji, who takes issue with both the Marxist explanation of the triumph of materialist culture in the West as an outcome of

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<sup>78</sup> Clark, 196. See also, Linda Dittmar, “The Straight Goods: Lesbian Chic and Identity Capital on a Not-So-Queer Planet,” in The Passionate Camera: Photography and Bodies of Desire, ed. Deborah Bright (London: Routledge, 1998): 319-339.

<sup>79</sup> Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value,” in The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 31.

class struggles over control of productive forces and Weber's theory that Western capitalism arose as a logical outgrowth of ascetic Protestantism. Indeed, Mukerji's research indicates that the economic expansion that occurred in early modern Europe can be attributed to a growing demand for luxury goods — fashionable clothing most significantly — which motivated technical and entrepreneurial innovations in trade, manufacturing, and communication.<sup>80</sup>

By embarking upon this digression into capitalism's infancy in early modern Europe, with its implications for subsequent global political-economic relations, I may seem to have strayed a great distance from the micropolitics involved in late-twentieth-century U.S. lesbian style, hardly a blip on the radar screens of most social theorists. Even so, these observations may shed light on the contradiction noted by Clark and Stein, as well as pose more precisely a nagging question concerning lesbian celebrity. That is, how can an eminently economic enterprise such as the marketing of style, and the related marketing of celebrity images, possibly provide a foundation for lesbian politics when both rely upon the capitalist traffic in fetishized commodities, whether items of apparel or objects of fascination?

Consider, however, that commodities are objectifications of social statuses — organized in terms of such categories as gender, ethnicity, age, and economic class, but also groupings like professions and religions.<sup>81</sup> Consumer practices reaffirm these categories and reproduce their cultural significance, engaging material objects in rituals of everyday life in a manner that invokes their taken-

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<sup>80</sup> Chandra Mukerji, From Graven Images: Patterns of Modern Materialism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

<sup>81</sup> Marshall Sahlins makes this point eloquently and convincingly in his analysis of the modern Western fashion system, "La Pensée Bourgeois: Western Society as Culture," in Culture and Practical Reason (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 166-205.

for-granted meanings.<sup>82</sup> Should a commodity's acquisition and use be consciously undertaken, it may assume political significance, whether a bid for upward mobility, as in cases where a particular commodity is associated with higher social status, or in an attempt to redefine prevailing cultural arrangements. The world of goods is an array of signs that result from but also provide resources for power plays within a cultural matrix. Since the conventional meanings within that matrix must be reproduced in practice or become extinct, a cultural system is always vulnerable to threats posed by new or renovated social categories that generate new or renovated objectifications. Is there any difference between popular culture and consumer culture? Not in Western capitalist advanced industrial societies, but that doesn't mean that economic imperatives automatically prevail, that "commodity lesbianism" or "lifestyle lesbians" will eliminate all radical sexual practices. What it does mean is that the previous discussion of popular culture as an uncertain terrain, where adverse ideologies and members of social groups vie for cultural authority, applies to consumer culture as well.

### **Bodies of knowledge**

The struggle continues, or does it? A truce was negotiated in the 1990s in at least one influential sector of lesbian culture — the two mass circulation gay and lesbian magazines in the U.S., the Advocate and Out. Traditionally the lesbian and gay press has acted as a cultural watchdog guarding against homophobic disinformation and misrepresentation by the mass media, and

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<sup>82</sup> Perhaps the most mundane but nevertheless exemplary instances of this process are the consumer practices concerned with eating rituals: customary and proscribed foods, the organization of menus and mealtime schedules, etc. Of course, styles of adornment, and clothing in particular, also classify consumers according to culturally specific regimes that bespeak social locations and relations.

these magazines are no different. But this hasn't prevented them from covering entertainment celebrities and the industries that produce and support their careers with great gusto. Indeed, during the 1990s, the attention to Hollywood, commercial television, Broadway, and other major show business sites increased to the point that most issues of both magazines contained copious reportage on the doings of various stars, along with an incessant flow of information about new productions and awards, reviews, gossip, and the like, with a star's face on the cover of just about every issue.

Although the celebratory messages carried by these magazines would seem at odds with their critical function, they hit upon the ideal terms for settling the conflict — visibility politics. Not only do editors and critics writing for these gay and lesbian publications periodically offer visibility as a political justification for indulging in the guilty pleasures offered by mass entertainment, they also seek out examples in mainstream culture that affirm its progressive import. For instance, an editor at Out magazine reflects,

By midyear [1995], it was impossible to turn on a TV or go to a local cineplex without encountering a plethora of queer-themed characters, story lines and music ... there were more positive, more real images of gay men and lesbians than ever before.

As with anything in life, change requires a series of slow, successive baby steps made by a collective of individuals. If Hollywood sets trends and inspires people to take action they normally wouldn't take ... then perhaps we're on to something here.<sup>83</sup>

The reasoning applied here hinges on a belief in the benefits that accrue from any representation of "real" lesbians or gay men in the media.

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<sup>83</sup> Kevin Koffler, "Hooray for Hollywood," Out, March 1996, 16.

Presumably, celebrities also qualify, since one aspect of their appeal is that they provide a guarantee of reality — these are not only representations but real people, who lead real lives off-camera. It comes as no surprise, really, that images of lesbian and gay celebrities have been given pride of place on the covers of glossy gay/lesbian magazines. As a result, images of real lesbian celebrities are accorded the same political influence as documentary representations of non-celebrities. Maybe more influence, as this quote by Out author Michael Goff indicates:

When we look to openly gay public figures, we're looking for a public suggestion of our lives, which can be so hidden. We may also be looking for some help in repairing the damage the closet has done, as well as an appropriate target for our fantasies. But most important, openly gay people with a high profile give us the power to teach America about us. Although the battle for gays in the military was a great motivator, k.d. lang and David Geffen, for example, have done as much simply by incorporating their personal lives into their public ones. It allows everyone who reads Time magazine to "know" someone gay, even if a gay person like you or me is not working in the next cubicle.<sup>84</sup>

This interpretation of lang or Geffen as imaginary friends who will accelerate the extension of civil rights to all lesbians or gay men echoes a familiar refrain from coming-out manuals, but it is difficult to sustain. Even though a star's image depends on her being perceived as a real individual, what we actually see is a public persona whose private self is only revealed to us via the ersatz intimacy of talk show interviews and personality profiles that are the bread and butter of the celebrity set. Thanks to such displays, performers become "personalities"

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<sup>84</sup> Michael Goff, "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous," Out, December 1995-January 1996, 16.

elevated to stardom and rewarded for their achievements with fame and fortune.

Contrary to Goff's political rationale for interest in the famous, perhaps what recommends celebrities as exemplars is that they are not identical to most of our neighbors, friends, or loved ones. Advocates of visibility may find this a heretical thought, and so they should, but given the significance of popular culture for lesbian politics, a fair assessment of the social relations of celebrity seems in order. However, consolation for those looking for a political hook that justifies a sustained focus on celebrities in the gay and lesbian press can be found in an additional celebrity effect. If the problem that prevents the legitimation of lesbians is our perceived threat to social order, what could be a better corrective than lesbians who are available only as idealized figures and aren't likely to muddy the waters of projected fantasies by exhibiting their less-than-perfect selves? The problem with this outcome is that the visibility of "ordinary" lesbians, which is supposed to increase as the result of growing numbers of "out" stars becomes even more elusive. Visibility politics centered on the entertainment industry recedes as a viable strategy.

Although what amounts to an ever-deepening disjunction between lesbians celebrities and everyday lesbian lives dislodges a cornerstone of visibility politics, there are additional advantages that may follow from this schism. If lesbian stars represent the incorporation of lesbians into already existing cultural configurations — including moral schema — then we can learn from them the limits of such integration. In other words, high-visibility lesbians like Melissa Etheridge and k.d. lang, Ellen DeGeneres and Anne Heche, Chastity Bono and Candace Gingrich provide a measure of the acquiescence to gender and sexual norms required for recognition and inclusion to occur peaceably. But they also remind us that the bulwarks of normative culture are not inviolable,

since their visibility as lesbians has resulted from hard-won political battles. Too often, the induction of lesbians into the halls of fame is interpreted as the culmination of these struggles. I am suggesting that it should be seen instead as an accommodation, a negotiated compromise in the struggle over definitions of personhood.

Meanwhile, lesbian identities and practices will continue to take forms not yet permissible or, perhaps, even imaginable within a culture defined as fundamentally heterosexual. Thus, the group of "invisible" lesbians, always a loose configuration defined according to contingent and local criteria, continues to adopt and adapt the definitions embodied by visible lesbians in selective ways — just as the significance of sexuality, gender, and fame changes over time and across cultures. As does visibility.

## 2 Celestial configurations: aspects of lesbian stardom

In her biography of Radclyffe Hall, her lover of twenty-eight years, Una Troubridge, recalls a momentous conversation:

John [the name Hall used among friends] came to me one day with unusual gravity and asked for my decision in a serious matter: she had long wanted to write a book on sexual inversion, a novel that would be accessible to the general public who did not have access to technical treatises. At one time she had thought of making it a 'period' book, built round an actual personality of the early nineteenth century. But her instinct had told her that in any case she must postpone such a book until her name was made; until her unusual theme would get a hearing as being the work of an established author.

It was her absolute conviction that such a book could only be written by a sexual invert, who alone could be qualified by personal knowledge and experience to speak on behalf of a misunderstood and misjudged minority. It was with this conviction that she came to me, telling me that in her view the time was ripe, and that although the publication of such a book might mean the shipwreck of her whole career, she was fully prepared to make any sacrifice except — the sacrifice of my peace of mind.... I am glad to remember that my reply was made without so much as an instant's hesitation.... I was sick to death of ambiguities, and only wished to be known for what I was and to dwell with her in the palace of truth.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Una Troubridge, The Life and Death of Radclyffe Hall (London: Hammond and Hammond, 1961), 81-82; quoted in Michael Baker, Our Three Selves: The Life of Radclyffe Hall (New York: William Morrow, 1985), 188-89.

With Una's permission granted, The Well of Loneliness was written and published in 1928. And Hall's career was anything but shipwrecked, although the almost immediate prosecution under Britain's Obscene Publications Act of 1857 of booksellers in possession of copies of the novel, followed by an unsuccessful appeal of the guilty verdict, disappointed and angered her. Nor was the critical reception all she had wished for. Unlike the favorable critical responses her previous novels had received, reviewers of The Well refrained from praising the book's literary qualities while, in a number of cases, affirming its call for greater understanding and tolerance of lesbians.<sup>2</sup> Instead, the book reaped Hall other rewards. It became a colossal bestseller, despite the proscription of its publication in Britain until 1949; 200,000 copies were sold by the end of 1933 and over 500,000 copies prior to publication of the first British paperback edition in 1968. Her next novel, published in 1932, sold 9,000 copies in its first two weeks despite bad reviews, and earlier books by Hall reissued in the wake of The Well's success garnered hefty additional sales.<sup>3</sup> Hall could have lived comfortably without the income she received for her writing, due to the good-sized fortune she had inherited from her grandfather, but she still enjoyed the financial profits earned from her work. This is confirmed by a note she wrote to her agent Audrey Heath: "Do you remember the time when no publisher wanted John Hall, and

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<sup>2</sup> Hall's second novel, The Unlit Lamp (1924), received good reviews and gained Hall admittance into the ranks of the British literary elite. Her fourth, Adam's Breed (1926), received both the prestigious Prix Femina and James Tate Black Prize for best literary novel of the year in 1926 and sold well. Hall's previous novels also included The Forge (1924) and A Saturday Life (1925).

<sup>3</sup> Sales figures are from Baker (246 passim), and Jeffrey Weeks, Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present (London: Quartet Books, 1977), 111. Baker notes that publisher Jonathan Cape almost rejected The Well due to the "taboo subject matter" but accepted it because he saw opportunity for profit, calling it "a good piece of publishing property" (204).

now they're all at each other's throats — oh, well, as long as we get the dollars!!!"<sup>4</sup>

In addition, Hall became a major public figure as the result of the scandal created by those who advocated censoring The Well: "Every paper displayed photographs of John and contained descriptions of her "arresting" appearance and personality. The Yorkshire Post showed her in jacket and tie, a cigarette clamped raffishly between the teeth, looking every inch the smooth young man-about-town. The Manchester Despatch dubbed her 'the most easily-recognised artistic celebrity in London.'"<sup>5</sup> This image was something that Hall had long cultivated. From 1920 onward, she and Troubridge regularly appeared at social events in London wearing unconventional and distinctly unfeminine garb — Troubridge with her tortoise shell monocle and Hall in head-to-toe man-tailored outfits (although no trousers until the 1930s), as well as various accouterments obtained from a London theatrical costume shop. In her negotiations with publishers of The Well, she sidestepped her agent to oversee personally details of production and promotion, at one point insisting that particular photographs be used to publicize the American edition.

Although she drew upon her own experiences and used her lesbian friends as prototypes for characters in The Well, the novel's protagonist Stephen Gordon was not a surrogate for Radclyffe Hall.<sup>6</sup> Stephen was plagued by

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<sup>4</sup> Baker, 253.

<sup>5</sup> Baker, 225.

<sup>6</sup> In Noël Coward and Radclyffe Hall: Kindred Spirits (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), Terry Castle writes: "[S]ome of the matchups in The Well are close enough to suggest the roman à clef. Valérie Seymour, the sophisticated lesbian hostess who takes Stephen under her wing in Paris after Stephen leaves home, is patently modeled on the charismatic Natalie Barney, whose salon on the Rue Jacob was a haven for lesbian writers and artists between the wars. Along with her lover, the painter Romaine Brooks, Barney became one of Hall's

feelings of inadequacy and injury attributed to what she understood as her aberrant sexuality; the novel concludes with her resignation to the outcast status of a female invert. Hall, in contrast, actively courted the opportunity to make lesbianism a topic of public debate and further her own reputation as a writer. As a result of the considerable publicity she received, Hall became widely recognized: "Fans mobbed John for her autograph" when she and Una attended an opening night at the theater shortly after the moral crusade against the novel was launched in the conservative press, and "two women admirers stepped forward from the waiting crowd and kissed her hand" as she left the courtroom after the London appeal. She also received thousands of letters from supporters during and after the court case.<sup>7</sup> All told, Hall's refusal to dissemble or retreat from the public spotlight recommends her nomination as the first self-styled lesbian celebrity.

### **Distinguishing features**

Of course, Radclyffe Hall was not the first famous lesbian, an honor that without question belongs to Sappho, the Lesbian without whom none of us would be lesbians. Nevertheless, that someone could become celebrated as the author of a popular novel featuring a lesbian hero, or could imagine such a character and narrative in the first place, required a set of cultural conditions that had taken shape only in modern times — that is, since the sixteenth century and accelerated during the nineteenth. In addition to the novel form itself, which is the expressive form of the modern imagination, the idea of a type of person who

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and Troubridge's good friends in the 1920s. Other characters, especially those who appear in the Paris chapters, resemble homosexual men and women Hall knew on both sides of the channel in the postwar years — Mimi Franchetti, Adrien Mirtil, Violette Murat, Ida Rubenstein, and Lily de Gramont, the Duchesse de Clermont-Tonnerre" (39).

<sup>7</sup> Baker, 232-248.

could be classified as a lesbian, or some such category that indicated a distinct kind of homosexual woman (Hall preferred the term “invert”), had to be formulated and the qualifications for inclusion specified in order for the protagonist and her story to convey any meaning whatsoever.

It is well known that Hall employed the theories and terminology of late-nineteenth-century sexologists to delineate her main character in The Well of Loneliness. Her primary debt in this regard was to Havelock Ellis, who wrote a preface to the novel defending its publication, but she was also familiar with the taxonomies of sexual perversions compiled by Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Karl Heinrich Ulrichs. She refers to both in The Well, having Stephen’s father read their work in order to comprehend his daughter’s odd behavior. By uncritically citing these early commentators on homosexuality, she seems to confirm Michel Foucault’s postulate concerning the invention of homosexual identity in the late nineteenth century, attributable to a proliferation of scientific attention to sex as a newfound category of knowledge.<sup>8</sup>

Foucault’s assertion that this historical moment produced “a new specification of [homosexual] individuals” remains a disputed question. Other historical researchers have proposed that the theories developed by members of the new professions concerned with sexuality — sexologists, psychologists, psychoanalysts — should not be given credit for inventing what became lesbian and gay identities, since these new categories reflected changes in social-sexual relations in Anglo-American culture that were already underway. On one side of

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<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 42-43. Another proponent of this thesis is Jeffrey Weeks, who has written a number of articles and books that employ this perspective, including Coming Out, Sexuality and Its Discontents: Meaning, Myths and Modern Sexualities (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), and Against Nature: Essays on History, Sexuality, and Identity (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1991).

this debate, Lillian Faderman asserts the priority of professional discourse and takes it a step further. According to Faderman, the invention of a category of lesbian persons determined not only new sexual identities but also enabled women who loved other women to engage in sexual acts that they would have previously abjured: “[T]here was no such thing as a ‘lesbian’ as the twentieth century recognizes the term; it was only the rare woman who behaved immorally, who was thought to live far outside the pale of decent womanhood.”<sup>9</sup> But others, like Emma Donoghue and Terry Castle, take issue with this version of events. “What the advocates of the ‘no lesbians before 1900’ theory forget,” Castle writes, “is that there are myriad ways of discovering one’s desire,” and she goes on to list plentiful examples from European literature published before 1900 with lesbian themes and characters, beginning with Juvenal’s Satires.<sup>10</sup>

In his extensive compilation of historical documents dealing with homosexuality in the United States, Jonathan Katz, too, presents abundant evidence of lesbian relationships well before the mid-nineteenth century, including several that refer to lesbianism among white women colonizers and their descendants in the colonial period, as well as lesbian practices observed by missionaries in Native American cultures as early as the seventeenth century.<sup>11</sup> Taking this kind of material into account, George Chauncey Jr. cautions us to not

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<sup>9</sup> Lillian Faderman, Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in the Twentieth Century (New York: Penguin, 1991), 2.

<sup>10</sup> Terry Castle, The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 9. For a similar rebuttal, although with a different historical framework, see also, Emma Donoghue, Passions between Women: British Lesbian Culture: 1668-1801 (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Katz, Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A. (New York: Harper Colophon, 1976).

place too much emphasis on professional institutions and discourses. However, what the nineteenth- and twentieth-century medical literature does indicate, he allows, are "the parameters of the acceptable."<sup>12</sup> And, in a similar vein, Martha Vicinus has pointed out that modern lesbian identity has taken a number of different forms, of which the late-nineteenth-century sexologists' influential theory — that lesbianism is as an innate condition of gender inversion, a masculine soul inhabiting a female body — is only one. By the early twentieth century, she observes, several other modes of lesbian desire and identity were widely recognized and practiced, including but not limited to flamboyant hedonists, like the expatriate American heiress Natalie Barney; middle-class, college educated women who forged "romantic friendships," many living together as couples; and peasant or working-class "passing women."<sup>13</sup>

Yet, none of these configurations satisfied Hall's requirements for a hero who would focus attention on the unjust exclusion of lesbians from respectable society — as Vicinus says, they were "either too secretive or too ostentatious" to suit Hall's agenda.<sup>14</sup> Still, there is little doubt that Hall subscribed sincerely to the beliefs about the biological basis for lesbian desires and identity espoused in The Well. By aligning herself with the sexologists, Hall joined well known advocates for removing the social (and in the case of men, legal) stigma of homosexuality, such as Magnus Hirschfeld in Germany, who employed a scientific perspective to

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<sup>12</sup> George Chauncey Jr., "From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality: Medicine and the Changing Conceptualization of Female Deviance," Salmagundi 58/59 (Fall 1982/Winter 1983), 116.

<sup>13</sup> Martha Vicinus, "'They Wonder to Which Sex I Belong': The Historical Roots of Lesbian Identity," in The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993): 432-452.

<sup>14</sup> Vicinus, 445.

argue for sexual reform. Moreover, a crucial dimension of the scientific authority invoked to prove the innate and thus natural basis for homosexuality was its reliance on the empiricist theory of truth prevalent at the time — that is, the belief that reliable knowledge about reality can be obtained only from observable phenomena — which led them to concentrate on identifying lesbians by means of physical traits and behavioral patterns.

For instance, Ellis asserted that among the recognizable characteristics exhibited by lesbians are firm muscles and, in many cases, a “masculine type of larynx,” as well as traits that might be understood as cultural but, he believed, derived from an organic basis, such as a fondness for cigars, dislike of needlework, and proficiency in athletics.<sup>15</sup> Another example is the research conducted in the 1930s by the Committee for the Study of Sex Variants in New York City, which employed a variety of representational techniques, including photographs and x-rays of the unclothed bodies of their lesbian subjects, as well as drawings of their breasts and genitals, to establish visible criteria that could be used to distinguish lesbians from so-called “normal” heterosexual women. (These researchers also collected additional data they thought would allow them to ascertain and predict homosexual tendencies, such as measures of hormonal levels and psychological tests that were designed to be analyzed using statistical techniques.)<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Havelock Ellis, Studies in the Psychology of Sex: Sexual Inversion, vol. 1, pt. 4 (New York: Random House, 1936), 250-255.

<sup>16</sup> For extensive information about and analysis of the work of the Committee for the Study of Sex Variants, see Jennifer Terry, “Lesbians under the Medical Gaze: Scientists Search for Remarkable Differences,” Journal of Sex Research 27:3 (August 1990): 317-340. The fact that this professional journal devoted two special issues to articles critical of the medical discourses on sexuality and gender is a good indication of the changes that have occurred as the result of challenges from lesbian, gay, and feminist activists and scholars.

Hall paid homage to the professional experts on sexuality in the form of a female character who exhibited congenital physiological and psychological deviance from what was believed to be normal, also innate, femininity. As Mandy Merck points out, the methods used to delineate the character of Stephen Gordon in The Well echo those outlined above: "Hall's lesbian heroine is born a 'narrow-hipped, wide-shouldered' baby ... [and] throughout the novel she is subjected to the frequent, invariably productive, scrutiny of others as well as herself."<sup>17</sup> And in erecting her "palace of truth" on grounds delimited by surveyors of pathological sexualities, Hall may have conferred credibility on one of the most insidious lesbian stereotypes: the miserable pariah, recognizable by her outward demeanor.

At least this is the retrospective judgment frequently leveled at her novel by more recent generations of lesbians, beginning with those who made common cause with other groups struggling not for social acceptance but for revolutionary social change in the 1960s.<sup>18</sup> Hall's literary effort to generate visibility for lesbians, as well as supply an affirmative argument for lesbian difference, it seems fair to say, received high marks for visibility but failed to

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<sup>17</sup> Mandy Merck, "Transforming the Suit: A Century of Lesbian Self-Portraits," in Perversions: Deviant Readings (New York: Routledge, 1993), 87.

<sup>18</sup> E.g., in The Safe Sea of Women: Lesbian Fiction, 1969-1989 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990) Bonnie Zimmerman comments, "Valerie [Seymour] offers a welcome relief from the tortured self-hatred of the hero, Stephen Gordon, that wounded male soul trapped in a woman's body. It is ironic that Hall, a writer of modest talents compared to her illustrious contemporaries [Djuna Barnes, Collette, Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein et al.], should have created the novel and hero that have had the most profound and lasting influence on modern-day notions of lesbians" (7).

Maybe because I am of the same generation as Zimmerman, I too found The Well a depressing read and for many years dismissed it as irrelevant to contemporary lesbian issues. More recently, though, I find myself repeatedly returning to the novel to satisfy a variety of interests, including my curiosity about the discrepancies between Hall's public persona and that assigned to her fictional ideal of a lesbian self.

effect significant reforms in public opinion. However, another paradigm of modern lesbianism was enacted by Hall herself: artistic, eccentric, theatrical.<sup>19</sup> In her study of Hall's friendship with gay composer and writer Noël Coward, Castle remarks, "[W]e need to remember how central a role Hall the public figure played in creating the classic image of the 1920s lesbian. Other women might cut their hair or wear ties — the painter Gluck did, Sylvia Townsend Warner's lover Valentine Ackland did — but it was Hall who became notorious for it, whose picture appeared in popular weeklies, whose personal style became preeminently identified with 'lesbian' style."<sup>20</sup> Castle even conjectures that photographs and sketches of Hall reproduced in the press in the mid-1920s may have served as the prototype for the New Yorker's Eustace Tilley, the caricature of a sophisticated gentleman in top hat and monocle who appeared on the magazine's cover in 1925 and remained its mascot thereafter.<sup>21</sup>

Like other mannish lesbians of her day, Hall appropriated the dandy style adopted by urbane men in early nineteenth-century Britain and France. The originator of this fashion, George Byran (Beau) Brummell, had defined its basic tenets of extreme understatement and perfect tailoring aimed at an impression of unaffected superiority — what Elizabeth Wilson calls "a performance of

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<sup>19</sup> It may well be the correspondence between Hall's support of the medical model of homosexuality and the narrative resolution she devised for the misfit Stephen that allowed later commentators to assume that Hall shared her protagonist's fate as a social exile. The blurb repinted on the cover to an edition of The Well published as recently as 1990 (New York: Anchor Books) informs us, incorrectly, that the book "is the thinly disguised story of Radclyffe Hall's own life and that its publication "almost ruined Hall's literary career."

<sup>20</sup> Castle, Noël Coward and Radclyffe Hall, 59-60.

<sup>21</sup> Castle, The Apparitional Lesbian, 198.

aristocracy"<sup>22</sup> — not bestowed by heredity but by heroic individualism. The vestments of dandyism subsequently became the trademark of republicans and romantics, Byron and Baudelaire, but eventually evolved into the modern suit, the representative costume of the bourgeois, masculine conformity that Brummell intended to criticize.<sup>23</sup> Lesbians in the twentieth-century, in the U.S. as well as Europe, harkened back to the original impulses of dandy style by using dress to make an oppositional statement, although one premised on a style associated less with social reform than individual self-possession. The politics of style, though, can be remarkably ambivalent. For some lesbians this fashion was mainly a repudiation of feminine garb that did not in any way renounce the wearer's social class (for example, Hall and Troubridge were inveterate upper-class snobs), but for others it symbolized a more vehement rebellion against bourgeois definitions of gender and sexuality.<sup>24</sup> In either case, the visual effect of self-possession achieved through impeccable grooming without obvious ostentation allowed a dramatic juxtaposition — including elements of confrontation — of ideal bourgeois masculine and feminine traits, of self-control and self-display.

I have devoted so much space to Radclyffe Hall not because of her importance to Anglophone lesbian culture — although that cannot be disputed — but because of her location at a particular historical moment when the

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<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 182.

<sup>23</sup> The alterations necessary to effect this transition are described by Anne Hollander in *Sex and Suits: The Evolution of Modern Dress* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 100-102.

<sup>24</sup> Ironically, Brummell was interested in the reification of sexual difference by eliminating what he saw as decadent effeminacy in bourgeois men's dress and manners.

parameters and mechanisms of fame had assumed many of the characteristics that apply today. Her fame, then, was double-edged: On one hand, the scandal produced by her publication of what amounted to a public declaration of lesbian existence precipitated a reaction from defenders of the moral status quo. For example, one of the leaders of the campaign against The Well wrote, "I would rather give a healthy boy or a healthy girl a phial of prussic acid than this novel. Poison kills the body but moral poison kills the soul."<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, that scandal, coupled with Hall's flair for dramatic self-presentation, was transformed into a publicity coup that ensured her enduring reputation. In this she participated, quite willingly, in the celebrity culture of the time. And why would she not?

### **Famous players**

The lives of famous people recorded in the annals of history are most often read as indicators of the moral and political organization of a particular society and those who achieve renown are regarded as emblems of prevailing cultural values and power relations. Radclyffe Hall's interest in becoming a member of such distinguished company is not too difficult to fathom. Still, it may seem extraordinary that an outspoken lesbian would be allowed entry into the halls of fame at a time when such women were deemed morally enfeebled. An understanding of not only this particular instance of lesbian celebrity, which was in fact idiosyncratic, but also the proliferation of lesbian celebrity some sixty years later requires, at the very least, a sketch of the defining features of fame that had taken shape during the century preceding Hall's appearance on the

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<sup>25</sup> James Douglas, Sunday Express, August 19, 1928; quoted in Baker, 223.

scene, as well as several subsequent permutations that fostered the boom in celebrity culture so noteworthy today.

Although it is possible to make general statements about celebrity — noting, for instance, that those people who acquire fame embody the qualities and capacities recognized as significant within a particular social matrix — its forms or meanings are never transhistorical. Indeed, celebrities and celebrity itself have emerged as central preoccupations only in modern (or modernizing) societies. Moreover, a particular kind of person came to define celebrity in the early decades of the twentieth century: the entertainment celebrity. Writers and visual artists rarely qualified, although authors of best-selling fiction or popular stage plays might if they are able to produce more than one or two big hits. Painters, sculptors, and photographers rarely achieve fame outside the narrow confines of the art world when alive. There are a few exceptions and one who is outstanding in this regard — the epitome of contemporary celebrity itself — Andy Warhol.

In his historical study of fame in Western European and North American cultures, Leo Braudy traces this development to changes that began with the eighteenth-century revolutions in France and the United States. In keeping with the republican sentiments that fueled these political upheavals, candidacy for fame was democratized and no longer deemed the prerogative of the aristocracy or those patronized by this class.<sup>26</sup> At first, post-revolutionary notables were mainly political leaders like Washington and Napoleon, who were identified with their nations and not a particular social class. But a number of interrelated cultural, economic, and technological developments over the course of the nineteenth century contributed to the revamped criteria for fame in the

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<sup>26</sup> Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

twentieth: the explosion of commodity production enabled by industrial forms of manufacturing and organized by capitalist relations of exchange, which increased the amount of goods available to large numbers of people and put money in the pockets of those who wanted to buy them; the spread of literacy combined with the introduction of photography and innovations in printing technologies; the invention of related new media forms like cheap newspapers and illustrated magazines that catered to and capitalized on both this expanding reading public and advertisers for products who hoped to attract their attention; the proliferation of popular, large scale entertainments like circuses, vaudeville, and amusement parks, and, shortly before the beginning of the new century, cinema.

In very short order, or so it seems in hindsight, movie stars became the paradigmatic celebrities in the United States and Europe. And the various elements that created and sustained stardom according to this model have remained fairly constant ever since. Richard Dyer has described the elements of any particular star's image as

not just his or her films, but the promotion of those films and of the star through pin-ups, public appearances, studio hand-outs and so on, as well as interviews, biographies, coverage in the press of the star's doings and "private" life. Further, a star's image is also what people say or write about him or her, as critics or commentators, the way the image is used in other contexts such as advertisements, novels, pop songs, and finally the way the star can become part of the coinage of everyday speech.<sup>27</sup>

Since the promotion of movie stars along these lines began in 1909, some fourteen years after the advent of cinema, historical investigations of its genesis

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<sup>27</sup> Richard Dyer, Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 2-3.

have usually begun with the question about why it took so long for movie producers to figure out how to capitalize on fans' interest in the actors they saw regularly on their local screens. However, as Janet Staiger notes, this question may represent yet another instance of the mystification of the process by which movie stars (and other celebrities) are created. In her challenge to this approach, as well as to the oft-cited explanation that studio executives were reluctant to publicize the names of regular players in order to control salary demands (the argument is that actors would use popularity with the public as the basis for asking for increased pay), Staiger maintains that the prototype for the film industry's star system consisted of methods used by U.S. theatrical producers and managers for almost a century.<sup>28</sup> Initially devised to publicize prominent foreign performers on tour in the 1820s, the promotion of individual actors cast in leading roles was soon adopted as standard practice.

Photographs of featured actors in costume were displayed outside theaters and included in materials circulated by press agents engaged to generate free publicity for performances. Information about the off-stage lives of these actors had not yet become a common feature of these promotional packages, but that did not prevent reporters from trying to elicit such data in interviews. Although by 1910 similar methods were integrated into the studios' publicity techniques (lobby display cards and publication of photographs and biographies of contract players in film magazines), Staiger points out that as late as 1912 the named artists promoted by film companies were frequently famous stage actors testing the cinematic waters — Sarah Bernhardt, Réjane, Minnie Madden Fiske — not those whose acting careers began in films. In other words, in the early years

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<sup>28</sup> Janet Staiger, "Seeing Stars," in *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: Routledge, 1991): 3-16.

of movie making true stars were those who became famous in already established forms of entertainment.<sup>29</sup>

The basic formula for entertainment celebrity in the twentieth-century U.S. grew out of business decisions made by commercial theater producers in the 1820s, who found it advantageous to identify and promote a few individual leading men and women. Before then, actors were members of stock companies, in which roles were rotated and someone playing a major part in one play might be given a minor role in the next. The stock company was also the organizing principle of the original motion picture companies, but quickly abandoned once the audience appeal of movie stars became apparent. But the increasing centrality of celebrity in both theater and film (as well as similar practices in music and dance) was also linked to radical innovations in other media. These changes proceeded along four separate tracks — technological, economic, institutional, and ideological — although, as always, these are aspects of the same phenomenon as far as celebrity culture is concerned.

### **Magical realism**

Among all the various factors affecting the reconfiguration of fame by the end of the nineteenth century perhaps the most significant was the public announcement of the invention of photography in 1839. Throughout the twentieth century, the impact of photographic technology on celebrity became undeniable. Not only do photographic media like cinema and television provide a platform for performers in popular entertainment fields, by means of reproducing a performance as an artifact, photography and its spin-offs also

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<sup>29</sup> Even famous opera divas of the early twentieth century like Mary Garden were enticed by the promise of substantial fees to appear in movies by an industry capable of producing only silent pictures.

allow fans to nullify their awareness of the artifice of stardom. The second effect may be attributed to photography's assumed purchase on reality. "Stars," Dyer notes, "are a particular instance of the supposed relation between a photograph and its referent. A photograph is always a photograph of something or somebody who had to have been there in order for the photograph to be taken."<sup>30</sup> Thus, photography provides a key to a particular kind of knowledge celebrities represent: an indication of a real person behind the mask or beneath the surface of a scripted, rehearsed performance. Although this kind of knowledge cannot be conveyed by photographs alone, pictures of the star in question connect other kinds of information about her or him to a corporeal reality, and are therefore indispensable.

At first, photography captured the public's imagination as an ingenious product of science, praised for its marvelous ability to fix an image of transitory moments. Indeed, Don Slater has analyzed this as a central paradox of photography: its production of realism as a magic show.<sup>31</sup> Almost as soon as the viability of photography was announced the apparatus was put to use as a method for producing portraits, and the first generation of commercial photographers devoted themselves almost exclusively to portraiture, outfitting their studios with ornate furniture and draperies that emulated bourgeois drawing rooms. But even this application, which today seems entirely pedestrian, was regarded as suspiciously supernatural, even diabolical, insofar as the materialization of one's likeness in a photograph implied a transfer of a bit of the soul to the image. For example, the preeminent Parisian portrait

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<sup>30</sup> Richard Dyer, "A Star Is Born and the Construction of Authenticity," in Gledhill, Stardom, 135.

<sup>31</sup> Don Slater, "Photography and Modern Vision," in Visual Culture, ed. Chris Jenks (London: Routledge, 1995): 218-237.

photographer Gaspar Félix Tournachon, better known by his professional name Nadar, cited none other than Balzac as a subscriber to such notions, although he also pointed out that this did not prevent the renowned novelist from posing. “[A]ccording to Balzac,” Nadar reports, “every body in its natural state was made up of a series of ghostly images superimposed in layers to infinity, wrapped in infinitesimal films... Men never having been able to create, that’s to say make something material from an apparition, from something impalpable, or to make from nothing, an object — each Daguerrian operation was therefore going to lay hold of, detach and use up one of the layers of the body on which it is focused.”<sup>32</sup>

Many early photographers understood and capitalized on the illusionistic properties of photography. One of the very first and most renowned, Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre, began his career as a scene painter for the Paris Opera and graduated to designing and operating panoramas, as well as producing other public, precinematic illusionist spectacles like dioramas. And Nadar, more than many of his competitors, grasped the importance of the photographer’s ability to manipulate illusion, although he also believed in the medium’s ability to achieve realism. For Nadar, realism was not automatic, a matter of leaving verisimilitude up to optics and chemistry, but involved careful manipulation of light, costume, and facial expression. In order to produce a worthy portrait, he believed that the photographer must discern the subject’s unique character at the first encounter, “which can put you in sympathy with your sitter, helps you to sum them up, follow their normal attitudes, their ideas, according to their

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<sup>32</sup> Nadar (Félix Tournachon), *Quand j’étais photographe* (Paris: 1900), quoted in Aaron Scharf, *Pioneers of Photography: An Album of Pictures and Words* (New York: Abrams, 1975), 107.

personality, that enables you to make ... a likeness of the most intimate and happy kind, a speaking likeness."<sup>33</sup>

Before taking up photography, Nadar was a widely published and well regarded caricaturist within republican political circles. His previously established reputation among the French artistic and intellectual elite of his day enabled him to attract many of them to his studio. Between 1855 and the mid-1860s he photographed Hugo, Baudelaire, Dumas père, Nerval, Berlioz, Rossini, Delacroix, Doré, Daumier, Manet, Michelet, Pasteur, among others. George Sand was the subject of a series of portraits, including one in which she appears as a caricature of Louis XIV in a wig and velvet cloak. Bernhardt, then a relatively unknown actress, posed for Nadar in the early 1860s. Nadar printed multiple copies of these celebrity images, each eight-and-a-quarter by eleven inches in size, and sold them to the public for around fifty francs apiece, thus restricting sales to the monied classes. The artisanal methods of production employed in Nadar's studio during this period allowed him to develop a singular style, often described in terms of his skillful orchestration of light and shadow. His pictures also remain exceptional because of the distinctive clothing he encouraged his sitters to wear, as well as what one critic describes as his ability to dramatize "the striking gesture, the bearing, the visible essence of character."<sup>34</sup>

Nadar's photography business almost ran aground due to rivalry from another kind of celebrity portrait printed in a format known as the carte de visite, two-and-a-half by four inches, and priced at a small fraction of what one of Nadar's larger édition portraits cost. In 1854 André Adolphe Eugène Disdéri

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<sup>33</sup> Nadar, quoted in Scharf, 106.

<sup>34</sup> Ulrich Keller, "Sorting Out Nadar: An Examination of Nadar's Photographic Legacy," in Nadar, ed. Maria Morris Hambourg, Françoise Heilbrum, and Philippe Néagu (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1995), 79.

patented a technique for producing miniature photographs (with a few exceptions, these were portraits) printed on albumen paper and mounted on cardboard backing the size of a conventional calling card, with the subject's name and sometimes her or his signature printed below the image — a forerunner of not just the star photograph but also the photo ID.<sup>35</sup> Because the process involved subdividing one glass photographic plate into ten rectangles that could be printed simultaneously, large quantities of cartes de visite could be produced very quickly and with greater economy than any previous process allowed.

A few years later, after Disdéri had begun to mass-produce and sell miniature portraits of such celebrities as the French imperial family, the market for cartes boomed and, along with related formats like cabinet cards (four-and-a-half by six inches), dominated the commercial photographic trade for the rest of the century.<sup>36</sup> Nadar's business was threatened by these developments, and he attempted to compete by adopting the format, as well as the rationalized production techniques and newer, less expensive materials used by his rival. He copied photos from his store of celebrity portraits, as well as producing a new batch during the 1860s designed specifically for sales to collectors of cartes de visite. As a result, his careful attention to aesthetic refinement was sacrificed to the demands of mass production, while the reduced format made such subtlety irrelevant.<sup>37</sup> In addition to making celebrity portraits easily available to a range

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<sup>35</sup> Like Daguerre, Disdéri started out as a theatrical scenery painter and tried his hand, unsuccessfully, at producing a panorama as paid entertainment; he set up his first studio in Paris in a building owned by Houdini's brother-in-law, also a professional magician.

<sup>36</sup> Keller, 80.

<sup>37</sup> Nadar effectively quit the business in the mid-1870s, but his son continued to make prints from his father's negatives or rephotographed the old portraits and even used photomechanical printing processes to publish large editions of these images until his death in 1939. See Keller, 81-83, and "Chronology," in

of customers, the introduction of cartes de visite occasioned a second innovation — the family or personal photograph album, displayed on a parlor table for perusal by guests, which frequently included celebrity photos alongside studio portraits of relatives. In her study of Disdéri's career, Elizabeth Anne McCauley argues that the introduction of celebrity portraits into private homes significantly altered concepts of fame and the famous, "making them more familiar, less heroic."<sup>38</sup>

Compared to painted portraits, which were beyond the means of all but the rich and powerful, cartes allowed middle-class and lower-middle-class people representation on the same level as celebrities. Moreover, McCauley points out, the full-length framing favored in carte de visite portraiture encouraged popular theories about the meanings that could be gleaned from these pictures:

"[V]iewers could interpret character through the details of the figure's pose, with caricaturists and writers in the photographic press outlining the way that the bend of a leg or the drop of a wrist could reveal a profession, personality, class, or temperament."<sup>39</sup> She also draws attention to the influence of fashion plates of the period on carte de visite style, noting that both types of imagery were premised on the flâneur society of mid-nineteenth-century Paris, "in which clothes were the man, and character was evaluated on the basis of external appearances."<sup>40</sup> The peak years of Disdéri's carte de visite business were the early 1860s, when he produced a series of portraits of the royal family and other

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Hambourg et al., 251-255. Meanwhile, Disdéri was unable to sustain his dominance in the carte de visite industry, eventually filing for bankruptcy in 1872.

<sup>38</sup> Elizabeth Anne McCauley, A.A.E. Desdéri and the Cartes de Visite Portrait Photograph (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 2.

<sup>39</sup> McCauley, 3.

<sup>40</sup> McCauley, 36.

prominent personages, each accompanied by a four-page biography. Two portraits were issued each week, for which his middle-class subscribers paid one franc each, and at least one hundred twenty-seven people were represented in Desdéri's Galerie des contemporains. Among these notables, McCauley reports, thirty-seven percent were actors and other entertainers, while ten percent were military leaders, and twenty-eight percent were politicians and nobles.<sup>41</sup> Disdéri also added to his repertoire the collage carte, which consisted of multiple portraits (or in one case, merely legs — of ballerinas) printed as a composite representing such professional groups as opera stars or heads of state.

The carte de visite craze quickly spread from Paris to London, then to the U.S., where the country's most respected portrait photographer, daguerreotypist Mathew Brady, also found his business endangered by the newer, cheaper method of reproducing images. Like other commercial photographers of his day, and more successfully than most, Brady prominently displayed daguerreotypes of famous citizens, mostly politicians and members of the business and social elite, in his Broadway studio or the branches he set up in other cities as advertisements to attract a well-heeled clientele. Not only did Brady's business depend upon income from patrons of his establishment but on sales of copies of his celebrity images, for which he charged from between five and twenty-five dollars, compared to one dollar paid by an ordinary sitter for her or his own portrait. By 1860, the photographic market was flooded by inexpensive (as little as twenty-five for a dollar) images of politicians and men of rank, but also famous authors and theater stars.<sup>42</sup> Cartes de visite picturing an obscure lawyer from Illinois, Abraham Lincoln, were widely circulated during

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<sup>41</sup> McCauley, 55-62.

<sup>42</sup> William Welling, Photography in America: The Formative Years, 1839-1900 (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1978), 143.

the 1860 presidential campaign, and his election is often credited to the unprecedented publicity he received as a result.<sup>43</sup> As Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote in 1863, cartes de visite had become "the social currency, the sentimental 'green-backs' of civilization."<sup>44</sup> Brady was reluctant to abandon the daguerreotype process and even more disinclined to court lower-class collectors of cartes de visite, although he did produce portraits in this format once it became evident that demand for more expensive photographs had evaporated.<sup>45</sup>

In an article on nineteenth-century celebrity portrait photography in the U.S., Barbara McCandless presents Brady's career trajectory as the counterpoint to that of a second major figure in this field, the Canadian-born photographer Napoleon Sarony.<sup>46</sup> In 1866, Sarony set up a portrait studio in New York City specializing in theatrical portraiture, having learned his craft in England, where he became familiar with the work of Nadar and the other prominent French celebrity photographer, Etienne Carjat. Within a few years, he became the major photographer for the theatrical community in New York, producing only cartes de visite and the slightly larger but similarly cheap, collectible cabinet cards,

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<sup>43</sup> Robert Taft, Photography and the American Scene: A Social History, 1839-1889 (New York: Macmillan, 1938).

<sup>44</sup> Oliver Wendell Holmes, "Doings of the Sunbeam," Photography: Essays and Images, ed. Beaumont Newhall (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1980), 69.

<sup>45</sup> However, Brady was unable to readjust his business practices to meet the requirements of carte de visite production, nor was he temperamentally suited to head a photographic company that dealt in mass produced images, and he was forced into bankruptcy as a result. His extensive documentation of the Civil War, upon which his enduring reputation is based, was also financially disastrous.

<sup>46</sup> Barbara McCandless, "The Portrait Studio and the Celebrity," in Photography in Nineteenth-Century America, ed. Martha A. Sandweiss (New York: Abrams, 1991): 49-75.

which were not sold directly to customers but through dealers who supplied shops and street vendors. In 1882, there were six dealers in New York City marketing cartes de visite and cabinet cards, and street merchants alone accounted for one million dollars in sales of these cards to the public.<sup>47</sup>

As one of the most prolific producers of celebrity portraits and a canny entrepreneur, Sarony prospered. He was known for his ability to coax dramatic poses and expressions from his subjects, which may have been one of the reasons he was the photographer of choice of the most famous performers. Another reason, however, was that he paid the highest fees, knowing that he could recoup these costs and make a considerable profit in addition. Prior to 1867, famous people whose portraits were sold by photographers sometimes received free daguerreotypes or paper prints in exchange, but others sat for the commercial photographers' cameras without receiving any compensation because they recognized the value of the publicity such pictures could generate.<sup>48</sup> This changed after Charles Dickens, on tour in the U.S. in 1867, demanded and was paid a fee to have his photograph taken. Word of this arrangement quickly spread, and payment or royalties became the standard practice. For instance, Bernhardt received fifteen hundred dollars from Sarony in 1880, and he paid five thousand dollars to British actress Lillie Langtry in 1882. Around the same time, however, Oscar Wilde posed for free almost as soon as he arrived for his first lecture tour of the United States, because his agent

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<sup>47</sup> McCandless, 68.

<sup>48</sup> On this note, see McCauley, 82-83, where she cites the attitudes of a frequent subject of French celebrity photographs, Napoléon III, who appears to have appreciated the propaganda value of circulating images of himself and his family via the popular carte de visite medium.

convinced Wilde of the publicity benefits that would accrue from having a Sarony carte de visite in circulation.<sup>49</sup>

The antecedents of iconic celebrity photographs, such as those produced by Arnold Genthe, Baron de Meyer, Cecil Beaton, and Edward Steichen in the mid-twentieth century, can be found in Nadar's large format oeuvre. Less memorable photos produced as cartes de visite and cabinet cards are precursors of the stock photographs that provide the ongoing outpouring of celebrity images that have become a ubiquitous feature of twentieth-century life, although several of Sarony's images — his first portraits of Wilde, for example — could also be counted among the classic celebrity images.

### **Public address**

Despite the guarantee of reality photographs offer, celebrity portraits only acquire meaning when presented in the context of information about the person pictured. In the case of actors, this additional narrative becomes an extension of their fictional roles, not in the sense of exact correspondence but in terms of what are understood as basic personality traits (sexiness for anyone playing a prostitute or showgirl; no-nonsense toughness for a cop or detective, etc.). Alternately, publicity photos may be conceived to domesticate a star's image, exemplified by pictures of Marlene Dietrich accompanied by her daughter and husband.<sup>50</sup> Needless to say, getting the two celebrity personae — the

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<sup>49</sup> Information about Sarony's payments to Bernhardt, Langtry, and Wilde comes from Lloyd Lewis and Henry J. Smith, Oscar Wilde Discovers America (New York: Benjamin Blum, 1936), 39.

<sup>50</sup> Dietrich posed with husband Rudi Sieber and daughter Maria for a series of press photos when husband Rudi arrived in the U.S., shortly after von Sternberg's ex-wife sued Dietrich for destroying her marriage. Since Dietrich and studio publicists were eager to downplay the scandal, photos from the series appeared in a variety of contexts, but their intended purpose is best illustrated by

"fictional" and the "real" — in sync has not always been an easy task. However, the Hollywood studio's domination of the entertainment business until the late 1950s made the job somewhat more manageable, since, as Richard deCordova observes, "The narrative which emerged to create the star was entrenched in the same forms of representation as the films in which the stars acted."<sup>51</sup> But systems used to achieve conformity were never airtight, as was proved by revelations of scandalous behavior and several suspicious murders in the film colony in the early 1920s<sup>52</sup>. Thereafter, deCordova contends, the meanings to be gleaned from knowledge about film stars, the truths they seemed to embody, became primarily sexual meanings and truths, accumulated in a sequential order that replicates the historical stages of the development of the film star system: 1) knowledge about the reality of the star's body, 2) the facts about the star's marriage, or, if unmarried, her or his prospects, and 3) the secret of the star's sexual transgressions.<sup>53</sup>

Photographs, which fulfilled the first aspect of this accretion of knowledge, provide the basic building blocks; official biographies, regularly updated, supply the mortar; and gossip, innuendo, and fans' own imaginations furnish and embellish the edifice. Obviously, fictionalization can occur at any of these three levels, and it is the resulting precariousness of celebrity knowledge

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their publication in movie magazines around the time when the lawsuit was also being covered. See, for example, Adele Whitely Fletcher, "Marlene Dietrich's Amazing Secret," Modern Screen 3:2 (January 1932), 28.

<sup>51</sup> Richard deCordova, "The Emergence of the Star System in America," in Gledhill, Stardom, 28.

<sup>52</sup> All salaciously documented in Kenneth Anger's Hollywood Babylon (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1975) and Hollywood Babylon II (New York: Penguin Books, 1984).

<sup>53</sup> Richard deCordova, Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 142.

that makes it so productive. Once it became feasible to combine the photos and text in a single widely available medium, entertainment celebrity was poised for take-off.<sup>54</sup> This occurred when, after several decades of experimentation, half-tone reproductions that could be printed using the same presses and page set-ups as type became economically feasible in the 1890s.<sup>55</sup>

By the turn of the century, people who could not afford to buy photographic prints were able to compile their own celebrity scrapbooks, filled with photos snipped from daily newspapers that cost as little as a penny or popular magazines that sold for only ten cents per issue, and a bit later from more specialized movie magazines. Readers were also able to obtain information from printed narratives in the same magazines, which offered a more complete representation and extended the meaning of a particular star's image beyond her or his pleasing face, elegant clothing, or other purely visual characteristics. And these narratives then called for more images: magnificent houses, posh gardens and swimming pools, sporting events and fancy dress parties, cars and dogs, and so on. The phenomenon, however, should not be attributed to a technological feat alone, nor did it appear without precedents. In many respects, magazines and newspapers that provided coverage of movie stars and other entertainment celebrities in the twentieth century represented an outgrowth of the cheap, popular publications that catered to an expanding reading public made up of

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<sup>54</sup> Incorporation of speculation about celebrities' extramarital sexual adventures took somewhat longer, since this occurred only when more liberal attitudes toward sexuality became more prevalent. For an overview of changing sexual mores and institutions in U.S. culture, see John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America (New York: Harper and Row, 1988).

<sup>55</sup> Fox Talbot had experimented with the method as early as 1853, and it had been used by a commercial printer in New York in the 1880s. See, William M. Ivins Jr., "Prints and Visual Communications," in Photography in Print: Writings from 1816 to the Present, ed. Vicki Goldberg (New York: Touchstone, 1981), 189.

working people, including a growing number of wage-earning women, that first appeared in the U.S. in the 1830s.

Until penny papers were introduced in New York City in 1833, newspapers cost six cents, were available by subscription only, and addressed upper- and middle-class “establishment” male readers.<sup>56</sup> Two of the four pages of the standard daily, the front and the back, were devoted to advertisements. News in this context was limited to mercantile and political reports, and editorials on political matters were featured prominently. Experiments with lowering newspaper prices were undertaken in Boston and Philadelphia as early as 1830, but the first to revolutionize newspaper contents and methods of distribution was the New York Sun, founded by Benjamin Day, followed soon after by the Evening Transcript and James Gordon Bennett’s Herald. By 1836, other major Eastern cities boasted penny papers, and the phenomenon spread westward over the course of the next few decades. All penny papers were conceived as vehicles for daily news items geared toward working-class, mainly immigrant readers and concentrated on “human interest” stories, like crime reports, presented in lively, colloquial language.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, they were sold by

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<sup>56</sup> An annual subscription for these traditional papers cost over fifteen dollars, at a time when the average daily wage was eighty-five cents. This and subsequent data on the economic impact of penny papers is taken from Michael Schudson, Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers (New York: Basic Books, 1978).

<sup>57</sup> In American Journalism: A History, 1690-1960 (New York: Macmillan, 1962), Frank Luther Mott reproduces in full a police court report from a 1833 issue of the Sun, two items of which give a sense of the tone and content of the popular innovations in news reporting found in penny newspapers: “Margaret Thomas was drunk in the street — said she never would get drunk again ‘upon her honor.’ Committed, ‘upon honor.’... Patrick Ludwick was sent up by his wife, who testified that she had supported him for several years in idleness and drunkenness. Abandoning all hopes of a reformation in her husband, she bought him a suit of clothes a fortnight since and told him to go about his business, for she would not live with him any longer. Last night he came home in a state of intoxication, broke into his wife’s bedroom pulled her out of bed, pulled her hair,

newsboys on the street, which meant both that they were widely available and that the price of a single issue was easily affordable for wage laborers.

These journalistic upstarts proved enormously popular: from 1830 to 1840 newspaper circulation in the U.S. increased almost fourfold, from approximately 78,000 to 300,000, largely attributable to the introduction of penny newspapers. In comparison, the urban population increased from .9 million to 1.5 million during the same decade, a sixty percent increase. The average circulation of a metropolitan daily in the 1820s was between one and two thousand subscribers; the Sun sold around fifteen thousand copies a day in 1835. Another important cornerstone of mass circulation media was put in place when Joseph Pulitzer bought the failing New York World in 1883. He lowered the price to one cent (by this time, the Herald cost three cents and the Sun was two) and refashioned the paper into a provocative daily, akin to current and former penny papers, that combined muckraking political reporting with attention to other sorts of scandal.<sup>58</sup> But the innovation that gave the World an edge over its competitors, according to Michael Schudson, was its liberal use of illustrations and Pulitzer's willingness to publish large-format advertisements, some of which used pictures — something other newspapers, from the plebeian Sun to the upper-crust New York Times, eschewed. Pulitzer's personal dislike for illustrations in newspapers at first motivated him to reduce the number in the World, but he soon reversed his position when he discovered "the circulation of the paper went with the

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and stamped on her. She called a watchman and sent him up. Pat exerted all his powers of eloquence in endeavoring to excite his wife's sympathy, but to no purpose. As every sensible wife ought to do who is cursed with a drunken husband, she refused to have anything to do with him hereafter — and he was sent to the penitentiary" (223-224).

<sup>58</sup> Schudson chronicles the rapid rise in the World's circulation, from 15,000 when Pulitzer bought the paper to over a quarter million three years later (92).

cuts.”<sup>59</sup> Of course, an additional achievement in engraving techniques — half-tone reproductions of photographs used on a regular basis in newspapers beginning with the New York Tribune in 1897 — gave advertisers one of their most effective methods for attracting readers’ attention.<sup>60</sup> And in due time, 1915 to be precise, ads using entertainment celebrities to endorse products began to appear.<sup>61</sup>

The penny papers and their Pulitzer and Hearst descendants then begot the tabloids, a term that at first referred solely to a newspaper format, half the size of the conventional broadsheet. Although the earliest penny papers were also printed on smaller pages as a purely economic measure, Frank Munsey is credited with establishing the first but short lived U.S. tabloid, the Daily Continent, in 1891. (An earlier predecessor was the New York Daily Graphic, published between 1873 and 1889, although this did not fit the profile of telegraphic prose and sex-and-crime reportage that distinguishes the genre.) But Munsey’s paper soon succumbed to competition from the World and William Randolph Hearst’s Journal (bought by Hearst in 1895 and the World’s primary competition for years). Only in 1919 did the tabloid press in the generic sense take root in the U.S., modeled on the London Daily Mirror founded by Lord Northcliffe (Alfred Harmsworth). The first sustained venture in this field was the New York (Illustrated) Daily News, published by the company that owned the

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<sup>59</sup> Schudson, 95.

<sup>60</sup>The story of the not-so-eager embrace of half-tone photoengravings in newspaper production appears in Alfred McClung Lee, The Daily Newspaper in America: The Evolution of a Social Instrument (New York: Macmillan, 1937), 129-130.

<sup>61</sup> deCordova, Picture Personalities, 110.

Chicago Tribune; in five years it became the largest selling daily in the city.<sup>62</sup> When Hearst brought out a revamped New York Daily Mirror as a tabloid in 1924, he promised readers "90 percent entertainment, 10 percent information — and the information without boring you."<sup>63</sup> Not surprisingly, news about and profiles of celebrities, along with plentiful pictures, were important elements in the kind of enticing content Hearst and other tabloid publishers proffered.<sup>64</sup> Another tabloid that first appeared in 1924 was Bernarr MacFadden's New York Evening Graphic. With absolutely no pretense about providing news for informational (as opposed to entertainment) purposes, the Evening Graphic created the template for the papers we today call tabloids; indeed, McFadden Holdings, a vestige of the the media empire that included the Evening Graphic now owns the National Enquirer and a similar paper, the Weekly World News.

### **Prying Eyes**

Perhaps the most pertinent feature of this genealogy is not the material form of the medium but the style of gossip reporting that these early tabloids devised. Most significantly, Walter Winchell's "Your Broadway and Mine" column first appeared in the tabloid Evening Graphic, introducing readers to

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<sup>62</sup> For a more complete description of the foundation and early years of the Daily News, see Mott, 667-668.

<sup>63</sup> Elizabeth S. Bird, For Enquiring Minds: A Cultural Study of Supermarket Tabloids (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 19.

<sup>64</sup> The tabloids launched in the 1920s and 1930s that survived wars of competition and episodes of mismanagement, including a number in major cities across the U.S., developed into more respectable papers by the 1940s. Although today's supermarket tabloids resemble these early forebears in their willingness to participate in creating the scandals they report, as well as their emphasis on gruesome and fantastic events, these have largely grown out of publishing experiments in the 1950s and innovations in the genre made during the 1970s. See Bird for a fairly comprehensive account of this history.

what became the standard for modern celebrity gossip.<sup>65</sup> One of Winchell's colleagues remembers the impact of his new style of gossip reporting: "The effect of his Monday column [in the Evening Graphic] woke up Broadway to startled self-consciousness. People could hardly believe what they saw in print. All the old secrets of personal sex relations — who was sleeping with whom — were exposed to the public gaze."<sup>66</sup> In his account of Winchell's career, Neal Gabler observes that before Winchell began publishing his items, collected during nightly rounds of Times Square area speakeasies, editors and writers subscribed to the maxim that "certain things weren't done by decent people, including decent journalists. Certain proprieties had to be maintained."<sup>67</sup> But Winchell's columns proved enormously popular and greatly enhanced the circulation of the Evening Graphic and the New York Daily Mirror, a Hearst tabloid that was his home base from 1929 to 1962.

The Mirror also provided Winchell with an outlet for national syndication. In 1930, Winchell began to air his gossip on network radio, and his audience expanded exponentially as a result.<sup>68</sup> In a mere six years his influence spread from a local community, albeit a large urban center, to the entire nation, able to tune into his witty, sometimes caustic commentary. According to Gabler,

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<sup>65</sup> A number of books about Walter Winchell have been written, but the most comprehensive and by far the best is Neal Gabler, Winchell: Gossip, Power and the Culture of Celebrity (New York: Random House, 1994).

<sup>66</sup> Bernard Sobel. Broadway Heartbeat: Memoirs of a Press Agent (New York: Hermitage House, 1953), 301.

<sup>67</sup> Gabler, 137.

<sup>68</sup> Mosedale writes that in 1940 the newspapers that carried Winchell's column numbered 1,000 and estimates his radio and newspaper audience at fifty million Americans, over a third of the country's total population at the time.

It all seemed mildly illicit — this world that Winchell hurled each Sunday night [in his early radio broadcasts] into the teeth of Depression America. It was a glamorous world governed by none of the ordinary rules of behavior or responsibility. It was a world where romance was a euphemism for sex and where each listener was a voyeur, vicariously enjoying the suggestion of perpetual sexual availability of these stars, celebrities and socialites who changed lovers, husbands and wives like clothes. And it was Walter's presentation that made it seem so. By piling one item on another and by wrenching them all from any context, he created a new context: a dizzying and disorienting bacchanalia, almost prurient in its appeal.<sup>69</sup>

Winchell credited his own success with establishing the gossip column as the arbiter of fame. Boasting about his own influence, he remarked, "Social position is now more a matter of press than prestige." To which Gabler adds, "A mention in his column or in his broadcast meant that one was among the exalted. It meant that one's name was part of the general fund of knowledge."<sup>70</sup> The gossip columns written by Winchell and his rivals at the other major dailies covered all sorts of show business and artistic celebrities, along with members of the upper class — social register members as well as the nouveau riche, European aristocrats who kept company with fashionable folk from the U.S. — and recent additions to celebrity ranks like award-winning athletes and record-setting aviators. He also wrote about sensational crimes and those accused of committing them. The kinds of topics he introduced as acceptable, even essential,

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<sup>69</sup> Gabler, 162.

<sup>70</sup> Gabler, 185.

items of public information concerning prominent people — couched in euphemistic language, of course — were tolerated if not encouraged by editors.

Gossip writing was also given a boost by the expansion of journalism into coverage of the motion picture industry, first in trade magazines like Moving Picture World (1907) but within a few years in those geared to fans like Motion Picture News (1910) and Motion Picture Story (1910), which was sold in the lobbies of movie theaters, and Photoplay (1911). We tend to think of these magazines as the prototypes for more recent forums for celebrity gossip like People, and by the end of World War I they had settled on the parameters that still govern this branch of publishing. However, issues from the formative years of the fan magazines, until 1917 or thereabouts, exhibit a less coherent idea of what the format should be and what information people would pay money to read. For example, in its first few years Photoplay included numerous articles on the technical aspects of film-making — for instance, explanations of how elevated platforms are used to position camera above the action — whereas the private lives of actors received very little attention. What little gossip they carried tended to be concerned with upcoming productions and casting decisions. In keeping with the widely held belief that gossip is a feminine preoccupation, its relative absence in prewar issues indicated that publishers imagined that the ideal reader might be male, a supposition born out by the kinds of products they advertised: correspondence courses in law (almost exclusively a male profession), barbershops and turkish baths, subscriptions to Popular Electricity magazine. There were ads pitched to women as well — millinery courses, custom-made skirts, bust enlargement therapy, for example — but these figured less prominently. But there were also numerous solicitations of “photoplays” or offerings of courses in professional screenwriting, an occupation open to women as well as men. The most profitable group of consumers anticipated by these

magazines in their first years, however, were film exhibitors, wooed by promotions for lobby display stands, film titling services, theater decorations, and popcorn machines.

Around 1914 the balance between ads directed at men and those clearly intended for women shifted decidedly toward the latter, and by late 1917 the classification of these magazines as feminine reading material had solidified. By then, the overwhelming number of products advertised were for distinctly feminine commodities — like sanitary napkins, laundry and face soap, hairpins, perfume, diet pills and fat reduction creams. Additionally, by the early 1920s the faces these magazines presented to the public on their covers and employed to appeal to readers' curiosity were uniformly female.<sup>71</sup> Yet this gender segregation did not necessarily reflect their readership, insofar as published letters from readers included many from men, who, like women, inquired about their favorite stars. Still, a feminine slant prevailed, and men who participated in the activities of fandom had to do so within this framework.

Over time, the gossip pages moved from the back to the middle, and eventually to the front, middle, and back of each issue, organized as separate columns presented under several different headlines. The space assigned to gossip expanded as well, from two pages in 1915 issues of Photoplay, to three in 1916, five in 1917, and up to nine by 1930. In keeping with the redirection of the agenda, away from the mechanisms of film production towards news about "personalities," the constitution of gossip, too, changed markedly during this period. Gossip in the early years, often concentrated on finances, lawsuits, and other business matters; stars' off-screen lives were discussed in relation to

<sup>71</sup> The sole exception I discovered in my survey of magazines published between 1915 and 1933 was a 1931 cover of Modern Screen with Clark Gable and Greta Garbo, timed to coincide with the release of Susan Lenox: Her Fall and Rise, in which they co-starred.

careers and salaries, and their romances and families were rarely mentioned. A photo spread entitled "Who's Married to Who" in a 1917 edition of Photoplay represented the magazine's timid entry into the territory of intimate relations in Hollywood.<sup>72</sup>

By the mid-twenties these monthlies offered a steady diet of detailed information about who's not only married to whom but also who's dating and maybe sleeping with whom.<sup>73</sup> A visual catalogue of couplings was provided by numerous photos of those attending parties, resorts, and sporting events (like polo games); and news of marriages, divorces, and child-births. Other features offered makeup and hair-styling tips, information about the fashions favored by particular performers, as well as their favorite recipes. In the thirties, articles on how celebrities dealt with personal difficulties were added to the mix. An especially intriguing subgenre of this last type consisted of cautionary tales about star-struck young women so obsessed with fantasies of becoming movie actresses themselves that they leave home and end up lonely and miserable or, worse, victims of predatory men.<sup>74</sup> What is most interesting about these pieces is

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<sup>72</sup> "Who's Married to Who," Photoplay 11:6 (May 1917): 67-68.

<sup>73</sup> Again, Marlene Dietrich's affair with Joseph von Sternberg, which neither made much attempt to hide, was one of the most closely watched. A typical item is this snippet from Modern Screen's "Inside Stuff" column in the February 1933 issue (4:4): "Marlene Dietrich is now carrying her 'mannishness' so far as to wear the same cut of trousers, when she affects that masculine attire, as Director Joseph von Sternberg. What would you call it — a brother-act or sister-act?" (24). The simultaneous reference to Dietrich's adulterous affair with a man and her lesbianism may seem odd at first, but may indicate how the meaning of the von Sternberg liaison was exoticized — therefore represented as atypical, of Hollywood or American marriages in general — by annexing it to Dietrich's star image as a sultry, seductive, foreign libertine.

<sup>74</sup> E.g., a story about how Joan Crawford risked destitution by rejecting a producer's sexual advances while a chorus girl: Modern Screen 4:4 (September 1932). This infusion of cautionary tales about the downfall awaiting credulous aspiring showgirls has not disappeared but resurfaces in the present-day

that they acknowledge and reinforce popular conceptions about the carnality rampant in Hollywood.

### **Heroic measures**

From this review of the rapid expansion of popular print media and proliferation of celebrity images in the nineteenth century, which then converged in the early twentieth century to create an array of magazines and newspapers illustrated with photographs, it is not difficult to recognize the outlines of today's prodigious celebrity culture. No doubt, the effect of electronic media — radio and television — on the exponential growth of celebrity culture from the 1930s to the present is indisputable, but the synthetic quality of entertainment celebrities has been a consistent feature of their constitution and their cultural significance since the turn of the century. What remains more obscure, though, is how changing concepts and practices of gender and sexuality affected and were affected by the increased attention to entertainment celebrities. Indeed, many of the commentators who see contemporary forms of celebrity as symptoms of social malaise have paid little attention to these factors.

Social critic Daniel Boorstin, for example, who is responsible for the oft-quoted definition of a twentieth-century celebrity as "a person who is known for his [sic] well-knownness," has argued that the growth of entertainment celebrity in the U.S. exemplifies the cultural decadence, artifice, and posturing that has eclipsed traditional notions of heroes and heroism.<sup>75</sup> Boorstin adopts a highly moralistic tone and uses metaphors that speak of deceit — his synonym for

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equivalents to the fan magazines. Interestingly, one such item, on model agencies that make false promises, was aired on the 20/20 program that followed the Ellen coming out episode.

<sup>75</sup> Daniel J. Boorstin, The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America (New York: Random House, 1961).

celebrity is a “human pseudo-event” — to explain the modern fascination with celebrity, which he links to the narcissistic personality typical of industrialized Western societies. But there is no recognition of the masculine attributes of the kind of fame he finds most laudable, apparently oblivious to the implication that he finds the newer kind of celebrity reprehensible because it is feminine.

A similar argument appears in the work of Richard Schickel, a prominent film critic and author of two books on twentieth-century celebrity, who bemoans the false sense of intimacy fostered by media coverage of celebrities. Celebrity culture, according to Schickel, undermines traditional modes of respect and “may substitute for a sense of organization, purpose, and stability in our society.”<sup>76</sup> Like Boorstin, he sees the stakes as nothing less than the collapse of political, psychological, and moral order:

[Celebrities] are turned into representations for much more inchoate longings; they are used to simplify complex matters of the mind and spirit; they are used to subvert rationalism in politics, in every realm of public life; and, most important, they are both deliberately and accidentally employed to enhance in the individual audience member a confusion of the realms (between public life and private life, between those matters of the mind that are best approached objectively and those that are best approached subjectively), matters that are already confused enough by the inherent tendencies of modern communications technology.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Richard Schickel, Intimate Strangers: The Culture of Celebrities (Garden City: Doubleday, 1985), 22.

<sup>77</sup> Schickel, viii-ix. The author of movie reviews for Life and Time, Schickel's other book on celebrity is His Picture in the Papers: A Speculation on Celebrity in America. Based on the Life of Douglas Fairbanks, Sr. (New York: Charterhouse, 1973).

The tendentiousness of Boorstin's and Schickel's analysis may raise hackles, but in many respects they only magnify a theme found in one of the first social scientific studies of celebrity phenomena, social psychologist Leo Lowenthal's 1944 analysis of the increase in biographical profiles in popular magazines (the Saturday Evening Post and Collier's) during the first four decades of the twentieth century. In addition to finding a general trend toward a focus on individual success stories, Lowenthal detected a shift from features on men of industry and state to entertainers and athletes — in other words, decreased interest in production and increased concern with consumption.<sup>78</sup>

While Boorstin's writings and those by other cultural conservatives evince a nostalgia for past cultural values — what Mike Featherstone has identified as a Weberian narrative of disenchantment common to paeans to the heroic ethic<sup>79</sup> — Lowenthal and other leftist media scholars interpret entertainment celebrities as figments of ideology, understood in the Marxist sense of "false consciousness." It's not surprising to find this attitude in Lowenthal's work, since he was a member of the Frankfurt School and shared the views of his colleagues Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse regarding the consciousness-numbing effects of popular culture. From the perspective of many Marxist scholars, it is not the homogenous mediocrity and sheepishness of "the masses" that is deplored, as it is in Boorstin's treatise, but capitalist commodification and greed. Thus, reports about the accouterments of entertainment celebrities' sumptuous lives can be interpreted as invocations of

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<sup>78</sup> Leo Lowenthal, "The Triumph of Mass Idols," in Literature, Popular Culture, and Society (Palo Alto: Pacific Books, 1968): 109-140; originally published as "Biographies in Popular Magazines," in Radio Research, 1942-43, ed. Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Frank Stanton (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1944).

<sup>79</sup> Mike Featherstone, "The Heroic Life and Everyday Life," in Cultural Theory and Cultural Change (London: Sage Publications, 1992): 159-182.

the bourgeois imagination and the capitalist property relations this world view expresses — “Bovaryism” is the felicitous term employed by Edgar Morin.<sup>80</sup> Morin and others have also elaborated the various ways in which celebrities function in tandem with capitalist forms of media production: stars can be seen as capital itself, employed to produce profits for themselves and for their employers; or they can be understood as commodities, manufactured by publicity apparatuses; or they can operate as fetishes used to promote purchases of other commodities via product tie-ins with movies or other entertainment vehicles, as well as endorsements for unrelated merchandise.<sup>81</sup>

No matter what political orientation is involved, though, all these discussions of celebrity depend upon a causal logic, whereby negative values — e.g., crass desires, gullibility, unrealistic fantasies — are instilled in audiences by the star system. Paradoxically, another group of social researchers have found the same skeptical sentiments among star-gazing fans, the very “masses” assumed to be deceived by “mass culture” who, in fact, reveal themselves to be quite astute critics of the apparatus of celebrity production and suspicious of its motives.<sup>82</sup> For some, however, familiarity with the mechanics of celebrity

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<sup>80</sup> Edgar Morin, The Stars, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1960).

<sup>81</sup> The leftist and liberal critical literature that critiques entertainment celebrities as instruments of capitalist manipulation is extensive and too lengthy to list. A few examples, in addition to Morin, are: Thomas B. Harris, “The Building of Popular Images: Grace Kelly and Marilyn Monroe,” Studies in Public Communication 1 (1957): 45-48, reprinted in Stardom: 40-44; Charles Eckert, “The Carole Lombard in Macy’s Window,” in Fabrications: Costume and the Female Body, ed. Jane Gaines and Charlotte Herzog (New York: Routledge, 1990): 100-121; and Michael Parenti, Make-Believe Media: The Politics of Entertainment (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992).

<sup>82</sup> Fans’ ambivalence in their appreciation of celebrities has been explored, from different perspectives, in Roland Barthes, “La vedette: enquêtes d’audience?” in Oeuvres complètes: Vol. 1, 1942-1965. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1993: 1111-1155; Jackie Stacey, Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship

culture is but proof of its insidious nature. Consider the position taken by Todd Gitlin, a veteran of the New Left and prominent media sociologist: "What is peculiar, though, is American culture's relentless hunger for celebrities, along with a fascination with the process by which celebrity is manufactured. The culture of mythmaking is a culture in which the genuinely heroic has been downgraded. When everything is 'theatricalized' ... then what is noble? what is valuable? what matters?"<sup>83</sup>

Surveys of theories of celebrity tend to divide the field into those that emphasize the production of celebrity and those that concentrate on consumption, but the two approaches are united in a common concern with the detrimental effects of spectacle, theatricality, superficiality, and illusion, as Gitlin's brief statement so eloquently shows. According to this logic, a fascination with celebrity is spawned by the circulation of celebrity images and texts, which become commodities susceptible to the sort of fetishism Marx described in Capital: "nothing but the definite social relations among men [sic] themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things."<sup>84</sup> Individual stars can be likened to brand names of products manufactured according to industrial specifications and consumed as items of monetary exchange, while the actual labor necessary for their production remains concealed.

However, the history of the mixing of consumer activities and entertainment is more extensive, more complicated, and not necessarily

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(London: Routledge, 1994); and Joshua Gamson, Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994).

<sup>83</sup> Todd Gitlin, "Glib, Tawdry, Savvy, and Standardized," Dissent 40:3 (Summer 1993), 352.

<sup>84</sup> Karl Marx, Capital, Vol. 1 (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 165.

determined by economic forces alone. From its formative period onward, public spectacle — exotic and sumptuous wares, colorful entertainers, and the crowd itself — was a key component of modern consumer culture. Even in pre-modern Europe, at late medieval merchant fairs theatrical entertainments played next to vendors' stalls and shops. The birthplace of the modern banking and financial speculation, as well as a center for buying and selling goods, these markets also served as a gathering place for people from all social strata: the concept of "society," became tangible in such places where people intermingled at "the center of networks of display, communications, spectacle."<sup>85</sup> In short, consumer activity is intricately bound up with sensual and emotional pleasure as much as with participation in and reproduction of abstract economic exchange.

Still, class identities and relations are central to such activities, especially in a world where economic exchange is the privileged medium of social interaction and consumer activity the most effective enactment of social status. In fact, class identity and consumer culture are inseparable, for, as Don Slater notes, the reason consumer culture became so ingrained as a taken-for-granted defining feature of social life was that it provided the answers to questions raised by the breakdown of the rigid feudal system.<sup>86</sup> Once power could be exercised in the realm of commercial relations, which was one of the crucial achievements of the eighteenth-century bourgeois revolutions, goods and acts of consumption that signaled identity and status became highly negotiable, but within limits that maintained the modern moral order predicated on the model of the ideal citizen — industrious, white, male, heterosexual, married. Thus, by the mid-nineteenth century, when the middle class had secured its social hegemony, consumer

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<sup>85</sup> Don Slater, "Going Shopping: Markets, Crowds and Consumption," in Cultural Reproduction, ed. Christopher Jenks (London: Routledge, 1993), 195.

<sup>86</sup> Don Slater, Consumer Culture and Modernity (London: Polity Press, 1997).

culture largely catered to bourgeois interests, and the most awe-inspiring spectacles of the time — shopping arcades and department stores, museums, international exhibitions (e.g., London in 1851, Paris in 1855 and 1887, Chicago in 1893) — and illusionistic displays like dioramas, panoramas, and early cinema — were similarly designed to appeal to this group.

The basic activity of consumer culture — shopping — is the practical expression of the modern idea of the social subject as a self-defining individual. And consumerism, Slater remarks, represents the “pre-eminent social training ground” for the production of liberal individualist ethics.<sup>87</sup> Acts of consumption signify autonomy, privacy, and freedom — but, because modernity is contingent upon impersonal, rationalized production, consumption under these conditions also implies manipulation. This contradiction results in what Slater has called the “dialectic of shopping,” with corresponding concepts of two types of consumers: the rational hero and the irrational dupe.

What’s more, the gender disparities associated with this dichotomy — the trite but no less authoritative opposition of active masculinity to passive femininity — are glaring: “Mass consumption and the mass cultural audience ... attract gendered imagery. They are described as whimsical and inconstant, flighty and narcissistic; they can be seduced, or their resistance overcome, by stimuli or persuasion in order to achieve market penetration.” Slater also notes the difficulty of examining how gender operates in discourse on consumer culture: “[I]n writing a book that surveys [theories of consumption], I have symptomatically found it difficult to raise these issues consistently: they get structured out of the field.”<sup>88</sup> Tania Modleski makes a similar observation: “Not

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<sup>87</sup> Slater, Consumer Culture, 61.

<sup>88</sup> Slater, Consumer Culture, 57.

the least of the problems involved in equating the masses and mass culture with the feminine is that it becomes much more difficult for women to interrogate their role within that culture."<sup>89</sup> Something very similar happens in the discourse on celebrity. There is the same dichotomy, although the opposition is between heroic, rational (masculine) cultural critics and irrational, passive (feminine) consuming fans. Condemning entertainment celebrities as agents of capitalist deception or the decay of moral values then becomes an implicit acceptance of this judgment. Hence, the danger of "mass culture" may be read as anxiety about the power of feminine seduction projected onto "the masses."

Of course, these "masses," or the even more menacing "mob," as nineteenth-century social critics liked to describe communities of working-class, often foreign-born, women and men, were condemned as vulgar and unruly by some middle-class women reformers, as well as many of their male colleagues, who advocated an ethic of "social purity." Nonetheless, detractors of popular entertainments and associated celebrities — predominantly but not exclusively men — frequently express condescension, if not outright antipathy, to mass culture by means of analogies to women and passive or seductive femininity.<sup>90</sup> In this arena, class and gender are rarely explicitly addressed but continually alluded to; in the process, their separate but overlapping histories become intertwined. This is not merely a rhetorical trick, but can be traced to the overlapping histories of workers' and women's political movements. As Andreas Huyssen has explained,

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<sup>89</sup> Tania Modleski's "Femininity as Mas(s)querade," in Feminism without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age (New York: Routledge, 1991), 34.

<sup>90</sup> E.g., Gustave Le Bon, author of the influential book The Crowd (New York: Penguin, 1981 [1895]), wrote "Crowds are everywhere distinguished by feminine characteristics" (39).

[W]hen the 19th and early 20th centuries conjured up the threat of the masses "rattling at the gate," to quote [Stuart] Hall, and lamented the concomitant decline of culture and civilization (which mass culture was invariably accused of causing), there was yet another hidden subject. In the age of nascent socialism and the first major women's movement in Europe, the masses knocking at the gate were also women, knocking at the gate of a male-dominated culture.<sup>91</sup>

Insofar as an interest in consumption is deemed inherently feminine, the irrational, vulnerable consumer manipulated by merchants' hype becomes analogous to the emotionally impressionable consumer of sentimental drama. Not surprisingly, by the end of the nineteenth century the most popular theatrical form in Europe and North America, melodrama, had been disdained by critics who regarded it as inferior to serious dramatic art — realism or tragedy — and dismissed as yet another type of trifling mass culture. This was part of a more sweeping division of high from low art that occurred in nineteenth-century Europe and, by proxy, North America, which Christine Gledhill correlates with "a re-masculinisation of cultural value ... recentering the hero and claiming tragic value for the failure of heroic potential." The result was a sexual partition that rendered emotional expression on stage and by audiences feminine. As Gledhill says succinctly, "Men no longer wept in public."<sup>92</sup> Very soon, movies became the most popular form of entertainment and extended the

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<sup>91</sup> Andreas Huyssen, After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 47. The chapter from which this passage is taken summarizes this phenomenon well: "Mass Culture as Woman."

<sup>92</sup> Christine Gledhill, "The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation," in Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Women's Film (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 32.

possibilities for melodramatic plots and performances.<sup>93</sup> Meanwhile, paternalistic predictions about the dangers of mass culture increasingly warned about the beguiling effects of motion pictures on naïve, passive spectators.<sup>94</sup>

There are additional connections between the defining characteristics of melodrama, the emergence of entertainment celebrities, and femininity. First of all, melodramatic characters and stage or film stars are cut from the same cloth: each relies on an ability to display affective conditions and social identities; each takes on meaning through expressive gestures, including speech, using techniques that put emotions on display and make them legible.<sup>95</sup> Once again, the emphasis on states of feeling, rather than reason, and on self-display imprints entertainment celebrities with particularly feminine features, and has the same effect on fandom as well. At the same time, acting has been one of the few occupations in which ambitious women could prosper financially and

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<sup>93</sup> Gledhill concurs with Thomas Elsaesser's contention that all cinematic genres can be understood as variants of melodrama, not only domestic, family-centered narratives usually classified as such. See Elsaesser's "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," in Gledhill, Home Is Where the Heart Is: 43-69.

<sup>94</sup> Several of the earliest of such studies were Herbert Blumer, Movies and Conduct (New York: Macmillan and Company, 1933) and P. M. Hauser, Movies, Delinquency, and Crime (New York: Macmillan, 1935). Movie viewing, Blumer writes, has the "conspicuous tendency ... to dull discrimination" (198) and "to dissolve moral judgment into a maze of ambiguous definitions" (199-200).

<sup>95</sup> For an extensive treatment of the defining features of melodrama performance style, see Peter Brooks, The Melodramatic Imagination: : Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984). For a discussion of the connections between melodrama and film stars, see Christine Gledhill, "Signs of Melodrama," in Stardom: 207-229. But the point can also be illustrated by recalling any performance by a Method actor trained at the Actor's Studio, the young Marlon Brando, say, or by a member of the cast of one of Douglas Sirk's splendid Hollywood melodramas (e.g., Magnificent Obsession, All that Heaven Allows, Written on the Wind, Imitation of Life), or, for that matter, any performance on a television dramatic program, to understand the basic features of melodramatic performance style.

professionally, because, as Huyssen argues, this particular kind of artistry “was seen as imitative and reproductive, rather than original and productive.”<sup>96</sup> A curious addendum to the feminization of celebrity culture is that even male stars become suspect; a classic example is Rudolph Valentino, whose exotic costumes and elaborate makeup in films like The Sheik, as well as his marriages to two women suspected of being lesbians, provoked sarcastic comments about his masculinity in the press.<sup>97</sup> It is not difficult to fathom, then, why an interest in entertainment stars is taken as a sign of emotional immaturity or intellectual inferiority. It is, in a word, unmanly.

### **Dramatis personae**

For all the power exerted by the idea of lesbians as would-be men — women who are unfeminine or “mannish” — and therefore presumably averse to the excessive emotional display of melodrama, the concept of how lesbian subjectivity is expressed and lived that became predominant in the twentieth century is remarkably melodramatic. Consider how Peter Brooks describes the characteristics of melodrama, keeping lesbians in mind:

[M]elodramatic rhetoric, and the whole expressive enterprise of the genre, represents a victory over repression. We could conceive this repression as simultaneously social, psychological, historical, and conventional: what could not be said at an earlier stage, not still on a “nobler” stage, nor within the codes of society. The melodramatic utterance breaks through

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<sup>96</sup> Huyssen, 51.

<sup>97</sup> See Miriam Hansen’s study of Valentino in Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991). Steve Neale also considers eroticized and fetishized representations of men in Hollywood cinema in, “Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on Men and Mainstream Cinema,” Screen 24:6 (November-December 1983): 2-16.

everything that constitutes the “reality principle,” and all its censorships, accommodations, tonings-down. Desire cries aloud its language in identification with full states of being.<sup>98</sup>

In this regard, it seems reasonable to question why the melodramatic disposition of the star system and enduring popularity of melodrama itself didn't make the sphere of popular entertainment more hospitable to lesbians. What little lesbian material was produced before the 1970s — and I would include novels like The Well, along with more spectacular forms like plays and movies — was often censored. The cast members of the 1927 Broadway play The Captive were arrested and subsequent performances banned, although the lesbian who threatens the marriage of the play's two main characters is only talked about and never appears on stage. Crucial scenes in the 1931 German film Mädchen in Uniform, which deals with lesbian desire in a girls' boarding school, were cut from the version shown in U.S. movie houses. When the Nazis came to power in 1933, the film was withdrawn immediately from circulation in Germany, and those responsible for its production fled the country. Once the Production Code was adopted by Hollywood studios in 1934, the possibility of the slightest, saddest lesbian character was eradicated until after the Code was gradually set aside in the 1950s. It's no wonder, then, that until the late 1980s, the idea that any woman working within show business, or any branch of the media, would willingly proclaim herself lesbian was practically unthinkable (the phrase most often used was “professional suicide”). Indeed, hints aplenty could be dropped but the tacit agreement to not investigate further was sufficient to police the boundary separating lesbianism and celebrity.

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<sup>98</sup> Brooks, 41.

And yet the conditions for lesbian personhood in the twentieth century and those for entertainment celebrity seem to be particularly well matched. I'd go so far as to say that this is not solely an effect of chronological contiguity but of a firmly established structural relationship, albeit one where lesbian content is most often realized through erasure or disavowal. In every sector of modern consumer culture and all the key areas where contemporary celebrity is constituted — popular entertainment, mass media, and related publicity techniques — normative definitions of sexuality, gender, and class are routinely mobilized and reinforced. At the same time, the devices used to arouse and satisfy consumers' desires establish an imaginary, but also material, foundation for lesbian passions: engagements in activities coded as feminine, where the pleasures of women's company may be taken for granted; opportunities to enjoy the display of female bodies; enactments of relationships among women, even if overtly asexual; and depictions of forceful, not always typically feminine women.<sup>99</sup>

That may be the reason why backstage and off-screen show business communities have always been suspected of fostering lesbian tendencies, as well as licentiousness of every variety. There is certainly a voyeuristic component to this notion, as the tenor of the following passage in Havelock Ellis's 1903 text on lesbianism indicates:

Passionate friendships among girls, from the most innocent to the most elaborate excursions in the direction of Lesbos, are extremely common in theaters, both among actresses and, even more, among chorus- and

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<sup>99</sup> I realize that voyeurism is believed by a number of feminist theorists to be a male or masculine perversion, but I find this absurd, or another way to interpret lesbian subjectivity as "inversion" or a denial of sexual difference; the effect of all such explanations is a refusal to consider that the binary concept of gender is not immutable.

ballet-girls. Here the pell-mell of the dressing rooms, the wait of perhaps two hours between the performances, during which all the girls are cooped up, in a state of inaction and excitement, in a few crowded dressing-rooms, afford every opportunity for the growth of this particular kind of sentiment.<sup>100</sup>

These words appear as a quotation, which Ellis attributes to “a friend,” although it’s not at all clear what relationship this friend has to the setting she or he describes. However, a line further on in the text may offer a hint: “It is ... among the upper ranks, alike of society and of prostitution, that Lesbianism is most definitely to be met with, for here we have much greater liberty of action, and much greater freedom from prejudices.”<sup>101</sup> Few late nineteenth-century social commentators were concerned about threats to the decency of lower-class performers — they were presumed morally deficient in any case — while bourgeois women, who were expected to embody the principles of feminine virtue, were perceived as “fallen” if they opted for a career on the stage. Tracy Davis has written at length about the ideological foundations of the sexual stereotypes applied to actresses and other female performers in Victorian England, but also in the U.S. during the same period:

[L]ike the demi-mondaine, she is marked as a social adventuress, flaunting her beauty to accrue influence and wealth; and like the prostitute, she must perpetually stoke the fires of admiration, or perish. The incompatibility of naïvité, modesty, and theatrical ambition was interpreted as unfeminine, anti-family, and anti-male tendencies in women who chose to contravene their properly gendered upbringing....

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<sup>100</sup> Ellis, 215.

<sup>101</sup> Ellis, 216 (emphasis added).

She was criticized for doing exactly what men did: turning outside the home for social intercourse, intellectual stimulation, and occupational fulfillment.<sup>102</sup>

The association between disdain for proper female behavior, attributed to women who opted for careers on stage, and masculine tendencies associated with lesbianism, which was the defining characteristic of an identifiable “invert,” becomes clearer.

Despite the prevailing suspicions about the sexual debauchery of actresses and other female performers, unambiguous references to homosexuality were rare when actresses appeared as characters in the media. Allusions, however, were not. Sanitized representations of off-stage life can be found in the Stage Door-type movies, which feature lots of intense, but never overtly sexual, relationships between women. A pre-Code film like the 1929 Pandora's Box could go even further by alluding to the lesbian demi-mondaines in pre-World War Two Berlin music halls. But since the logic of the celebrity system presumes that the “real hero behaves just like the reel hero,”<sup>103</sup> and until very recently there were no unmistakable lesbian heroes in the repertoire of popular entertainments, any particular star's heterosexuality could be taken for granted. Therein lies the basis for the aura of secrecy that hovers around lesbian celebrities and results in what Terry Castle has dubbed the “apparitional lesbian,” who “remains a kind of ‘ghost effect’ in the cinema world of modern life: elusive, vaporous, difficult to spot — even when she is there in plain view, mortal and magnificent at the center of the screen.”<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Tracy C. Davis, Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture (London: Routledge, 1991), 85-86.

<sup>103</sup> DeCordova, 27.

<sup>104</sup> Castle, Apparitional Lesbian, 2.

One strategy frequently used to give these ghosts material form has been *biographical, historical recuperation* — the compiling of annotated lists of illustrious lesbians that provides a cornerstone of the visibility project. Another, which I find more agreeable, is to investigate the lesbian phantoms that haunt Western culture as indications of central contradictions in its belief systems, including the notion that visibility is the proof of reality. I am not arguing that there is another, truer reality concealed under the illusory surface of media imagery. Instead, what seems so intriguing is how the tremendous growth of consumer and visual culture, which is so often cited as the culprit for the proliferation of celebrity, has produced at the same time a sexualized field where secrecy may indicate something dangerous but can also provide a major source of pleasure. But it is important to remember that not all keepers of secrets occupy equivalent positions in relation to power. As Foucault states,

Silence itself — the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers — is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said.... [W]e must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things [about sex], how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required.<sup>105</sup>

As a result, the impetus for disclosing the unspoken, or unspeakable, is capable of precipitating a disturbance in orderly public discourse.

The reputation of a lesbian celebrity like Radclyffe Hall may be interpreted in this context. Some thirty-five years after The Well of Loneliness

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<sup>105</sup> Foucault, 27.

appeared and became a centerpiece of lesbian culture, as well as broader cultural precepts concerning lesbianism, its protagonist and its author remained commanding iconic figures for members of a growing number of politically ambitious lesbians. And it is telling that the two were frequently conflated. When Una Troubridge's biography of Hall was published in 1962, the first and only North American lesbian journal in existence at the time, the Ladder, reviewed it as a "biography of 'The Well'" and recommended it as a companion to "that monumental lesbian love story."<sup>106</sup> A subsequent article in the Ladder devoted to Troubridge's paean to Hall, written by leading gay author Donald Webster Cory, also insisted on the correspondence between Hall and Stephen Gordon. Cory, however, did note the discrepancy between the imagined character and her author that I mentioned previously: Hall "required no false front of concealment" and suffered no terrible social censure, while Stephen and her lesbian friends were lonely, "miserable and outcast and driven to suicide."<sup>107</sup> Nevertheless, he avers that social stigma, which was the lot of all homosexuals and led inevitably to feelings of alienation and an internalized sense of inferiority, must have been as true of Hall as it was of her fictional lesbians.

The antidote, as Cory understood this social-psychological dynamic, was twofold. First, heroic individuals needed to furnish public representations of homosexual women and men. This, he believed, had been Hall's major contribution: "It was one thing for the world in its silence and its gossip to know about John, as they knew about many of her contemporaries, men and women. It was quite another thing to make an official fact out of something that everyone just knew to be." Second, these representations also needed to be

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<sup>106</sup> Gene Damon, "Biography of 'The Well,'" Ladder 6:7 (April 1962), 10.

<sup>107</sup> Donald Webster Cory (pseud. Edward Sagarin), "The Loneliness of Radclyffe Hall," Ladder 7:10 (July 1963), 8-9.

heroic: "They would be portrayed, not as human beings, but as superhuman beings.... [M]illions of people felt that this was the portrait that the world required, to lessen the antipathy, to accept the invert into the family of humanity."<sup>108</sup> On these terms, a lesbian celebrity automatically attained the stature of a hero, even if this meant that she was also fated to be a martyr. In Cory's words, "[W]hether she rejects the society or accepts its judgement and looks upon herself as an aberration, no matter what course she chooses, she is a lonely human being."<sup>109</sup>

As recently as 1970 Hall was still invoked as the standard-bearer for lesbian personhood. In that year, a cover of the Ladder featured words from the final passages of The Well inscribed in Gothic lettering with Hall's name printed underneath: "We are coming / And our name is legion / You dare not disown us."<sup>110</sup> By then, however, the women's and gay liberation movements were gathering steam, and the quotation took on a different tone in this context. In the novel, these phrases are uttered as an petition for deliverance, addressed to God by the ghosts of lesbians who had died over the course of the novel, with Stephen acting as the medium. Printed in large letters, without illustration, in 1970 these words read as a militant declaration, a vaguely threatening statement issued by impatient amazons as a call to arms against a secular, homophobic world. Martyrdom was no longer an appropriate stance for living lesbian celebrities.

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<sup>108</sup> Cory, 7-8.

<sup>109</sup> Cory, 9. That Hall's novel conjured up an image of lesbians as martyrs was both widely recognized and rejected by the author. A cartoon on this theme published shortly after The Well scandal erupted, which depicted a caricature of a crucified Hall, infuriated the author, who found it intolerably blasphemous, and she refused to speak about for years (Baker, 257).

<sup>110</sup> Ladder 14:3&4 (December 1969-January 1970), 1.

### **3 Going public: star wars in the liberation movements**

From the outset, the gay and women's liberation movements that burst forth on the public stage in the late 1960s looked forward to a world transformed by political and cultural revolutions, but members of these movements also forged historical arguments to counter the idea that homosexuality was unhealthy and socially pernicious. Where lesbians were concerned, famous women — from Sappho to Gertrude Stein — whose homosexuality had been practically erased, although not always ignored, were posthumously recruited as distinguished forebears. The justification for the attention given to eminent lesbians of past eras was similar to that most frequently encountered today: role models. This was not a novel argument, insofar as the homosexuality of distinguished individuals has been a consistent feature of organized efforts to obtain social approbation and decriminalization of homosexuality. Magnus Hirschfeld, who founded the Scientific Humanitarian Committee in Berlin in 1898 and later established the Institute for Sexual Science to promote sexual reform and tolerance of homosexuality in particular, published lists of famous homosexuals. However, the difference between the rationale for these earlier efforts and those made since the 1960s is that Hirschfeld and his contemporaries believed that this information would change social mores in a population they considered largely heterosexual, while members of liberation groups were more concerned with problems of self-regard among gay men and lesbians.

In 1969 Dick Leitsch, executive director of the New York City chapter of the Mattachine Society, called for research into and publication of information about notable lesbian and gay men by members of the nascent gay liberation movement:

Homosexuals, like everyone else, need people to identify with. We need heroes, homosexuals who have "made it", to show what we can do if we try.... Increased interest in homosexual heroes and homosexual histories would help solve the identity crisis so many homosexuals feel by bringing home the realization that we are not "freaks", but part of a group that has always existed and contributed its bit toward civilization and culture.<sup>1</sup>

For Leitsch and like-minded comrades a parade of accomplished cultural and political figures who could be identified as lesbian or gay offered psychological benefits for shame ridden gay men and lesbians who were potential members of the movement. Awareness of these dead heroes would instill pride, which quickly became the watchword of the gay liberation program.

Living lesbian heroes were another matter, all famously occupying more or less transparent but securely guarded closets. Although it might seem inconsistent with efforts to identify noteworthy representatives, anyone who became renowned due to her involvement in the women's or gay movement was suspected of using politics for self-aggrandizement. In other words, the concern with celebrity in lesbian cultural milieus was treated as a political problem as often as it was interpreted as an achievement. Documents from the extremely volatile and often contentious late 1960s and early seventies confirm the difficulties presented by celebrity, which could be summarized as one general question: how to deal with the media. At that time and from the perspective of the young radicals who constituted the first gay and women's liberation groups, television and the mainstream press were not looked upon as neutral publicity vehicles. Rather, these media were assumed to be ideological instruments of repressive patriarchy and capitalism, an assessment amply supported by much

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<sup>1</sup> Dick Leitsch, "Facts Your History Teacher 'Forgot' to Mention," *Gay* 3 (December 31, 1969): 14.

of the coverage they offered — or neglected to give — about these movements. Women's liberation fared slightly better in this regard, although its more radical contingents were routinely treated as extremists. Gay liberation activists and actions, on the other hand, were either ignored completely or rendered as eccentric curiosities. The uprising in New York City sparked by a police raid of the Stonewall Inn in June 1969, for example, either was given little mention in the local news media or treated as an amusing scandal with little political import.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, the gay and women's liberation movements, like other radical political and countercultural groups active in the 1960s and early seventies, regarded media that did not emanate from friendly quarters — alternative, non-commercial media — with deep suspicion. In addition to general skepticism about the ideological slant given to reports on events and issues by dominant media, members of radical organizations resented its power to authorize spokespeople and leaders. The ideals of democratic decision-making often upheld by these groups, combined with an effort to incorporate Maoist principles of self-government in North American oppositional politics, created an atmosphere of mistrust concerning leaders or any structures that reproduced and institutionalized power differentials among individuals. The Gay Liberation Front (GLF), the name chosen by the first militant gay liberation organization formed in New York City in the wake of the Stonewall Rebellion, is indicative of its political principles, which consciously aligned this group with the popular national liberation movements in Asia, Africa, and Latin America that emerged in the post-World War II period.

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<sup>2</sup> For a survey of the how gay and, to a lesser degree, lesbian politics was treated by the mainstream media, see Edward Alwood, Straight News: Gays, Lesbians, and the News Media (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

### Shooting stars

Another source of gay and lesbian activists' ire regarding the press was the common journalistic practice of seeking conventionally attractive members of these groups as de facto representatives. The chosen spokespeople were almost uniformly white and middle-class, and often conservatively attired and well mannered by bourgeois standards. The gay press of the era, which consisted primarily of locally distributed, inexpensive newsprint periodicals, routinely registered antagonism to what was viewed as the commercial media's imposition of an individualistic ethic on fundamentally collective efforts. Anyone quoted as a spokesperson was likely to be castigated for her or his cooperation. For example, a feminist gay man, writing in the pages of the New York GLF newspaper Come Out, disparaged an article on gay liberation in the New York Times in a typical fashion: "[W]e can tell who are those among us who had the lowest consciousness — the straight identified homosexuals who compete with each other for access to the pig media." More optimistically, he added, "All the media in the world cannot erase the products of a gay consciousness."<sup>3</sup>

The same theme was taken up most vigorously by lesbians involved in both the feminist and gay movements, so it is not surprising that lesbians were among the most vociferous media critics. A regular contributor in both contexts, Martha Shelley, was particularly contemptuous of a new phenomenon she designated the "Women's Liberation Media Star," who she profiled for Come Out readers:

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<sup>3</sup> Steve Gavin, "Thoughts on the Movement," Come Out 2:8 (Winter 1972): 20. The epithet "pig," frequently used in the writings of radicals in this period, was borrowed from the Black Panther Party. For a discussion of this influence, see Karla Jay and Allen Young's introduction to their edited collection of early gay liberation documents, Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation (New York: New York University Press, 1992), xxxv.

Generally a college-educated, white, well-heeled woman who knows a great deal about publicity and publishing but who never has the time for consciousness raising, she is prone to make apologetic statements to the male press, prone to waste her time arguing with Hugh Hefner or Dick Cavett when she could be organizing women. "I have a wonderful relationship with my husband," says one denying her lesbian relationships in Life magazine — when only a week before she brought tears to the eyes of gay women with the stories of her ill-fated lesbian affairs.

Shelley goes on to explain the political repercussions that will ensue from efforts to use mainstream media to publicize feminist and gay arguments for liberation: "These media stars, carefully coifed and lathered with foundation makeup, claim to represent all women. In actuality they are ripping off all women.... These women will betray us when the cock crows.... If large numbers of women are going to passively depend on a few stars to liberate them, instead of getting themselves together to do it, the movement will surely fail.<sup>4</sup> According to Shelley's logic, media coverage was a distraction, at best, if not utterly antithetical to the principles and purposes of liberation.

Shelley's decision to omit the name of the offending woman featured in Life is curious and deserves further reflection. On one hand, it could be interpreted as a refusal to acknowledge someone the media chose to shine a spotlight on as worthy of additional recognition. Or it might be construed as a acknowledgment of that woman's claim to membership in the movement, despite her willingness to be singled out for attention. Therefore, not indicating her proper name may have been an effort to spare her embarrassment. (Shelley

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<sup>4</sup> Martha Shelley, "Subversion in the Women's Movement," Come Out 1:7 (December 1970-January 1971): n.p.

was less circumspect when she dealt with Betty Friedan in this article, perhaps because condemnation in this instance was directed at a feminist who had publicly distanced herself from radical feminists and lesbian activists, and attempted to do so in the name of the entire women's movement.) But there was little mystery concerning the reference for anyone involved in radical feminist or gay politics, at least in New York City.

She was clearly identifiable as Kate Millett, whose 1970 best-selling Sexual Politics gave feminists conceptual ammunition for a full-fledged attack on patriarchal, sexist culture as represented by Sigmund Freud, D.H. Lawrence, and Norman Mailer, among others.<sup>5</sup> However, Millett didn't count on — nor could she have predicted — her elevation to media stardom as the result of her book's popular success. Her portrait was displayed on the cover of the August 31, 1970, issue of Time, which devoted eight of its pages to a feature on "the politics of sex," including a sidebar profile of Millett.<sup>6</sup> She was, as Shelley noted sarcastically, interviewed at length by a reporter from Life for its September 4, 1970, feature on women's liberation.<sup>7</sup> She appeared on radio and television talk shows. All of this attention might have been lapped up greedily by someone trying to make a career as an actress or politician, but Millett was a literary scholar and artist, and her much touted book was her Ph.D. thesis. She was also an avid participant in a political movement that distrusted all such fanfare.

Not that mainstream media univocally praised Millett: she was lampooned viciously in an Esquire illustration; her work was also dismissed as unnecessarily strident and poorly documented by a reviewer in the same issue of

<sup>5</sup> Kate Millett, Sexual Politics (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970).

<sup>6</sup> "Who's Come a Long Way, Baby?" Time 96:9 (August 31, 1970): 16-23.

<sup>7</sup> Marie-Claude Wrenn, "Women Arise: The Furious Young Philosopher Who Got It Down on Paper," Life 69:10 (September 4, 1970): 16-23.

Esquire, as well as in Harper's, the New Republic, and Commentary.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, she became the symbol of everything that opponents of feminism despised. On top of that, a subsequent Time article cited a statement concerning her bisexuality that Millett had made to a gathering at Columbia University in November 1970, using it as evidence of her writing's dubious value. "The disclosure is bound to discredit her as a spokeswoman for her cause, cast further doubt on her theories, and reinforce the views of those skeptics who routinely dismiss all liberationists as lesbians," the article states matter-of-factly.<sup>9</sup> The New York City chapter of the National Organization of Women (NOW) immediately set out to dispute the underlying argument that a lesbian is automatically disreputable at their demonstration for child care and abortion rights held several days after the Time article appeared. Demonstrators wore lavender armbands and distributed leaflets declaring support for Millett and condemning Time for trying to undermine their movement. When the press failed to cover this aspect of the event, a group of feminists called a press conference to state plainly once again the solidarity between women's and gay liberation, with Millett prominent among the speakers. This time, the media took note. According to Sidney Abbott and Barbara Love's account of this affair, "Media coverage was excellent.... It virtually halted dyke-baiting."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Helen Lawrenson, "Feminine Mistake," Esquire 75 (January 1971): 82-85; Irving Howe, Harper's 241 (December 1970): 110; Janet Malcolm, "Help!" New Republic 163 (October 10, 1970): 15-17; Midge Decter, "Liberated Woman," Commentary 50 (October 1970): 33-44.

<sup>9</sup> "Women's Lib: A Second Look," Time 96:24 (December 14, 1970): 50.

<sup>10</sup> Sidney Abbott and Barbara Love, Sappho Was a Right-On Woman: A Liberated View of Lesbianism (New York: Stein and Day, 1972), 125. For a description of the entire sequence of events, see pp. 119-125.

For Millett, however, this display of sisterhood could not offset entirely the effects of the treatment she received from within movement ranks. The attacks began as soon as Sexual Politics was published and an unsigned leaflet denouncing Millett for grandstanding was distributed at a meeting of Radicalesbians, a group formed in response to homophobic statements by prominent members of the women's movement like Betty Friedan and Susan Brownmiller. Friedan had become infamous within U.S. lesbian circles as the author of the remark that lesbianism was a "lavender menace" as far as women's liberation was concerned. Nor did she stop there, but later engineered a purge of lesbian officers in the National Organization for Women. Brownmiller then echoed Friedan when she dismissed lesbians' presence within women's liberation as a "lavender herring" in a piece she wrote for the New York Times magazine.<sup>11</sup> Taken together, these condescending comments by leading feminists inspired the militant "Lavender Menace" action by Radicalesbians at the Second Congress to Unite Women in 1970.<sup>12</sup> And it was a member of Radicalesbians who challenged Millett to admit her lesbian affairs at the Columbia event.<sup>13</sup>

In Flying, Millett's autobiographical account of the year following her publishing success and her anointment as a women's liberation luminary, she writes about several grueling months on the college lecture circuit, after which "you come home to find everybody in New York invents scandalous legends

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11 Susan Brownmiller, "Sisterhood Is Powerful': A Member of the Women's Liberation Movement Explains Its Aims," New York Times Magazine, March 15, 1970: 26-27.

12 Abbott and Love, 108-116.

13 Karla Jay describes the leaflet and Radicalesbians' campaign to discredit Millett in Tales of the Lavender Menace: A Memoir of Liberation (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 232-233.

while you're gone, and three purists have just put forth an edict on your treason."<sup>14</sup> Martha Shelley could be counted as one of these purists, but so too could any of a number of radical feminists, such as the authors of a set of resolutions proposed by a feminist collective called the Class Workshop at the second Congress to Unite Women, held in May 1970 in New York City. Among the tenets the group advocated were the following:

Women's Liberation is getting popular enough that the media needs us as much as we need them. We can and must dictate our terms to them: present prepared statements and refuse to give personal information.... From now on anyone who refuses to follow this policy must be assumed to be doing so for her own personal aggrandizement.... No member of a group can appear as an independent feminist — whether for fame or for money.... No individual or group can earn a living by writing or speaking about women's liberation.... Anyone who wants to write should write for the movement, not for the publishing industry.... Any individual who refuses collective discipline will be ostracized from the movement.<sup>15</sup>

Millett was guilty on all counts. But the resolutions were not endorsed by those attending the conference. These were extreme and ultimately impractical guidelines for a political movement with as broad a constituency as women's liberation. The publishing industry was eager to cater to a growing audience for writings by feminists and about feminism, and the movement counted a goodly number of members with literary ambitions among its active members.

However, such sentiments were very much in line with the anti-establishment

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<sup>14</sup> Kate Millett, *Flying* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), 93.

<sup>15</sup> "What Can We Do about the Media," quoted by Alice Echols in *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 208.

stance characteristic of the more radical segments of both gay and women's liberation.

In many respects, disdain for the media and the fear that it would dilute radical messages by transforming movement spokespeople into celebrities had been a feature of American radical politics since the mid-1960s. The Civil Rights, Black Power, and anti-Vietnam War movements had all grappled with the problem but were never able to resolve it. As Todd Gitlin explains in his classic study of the relationship between the New Left and the media, The Whole World Is Watching, movement leaders like Mark Rudd of Columbia Students for a Democratic Society, Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin of the Yippies, and Stokely Carmichael of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee became so newsworthy that they often ignored the principles of egalitarian decision-making officially endorsed by the groups they represented. As the result of the media attention, Gitlin says, "Narcissistic motives, once negligible or contained, inevitably flourished, fattened by rewards, while more cooperative impulses withered."<sup>16</sup> In his analysis, the feminists who built the women's liberation movement in the late-1960s reacted against such preening ambitions and macho posturing with efforts to guard against this phenomenon, although they, too, could not control journalists' compulsive focus on individual personalities. Kate Millett captures well the impossible situation that faced any feminist who was singled out as a public figure: "[T]he movement is sending out double signals: you absolutely must preach at our panel, star at our conference ... at the same

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<sup>16</sup> Todd Gitlin, The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media and the Making and Unmaking of the New Left (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980). 161.

time laying down a wonderfully uptight line about elitism. Why can't we stick by what we knew was right to start with — no bloody leaders?"<sup>17</sup>

### **Outer space**

Unlike feminists, gay liberation groups rarely faced the need to deal with the possibility of their leaders becoming media stars, because at this time outspoken members of this political constituency were automatically deemed objects of scorn and derision. The mainstream press never seemed eager to identify gay or lesbian leaders, or even to acknowledge that homosexuality could be a political identity, as opposed to a shameful condition. Even a sympathetic article, such as a profile of the recently radicalized Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) that appeared in a 1971 issue of the New York Times Magazine, devoted considerable space and little criticism to theories concerning the psychopathology of lesbianism.<sup>18</sup> No one who believed that the mass media pursued a repressive social agenda would be surprised by the repeated insinuations of perversion among lesbian activists in so much of the reporting on feminist and gay politics. But for political revolutionaries like Rita Mae Brown, a leading radical lesbian feminist polemicist in the early seventies, this kind of treatment could be interpreted as a political advantage. "For those who build toward a new world, women's liberation is a dead movement twitching its limbs in the vulgar throes of establishment recognition," she wrote. "Women-identified women will not sell out."<sup>19</sup> Like many others at that time, Brown

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<sup>17</sup> Millett, Flying, 92-93.

<sup>18</sup> Judy Klemesrud, "The Disciples of Sappho, Updated," New York Times Magazine, March 28, 1971, 38-52.

<sup>19</sup> Rita Mae Brown, "Take a Lesbian to Lunch," Jay and Young, Out of the Closets, 195.

believed that radical lesbians possessed the political analysis and revolutionary resolve necessary to bring about liberation of all women.

However, there was at least one American lesbian, beside the ambiguous Kate Millett, who attracted abundant notice from the press due to her outspoken advocacy of lesbian issues and her unrepentant sexual identity. This was Jill Johnston, known mainly as regular contributor to the Village Voice and author of the first book to champion the new radical lesbian politics, Lesbian Nation.<sup>20</sup> Many lesbians expressed their admiration for Johnston's work, for the courage exhibited by an established, albeit avant-garde, art and dance critic publicly proclaiming her lesbianism and writing about her lesbian life. But she also encountered extreme animosity from lesbian feminist militants, which she also chronicled in her weekly column, reprinted in Lesbian Nation and recalled in a 1998 republication of much of this material. Looking back on the hostile reception she often received from members of both women's and gay liberation, Johnston credits the media for producing her "new giantess misshapen profile rigged up in the glare of national publicity" and the "'false self' of stardumb" that resulted. Still, she remained mindful of how she abetted the production of her own notoriety and therefore put herself directly in the line of fire.<sup>21</sup>

The kind of highjinks that landed Johnston in this predicament were often designed to garner attention from journalists who couldn't resist a juicy tidbit, although precedents can be found in the dadaesque prose she had been producing for the Voice for years. Starting out as a fairly conventional critic of avant-garde art and dance in the late 1950s, she developed a quirky, rambling,

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<sup>20</sup> Jill Johnston, Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution (New York; Simon and Schuster, 1973).

<sup>21</sup> Jill Johnston, Introduction to Admission Accomplished: The Lesbian Nation Years (1970-75) (London: Serpent's Tail, 1998), n.p.

sometimes whimsical, often intimate writing style by the mid-sixties. Her columns could be described as the literary equivalent of the happenings, Fluxus performances, and similar aesthetic attacks on the pretensions of high art that she championed as a critic — “an art of high amusement and contempt for authority,” as she put it.<sup>22</sup> Predictably, in the early days of women’s liberation, Johnston ran afoul of more respectable feminists like Friedan, who was interested in press coverage of the movement but not the kind generated by outrageous behavior. In summer 1970, Women Strike for Equality, a coalition made up of various women’s liberation groups and headed by Friedan, held a fundraising cocktail party at the East Hampton home of avant-garde art collectors Ethel and Robert Scull. But Johnston upstaged the representatives of the feminist group by taking a topless swim in the hosts’ pool while society reporters from the New York Times, Newsweek, UPI, and others took notes and snapped photos. “Have gun, will travel. See pool, will swim,” she wrote in her gleeful account of the episode.<sup>23</sup> Later she explained that she had not planned the action to “protest the discrimination of lesbians by feminists” because, in her words, “I wasn’t nearly so organized.”<sup>24</sup>

Then, in the spring of 1971, Johnston published a piece in the Voice entitled “Lois Lane Is a Lesbian,” no more or less impassioned than her previous writings but unusual in that she no longer mentioned lesbianism in passing but explicitly aligned herself with gay liberation and offered a theory of lesbian feminist politics. One would assume that such an unvarnished statement of affiliation in a widely read newspaper would be welcomed by gay and lesbian

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Jill Johnston, “Bash in the Sculls,” in Admission Accomplished, 10.

<sup>24</sup> Jill Johnston, “Tarzana from the Treetops at Cocktails,” in Lesbian Nation, 16.

activists. But Johnston was too eccentric for many involved in either women's or gay liberation. As she noted in the same article, "I'm persona non grata with every 'group' in the country.... The women's lib people don't like the way I swim. The Gay Liberation Front says I wouldn't get any support from them.... Gay newspaper says I'm an exhibitionist."<sup>25</sup> The last count of the indictment, at least, seems justifiable, although Gay's coverage of Johnston could also be attributed to their overall tendency to dismiss or belittle women's liberation and anyone associated with it.<sup>26</sup> Gay's sexism aside, Johnston's performance at Town Hall in New York City in May 1971, a media circus staged as a confrontation

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<sup>25</sup> Jill Johnston, "Lois Lane Is a Lesbian," in Admission Accomplished, 31.

<sup>26</sup> In support of this assessment I offer the evidence of Gay's routine neglect of feminist activities and viewpoints save a regular column by pseudonymous lesbian Lily Hansen (Lilli Vincenz), who wrote almost entirely about her personal life (family, girlfriend, dog). The only exception to such gestures toward lesbian inclusion were Gay's infrequent profiles of lesbians who became famous long ago and were either dead (Radclyffe Hall) or living in obscurity (Djuna Barnes). Pieces by men in Gay often evaluated their female peers in terms of their attractiveness and disdainful of any who were old, overweight, unfashionably dressed, or otherwise not glamorous. It's not too difficult to figure out why lesbians deserted the gay movement to form separate organizations. In one issue (Gay 1:7 [March 1, 1970]), they illustrated the token lesbian column with a soft-porn type image of a naked woman, which prompted a public protest by Martha Shelley at a panel on gay liberation and the media. For Gay's rebuttal to Shelley see, Peter Ogren "Woman Objects to 'Gay' as Sexist, Tears Up Paper at Rutgers: A Personal View," Gay 52 (June 7, 1971): 6, 9), which avers that women's liberation and gay liberation share no common ground. In another issue, art critic Gregory Battcock expresses support for the Panthers, the anti-Vietnam War movement, and opposition to police harassment while expressly refusing to support women's liberation ("The Last Estate," Gay 1:11 [July 6, 1970]). The pattern continues in Sorel David's lukewarm review of Johnston's first book, Marmalade Me, a selection of her dance and art criticism from the Village Voice, where the critic states, "I used to like Jill Johnston, but that was before she became a professional lesbian." Sorel David, "Shreds of an Orange Peel," Gay 58 (August 30, 1971). Gay's disinterest in lesbian issues can be contrasted with coverage in Come Out!, the publication of New York GLF. Significantly, Gay was affiliated with the Gay Activist Alliance, formed by (mostly male) members of GLF who objected to the original group's gestures of solidarity with the Black Panthers and its sympathy with and support for women's liberation.

between Norman Mailer and his feminist critics, could easily be put down as exhibitionist. Indeed, Johnston did not shy away from this characterization but saw her public buffoonery as classic épater-le-bourgeois theatrics meant to upset well-heeled supporters of fashionable radical causes. As far as she was concerned, her antics were also intended as a critical commentary on the event's premise — that “women's liberation is a debatable issue.”<sup>27</sup> She refused the terms of the debate and also its format when she rose from the conference table to join a couple of friends in sexual horseplay on stage.

But she did not repeat her performance or otherwise disrupt a local television talk show on which she and DOB president Ruth Simpson were scheduled to appear along with two conservative psychiatrists. Simpson and other members of her organization left in protest after attempting to oust the male guests and host, while Johnston stayed behind and attempted to contradict the doctors' ideas about sexual perversion.<sup>28</sup> And when she teamed up with author Germaine Greer, feminist media star of the moment and co-panelist at Town Hall, on another TV talk show, Johnston was outspoken but not particularly outrageous.<sup>29</sup> In a way, though, it didn't matter whether she played the game or not, whether she answered the interviewers questions or turned the tables on them. She was invited to participate in these discussions because of her notoriety for being colorful, which included being unbashful about her lesbianism, and if she lived up to her reputation the producers got what they were after. For Johnston, as well as other lesbians, a coherent, effective strategy

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<sup>27</sup> Jill Johnston, “Tarzana,” in Lesbian Nation, 17.

<sup>28</sup> Jill Johnston, “The Media Macho,” Village Voice, April 15, 1971: 25-26.  
“Lesbians Zap Bandy,” Gay 51 (May 24, 1971).

<sup>29</sup> Jill Johnston, “Germaine and Guillaume in Baltimore,” Village Voice, April 22, 1971: 31-32.

for being taken seriously by the dominant media at this time was structurally impossible. As a result of these and similar skirmishes with the media, Johnston adopted an analysis similar to Martha Shelley's and other movement critics of the time, even though she was vulnerable to the charge that her high visibility made her a collaborator with the enemy.<sup>30</sup>

Jill Johnston's clown persona may have allowed her to overcome the strictures that prevented the mass media from creating gay and lesbian liberation icons (n.b. there were no lesbians on Time or Newsweek covers until 1997<sup>31</sup>), although it permitted them to dismiss this newly open and prideful lesbian as a kook. On occasion, a relatively conservative, not at all amusing gay spokesman like Dick Leitsch was quoted as a representative of the old-guard homophile activists in the Mattachine Society, and serious DOB officials like Ruth Simpson in New York or the group's founders Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon in San Francisco would be called upon for authoritative lesbian viewpoints. But none of these political leaders became as widely identified with the movement as did Johnston. Nowadays her or Millett's notoriety would be celebrated as a milestone in the contest for visibility; then it was a millstone that each had to

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<sup>30</sup> Johnston's views on this topic can be found in the two Voice articles cited in notes 28 and 29, as well as in Lesbian Nation. One difference between her position and Shelley's was that she didn't condemn other feminists who were singled for media attention. In addition, her first two books were published by established presses like Dutton (Marmalade Me) and Simon and Schuster (Lesbian Nation), which was unacceptable to the strictest adherents of the radical (lesbian) feminist code of conduct.

<sup>31</sup> The 1997 milestone was the April 14 Time cover featuring Ellen DeGeneres, with the legend, "Yep, I'm Gay!" The cover story on Martina Navratilova in the June 30, 1982, issue of Newsweek does not contradict this observation, since it appeared during the period when she vociferously denied that she was a lesbian. See chapter 5 for a discussion of the press coverage of Navratilova's treatment by the press.

drag around from speaking engagement to speaking engagement, on the lecture and talk show circuit that constituted movement stardom.

### Talking trash

Johnston and Millett may have been media stars, emblems of the women's and gay liberation movements that provoked major press coverage at the end of the sixties, but they were also objects of what became known as trashing by feminist and lesbian activists critical of celebrity. Johnston even engaged in a bit of this activity, accusing Millett of "posing as 'straight' for the media" prior to Time's outing of the Sexual Politics author, although that didn't spare Johnston the same treatment when the media nominated her as the representative for lesbian liberation and she didn't decline.<sup>32</sup> In her case, the charge was that she was male-identified, because she boasted of her sexual exploits in print,<sup>33</sup> and elitist when she tried to organize a meeting on the intersecting interests of lesbians and feminists because, as she put it, "the entire dyke community from coast to coast was not invited."<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Jo Freeman, a women's liberation activist based in Chicago, was shunned and surreptitiously denounced by supposed "sisters" in Chicago in the early seventies. Some years later she published an article in Ms., using her movement nom de guerre Joreen,

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<sup>32</sup> See, for example, two articles on gay liberation that appeared in mass circulation magazines in 1971, both of which included photographs of Johnston: "The Militant Homosexual," Newsweek 78:8 (August 23, 1971): 45-48; and "Homosexuals in Revolt: The Year that One Liberation Movement Turned Militant," Life 71:26 (December 31, 1971): 62-72. In the former, Johnston is the only woman depicted, and she is one of three lesbians who appear in eight heavily illustrated Life magazine pages devoted to the new gay movement.

<sup>33</sup> Johnston, Lesbian Nation, 132-133.

<sup>34</sup> Jill Johnston, "Delitism, Stardumb, and Leadershit" [reprint of December 14, 1972 Village Voice column], Gullibles Travels (New York: Links Books, 1974), 189.

analyzing trashing as an unacknowledged enforcement of traditional concepts of proper feminine behavior.<sup>35</sup> In another article on the subject Freeman examined how the charge of elitism was used as a wrong-headed attempt to adhere to democratic ideals but led inevitably to covert power plays.<sup>36</sup> When these bitter struggles over media representation were taking place, however, few were prepared to speak up or write publicly about this form of callous behavior because the tactic left them estranged from the movement they were accused of betraying.

Rita Mae Brown, who was willing to antagonize anyone, undertook a critique similar to Freeman's in an essay entitled "Leadership vs Stardom," written in 1972 while she was a member of the Furies collective in Washington, D.C. But this didn't prevent her doing a bit of trashing of celebrity spokeswomen herself. In her analysis, "The rule of thumb for stars is this: she gets money for the white, rich, male world.... [T]hese tokens will in no way change the structure of government nor of the economy." Having taken swipes at these sell-outs, she did assert that attacks on stars from within the movement, although motivated by justifiable animosity, "play into the hands of the male supremacists who then use these attacks to illustrate the 'fact' that 'women hate each other and can't work together.'" More important for Brown was that a star should not be mistaken for a leader, "a woman who comes from the ranks of the movement.... She is not receiving rewards from male supremacists to divert our movement." What worried Brown is that the trashing of stars had spread to the trashing of

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<sup>35</sup> Joreen (pseudo. Jo Freeman), "Trashing: The Dark Side of Sisterhood," *Ms.* 4:10 (April 1976): 49-51, 92-98.

<sup>36</sup> Joreen, "The Tyranny of Structurelessness," in *Radical Feminism*, ed. Anne Koedt, Ellen Levine, and Anita Rapone (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1973), 285-299.

leaders, which threatened to destroy the movement by driving away the most dedicated and talented organizers and thinkers.<sup>37</sup>

The implicit assumption of this argument is that leaders never become stars and vice versa. The two categories — which could be distinguished as (deserved) political reputation opposed to (arbitrary) entertainment celebrity — were deemed utterly incommensurate, although, as Brown herself demonstrated in her own career, the wall between could be and was breached within a decade and crumbled altogether within two. Perhaps because she proceeded from cultural notoriety to political activism, and not the other way round like Brown, Johnston remarked in her contribution to this debate — an essay irreverently titled “Delitism, Stardumb, and Leadershit” — that “a star is not necessarily not a leader and vice versa.”<sup>38</sup> Johnston wasn’t putting herself forward as a candidate for leadership in the movement (although it’s possible to read Brown’s comments in this light) but seemed less willing to rebuke those who abjured all contact with the mainstream media.

Distrust of stars, and the media in general, may have been a hallmark of radical gay and feminist politics in the late sixties and early seventies, but that didn’t preclude dreams of recruiting closeted celebrities whose support would speed liberation — of all gay people, including the stars in question. The president of one of the first gay liberation groups in the country, Homosexuals Intransigent! (HI), a student organization founded at City College of New York in April 1969, advocated just such a project in an issue of Gay Power, another alternative, “underground” paper. “Celebrities who are homosexual could do a lot to change public attitudes towards homosexuality,” he wrote. “Any one

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<sup>37</sup> Rita Mae Brown, “Leadership vs Stardom,” The Furies 2 (February 1972): 20-22.

<sup>38</sup> Johnston, “Stardumb,” 193.

celebrity publicly declaring himself [sic] homosexual would risk retaliation, but if dozens or hundreds of thousands of gay public figures declared themselves at the same time, their declaration would force the public to change its attitude toward homosexuality more than toward themselves."<sup>39</sup> The plan was to compile a list of famous gay people and write letters to them asking them to allow their names to be used in ads or, if they were uneasy about this option, to donate money that would be used to recruit others who might be more bold.

Needless to say, the proposal never got off the ground. What it does indicate, however, is that from the beginning coming out was the central tenet and strategy of gay and lesbian liberation politics. Given their apparent faith in the persuasive power of celebrity, it is curious that representatives of HI described the group as "leaderless." The contradiction between engaging in fantasies about gaining support from rich, famous homosexuals and disavowing any differences in status among individual members indicates how the logic of visibility politics created blind spots in the radical movements of the time as they grew and attracted supporters. But the main contradiction this produced emerged almost immediately, when gay and lesbian activists recognized and set out to exploit the political implications of coming out. Although the effects did not become manifest for some time, it is at precisely this juncture that lesbian celebrity and politics intersect.

### **The personality is political**

Although much has changed in the decades since the concepts entailed in lesbian/gay liberation first took shape, the axiom that coming out is an essential requirement for any viable lesbian or gay politics has not. Indeed, coming out

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<sup>39</sup> "HI!" Gay Power 1:11 (1971), 15.

quickly became the cornerstone around which the movement was built — its most important feature — and the closet its most influential metaphor, to the point that both terms have been applied in all types of contexts that have nothing to do with homosexuality.<sup>40</sup> Coming out also drew celebrities into the liberation project because of their emblematic significance within the culture at large. The political valence of such notables shifted from their position as questionable agents of social conformity — since their silence served as a reminder that homosexuality was reprehensible — to potential role models if (but only if) they were willing to assert their homosexuality publicly. Coming out became the defining feature of the new politics of homosexuality, which logically generated and accelerated interest in lesbian and gay celebrities, both in the ranks of the liberation movement and in the culture at large.

A typical argument for coming out as a political strategy was made in the early days of gay liberation by New York GLF member Martha Shelley: “The worst part of being a homosexual is having to keep it secret ... the daily knowledge that what you are is something so awful that it cannot be revealed.... [T]he internal violence of being made to carry or choosing to carry the load of straight society’s unconscious guilt — this is what tears us apart, what makes us want to stand up in the offices, the factories and the schools and shout our true identities.”<sup>41</sup> Significantly, Come Out! was the name of New York GLF’s newspaper, first published in November 1969. Although the political implications of coming out seem to have been first publicized by local media produced in

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<sup>40</sup> “Coming out” and “the closet” have been generalized as metaphors applicable to an increasingly broad range of situations and people. Nowadays, one can “come out” as a previously “closeted” wife-beater, depressed person, National Rifle Association supporter, you name it.

<sup>41</sup> Martha Shelley, “Come Out,” Rat, February 24, 1970, quoted in Detroit Gay Liberator 1:8 (January 1971), 15.

New York such as the East Village radical newspaper Rat, these ideas quickly proliferated around the country. For instance, Shelley's remarks on coming out appeared in the Detroit Gay Liberator, and the Chicago Gay Liberation Newsletter reproduced excerpts of a speech given by GLF founding member Michael Brown at the first New York City Gay Pride rally in June 1970: "[W]e'll never have the freedom and civil rights we deserve as human beings until we stop hiding in closets and in the shelter of anonymity. We have to come out into the open and stop being ashamed or else people will go on treating us as freaks."<sup>42</sup>

The implication of the rapid diffusion of these ideas is not that New York City was the source of all lesbian/gay liberation theory and propaganda during this era. In many respects the movement's dynamism as a national phenomenon can be attributed to conditions that were not specific to any particular locale. On the other hand, local formations were not uniform nor were there any national organizations that could claim to represent lesbians and gay men on a national level. For example, issues of the Detroit Gay Liberator offer evidence that the socialist contingent in GLF in that city was even stronger than in New York, which could be attributed to the history of working-class militancy in Detroit's auto industry. Likewise, the Chicago Gay Liberation Newsletter carried more and longer articles about racism within the movement than any of the New York gay liberation papers. However, a loose communications network existed among the various gay/lesbian groups and their constituents, who stayed in touch largely through the publications that circulated among them. Thus, reprinted remarks made by New York GLF members signaled that affiliated groups understood themselves as part of a national movement and generally

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<sup>42</sup> Chicago Gay Liberation Newsletter 7 (August 1970), 1.

endorsed the sentiment that coming out should be placed high on the gay liberation agenda.

The provocation to come out quickly enlisted supporters outside the active membership of gay liberation organizations as well. Inspired by the radicals in GLF and other lesbian/gay liberation groups, Jill Johnston amplified previous references to herself as a lesbian she had made in print and alerted Village Voice readers that such deeds were political acts: "Gay people are now expecting and demanding the same sanctified regard for their sexual interests and unions as they have rendered for so long as they can remember to the weird forces that endowed them with life in the first place. Now there is only one way for this social change to take place. And that is for all gay people, those who know it and accept it, to stand up and speak for themselves."<sup>43</sup> In her own explicit coming out statement, Johnston encapsulated what became the prevailing wisdom among champions of gay and lesbian liberation: coming out will precipitate social recognition, respect, and thus liberation.

As mentioned previously, GLF groups were modeled on the national liberation movements that sought freedom from colonial domination in the post-World War II period, armed conflicts that were still raging in areas of Asia and Africa at the end of the 1960s.<sup>44</sup> In this context coming out was advocated as

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<sup>43</sup> Jill Johnston, "Lois Lane Is a Lesbian," in Admission Accomplished, 29; emphasis added.

<sup>44</sup> From the outlook of 2000, when "rights" is the word generally associated with gay/lesbian politics, the assumption is that this movement arose out of African-American struggles for civil rights and related campaigns for social justice. Such precedents were not irrelevant, but the first gay liberation groups self-consciously aligned themselves with socialist revolutionaries in the Third World and the more militant Black Power movement in the U.S., who believed that equality and justice would result only after the edifice of capitalist imperialism was demolished. This perspective can be gleaned from the numerous writings from this time that contained idiomatic spellings like *Amerika*, a rhetorical trademark of the Black Panther Party, and closed with the slogan, "All Power to

a means of declaring an oppositional identity as a member of the oppressed group, thereby taking the first step toward building a militant gay political movement. Although making a public declaration of one's homosexuality was less frequently mentioned as a method for achieving a sense of personal self-worth, this, too, was sometimes described as a side-effect of collective organizing. Like the radical factions of the women's liberation movement of that period, GLF and affiliated groups advocated consciousness raising, which they believed linked self-awareness and self-respect to solidarity with others who shared one's social marginality. For this wing of the movement, however, the primary goal of the process was to understand how the oppression of lesbians and gay men was related to that directed at others on the left and to forge alliances with them on the basis of common interest in overthrowing all systems of discrimination and exploitation.

From the start, though, gay liberation groups included activists who weren't interested in GLF's socialist and feminist theories but wanted to "obtain political power ... by working within the present system rather than trying to destroy it."<sup>45</sup> This was the rationale behind the formation of the reform-minded Gay Activist Alliance (GAA), created by disgruntled GLF members in late 1969. GAA and its supporters at Gay had no argument with capitalism and were not interested in making connections between social injustices like racism or sexism and the political-economic system. Nor did they want to participate in unstructured, leaderless groups, since they deemed these ineffective for planning and carrying out political campaigns, legal challenges, or fund-raising activities.

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the People!" See, e.g., Chicago Gay Liberation, "Working Paper for the Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention," in Jay and Young, Out of the Closets: 346-352, and Third World Gay Revolution, "What We Want, What We Believe," *ibid.*: 363-367.

<sup>45</sup> Jim Francis Hunter, "Where the Action Is: An Interview with Jim Owles," Gay 1:31 (September 7, 1970), 15. Owles was the first president of GAA.

For adherents of this position coming out was the organizing principle of their political program, because they believed, "Before a gay is willing to fight for anything he [sic] has to be aware of his own repression."<sup>46</sup> But this dispute was not confined to the differences in political ideology between the rival organizations, since a number of GLF members endorsed the idea that a vibrant, open homosexual counterculture, not political revolution, should be the movement's top priority. Coming out figured prominently in this contingent's strategy for realizing such a community. And the same split between political and cultural activists could be found in the ranks of GAA.<sup>47</sup>

For a fleeting moment, the political/ cultural split within the movement placed differing emphases on the interpretation of coming out. In early 1970, Gay published a letter in its advice column that epitomized the disagreement:

Q. I am a lesbian belonging to the Gay Liberation Front. We have had some internal dissension over a question of priorities. Which is more important, do you think, political liberation or mental liberation?

A. Liberation of the head, of course.... If we do not feel free inside, where we really live most intensely, we are not free anywhere.<sup>48</sup>

The schism between gay liberals and revolutionaries, as well as between political versus cultural interests, in New York City was replicated in cities around the country. At the same time many lesbians deserted both camps to form separate, often separatist, lesbian-feminist groups. Within three years champions of a unified, revolutionary gay and lesbian politics with ties to other liberation movements had retreated and their organizations had all but disbanded, while

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> See Jay, 89, also Toby Marotta, The Politics of Homosexuality (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981).

<sup>48</sup> Stephen Kaiso, "The Well of Possibility," Gay 1:5 (February 2, 1970), 8.

the ascendant liberals transformed the gay movement into a campaign for civil rights, in contrast to the sweeping social transformations the radicals had envisioned.<sup>49</sup>

In the process of this political displacement, an emphasis on individual self-knowledge and well-being became the predominant rationale for coming out, compared to the collective goal of organizing a substantial oppositional movement informed by revolutionary consciousness. This is often interpreted as fallout from the implosion of left radicalism in the U.S., due to disillusionment with the ultra-militant rhetoric and violent methods championed (if not actualized) by frustrated revolutionaries, coupled with important political victories for the right in the national political arena (Nixon's election as President in 1968, for starters). This is the common sense explanation of the disintegration of many radical left political organizations that occurred in the mid-1970s. Yet, gay politics and culture indicate that there is a more compelling argument that accounts for the success of what were considered reformist strategies for achieving liberation. The connecting link is the practical production of new kinds of gay/lesbian identities after 1968, which rendered coming out the most potent weapon in the gay and lesbian liberation arsenal.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Lesbian-feminism developed in a number of directions and survives as a distinct cultural formation in enclaves around the country. In addition, successful agitation for recognition within the women's movement offered a more agreeable environment for work on lesbian issues and ideas for many lesbian activists. Still, a goodly number of lesbians remained allied with gay politics and have been particularly prominent within it since the AIDS epidemic erupted in the early 1980s.

<sup>50</sup> I use 1968 as the temporal demarcation of gay politics' decisive turn away from the homophile model, which argued for tolerance and acceptance, toward a more defiant stance, as opposed to 1969 when the Stonewall uprising took place. Although the latter is an important landmark, the forces that it has come to represent had already taken root, as the HI groups at CCNY and other colleges indicates.

Although the conflicts that erupted in GLF were real and often bitterly fought, in several important respects the cultural/political, liberal/radical factions did not differ significantly. Indeed, many defining elements of the branches of the movement that succeeded that contentious period were informed by theoretical and strategic approaches propounded within the liberation movement. And these, in turn, were linked to broader developments in social practices and technologies having to do with permutations in definitions of personhood, what Nikolas Rose describes as "identity projects."<sup>51</sup> The term technology is also borrowed from Rose, who elaborates concepts introduced by Michel Foucault on the production of particular kinds of persons and notions of selves that are historically contingent. Technologies in this sense are not merely physical or institutional constraints (what Foucault calls discourses) but practical and technical methods for administering populations and individual subjects: "Technologies of the self take the form of elaboration of certain techniques for the conduct of one's relation with oneself, for example requiring one to relate to oneself epistemologically (know yourself), despotically (master yourself), or in other ways (care for yourself)."<sup>52</sup> Coming out is such a technique.

### **Unlikely bedfellows**

Advocates of gay and lesbian liberation or, later, gay/lesbian civil rights conceived coming out as a means to counteract social conformity and

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<sup>51</sup> Nikolas Rose, *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 157. Rose defines identity projects in this way: "Contemporary individuals are incited to live as if making a project of themselves: they are to work on their emotional world, their domestic and conjugal arrangements, their relations with employment and their techniques of sexual pleasure, to develop a 'style' of living that will maximize the worth of their existence to themselves."

<sup>52</sup> Rose, 29.

complacency in matters related to sexuality and gender. Where the public was concerned, coming out was intended to precipitate two effects: 1) exposure of homosexuality as a trait of seemingly “normal” individuals, which would unsettle assumptions about definitions of normalcy, and 2) demonstration of prideful gay and lesbian identities. Having been pigeon-holed for the better part of a century throughout the West as both unfortunate and dangerous aberrant creatures, anyone who thought of her- or himself as a homosexual person (not everyone who engaged in homosexual practices did, or does) was encouraged to take part in overthrowing the various mechanisms that guaranteed the odium meted out to homosexuality and homosexuals. Thus, rationales for coming out frequently invoked socialization and social roles, usually gender roles, to explain how homosexuality has been defined as deviance and how it might be reformulated as a positive identity.

Consider, for instance, how GLFers Allan Warshawsky and Ellen Bedoz introduce the problem in Come Out: “We are all the products of an oppressive society.... The institution of the nuclear family socializes us to meet the inhuman needs of the system. It defines our roles and pressures its members into fulfilling them. These roles no longer serve the needs of the individual.”<sup>53</sup> “The Woman Identified Woman” manifesto issued by Radicalesbians, a New York group made up of dissident members of both women’s and gay liberation organizations (including Martha Shelley and Rita Mae Brown), struck a similar note, and elaborated how socialization and roles affect lesbians in particular:

[A lesbian] may not be fully conscious of the political implications if what for her began as personal necessity, but on some level she has not been able to accept the limitations and oppression laid on her by the most basic

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<sup>53</sup> Allan Warshawsky and Ellen Bedoz, “G.L.F. and the Movement,” Come Out 1:2 (January 10, 1970), 4.

role in her society — the female role.... To the extent that she cannot expel the heavy socialization that goes with being female, she can never truly find peace with herself. For she is caught somewhere between accepting society's view of her — in which case she cannot accept herself — and coming to understand what this sexist society has done to her and why it is functional and necessary for it to do so.<sup>54</sup>

In the latter call to arms, attention shifts from statements about how social forces conspire to impose normative heterosexuality to explanations of why individual opposition to these processes promises social and political liberation.

Yet, despite their interest in revolutionizing family structures and gender norms, advocates of gay and lesbian liberation frequently employed the terminology and concepts used by adherents of the dominant social theory at the time, structural-functionalism, which proceeds from the premise that societies are integrated systems that tend inherently toward equilibrium, with internal mechanisms that contain any disruptive elements. The primary architect of this influential branch of American sociology was Talcott Parsons. His 1955 book Family, Socialization, and the Interaction Process is the classic structural-functionalist treatise on the relationship between family structures and socialization, defined as the process of internalization of norms and values that produces individuals who perform given social roles.<sup>55</sup> According to Parsons, the family in modern societies serve the function of ensuring the differentiation of gender roles. Although not biologically motivated, these roles are nonetheless natural, because they are products of the public-private dichotomy in social life,

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<sup>54</sup> Radicalesbians, "The Woman Identified Woman," in Koedt, Levine, and Rapone, Radical Feminism (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1973), 240-241.

<sup>55</sup> Talcott Parsons and Robert F. Bales, Family, Socialization, and the Interaction Process (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1955).

which Parsons sees as evidence of objective increases in social differentiation and complexity. In Parsons's words, this is a "positive 'progressive' development."<sup>56</sup> Thus, sexual and gender norms are not only indicative of basic human attributes but are socially necessary. For instance, Parsons avers that "the prohibition of homosexuality has the function of reinforcing the differentiation of sex roles,"<sup>57</sup> which is precisely what the lesbian and gay critics were aiming to dismantle.

Although they clearly did not countenance Parsons's belief that the taboo against homosexuality was socially "progressive" or other structural-functional justifications of social norms, the arguments made by Warshawsky, Bedoz, Radicalesbians, and various sympathetic analysts of homosexuality were shaped by functionalist reasoning. In other words, they accepted the basic tenets of functionalist theory, which treats social phenomena in terms of each one's contribution to overall social stability (e.g., definitions of crime provide the function of demarcating the limitations of collectively sanctioned behavior). These lesbian and gay theorists hoped that exposing the operations of this system would spur pro-liberation forces to counteract its effects.

Take, for example, socialization, perhaps the most significant concept appropriated by gay liberation from this strain of social theory, although this term has come to dominate the vocabulary used to talk about the relationship between individuals and social structures to such an extent that its theoretical lineage has become obscure. Socialization is at heart a theory of social reproduction. It explains how individual participants in the social world — i.e., everyone — are integrated into it and therefore guarantee its continuity. The theory of socialization depends on the bedrock assumption that most humans

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<sup>56</sup> Talcott Parsons, "Family Structure and the Socialization of the Child," ch. 2 in Parsons and Bales, 51.

<sup>57</sup> Parsons and Bales, 103.

will adapt to the world as given to them because they will be rewarded for doing so; social norms are learned by means of an overlapping system of frustrations and gratifications.<sup>58</sup> Briefly stated, this integration is achieved through the internalization of norms, which begins at birth for every individual within the family circle. The theory of socialization is antithetical to disorder or antagonism, other than as instances of pathology, and neglects questions of power. Socialization produces individual selves that mesh neatly with the requirements of an orderly society.

Closely related to socialization is the concept of social roles, the positions individuals occupy within the social order. Structural-functionalist theory employs the concept of roles to explain the allocation and performance of the diverse individual undertakings that constitute the social system. Sex roles provide an all-purpose shorthand for how gender identity is taken up and lived. Similarly, the concept of sex roles provided the theoretical framework used within both the women's and gay liberation movements to explain conventional gender and sexual behavior and attitudes. However, sex role theory, like socialization, supports an integration-oriented functionalism that promulgates normative ideas about social relations and structures. Moreover, the sole theoretical support for sex roles is that provided by Parsons's writings on the nuclear family. In this context, roles divide responsibilities and personalities found within that institution into two categories, "instrumental" and "expressive." Each of these complementary attributes conforms to a gender role, with the husband-father characterized by the former and the wife-mother by the

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<sup>58</sup> Talcott Parsons and James Olds, "The Mechanisms of Personality Functioning with Special Reference to Socialization," ch. 4 in Parsons and Bales, 193.

latter.<sup>59</sup> Once again, a normative imperative is engraved indelibly on the theoretical model.

Curiously, the role paradigm, which emerged in the 1930s and flourished in the 1950s and 1960s, had been roundly criticized and largely rejected by social theorists as early as the mid-sixties. But, as R.W. Connell notes, the concept of sex (or gender) roles survives in sociology and social psychology textbooks, and continues to inform applications of those discourses in myriad practical settings: education, corporate and industrial management, and social work, as well as the popular social commentaries produced in the news and entertainment media. Connell's explanation for why role theory was widely embraced in the first place and has remained prevalent is that it "attempted to show the functional necessity (for social survival) of role performance." It was, he writes, "the classic illustration of social determinism" that offered a scientific rationale for social hierarchies.<sup>60</sup> In his analysis, role theory is "a theoretical ideology developed to cope with the stresses in the cultural order created by movements of resistance," including political activism in favor of sexual liberation.<sup>61</sup> To quote Connell

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<sup>59</sup> Parsons and Bales, 22.

<sup>60</sup> R. W. Connell, "The Concept of Role and What to Do with It," Australia and New Zealand Journal of Sociology 15:3 (November 1979), 11.

<sup>61</sup> Connell, 14. Others have challenged the premises and substance of role theory. Among these critics are John Urry, "Role Analysis and the Sociological Enterprise," Sociological Review 18:3 (November 1970): 351-363, who points out how social position and behavior understood in terms of roles leads to the reification of social identities, and Margaret Coulson, "Role: A Redundant Concept in Sociology? Some Educational Considerations," in Role, ed. J. A. Jackson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press): 107-128. Dennis Wrong critiques socialization and role theory from a psychoanalytic perspective, observing that these paradigms overvalue normative commitments and neglect such psychodynamic factors as inner conflict in "The Oversocialized Conception of Man in Modern Sociology," in Sociological Theory: A Book of Readings, ed. Lewis A. Coser and Bernard Rosenberg (New York: Macmillan, 1970 [1957]): 122-132. Also, in Sexuality in the Field of Vision (London: Verso, 1986) Jacqueline

again, "Role theory plainly appeals to those who like to think that the social order works by mutual agreement; that people ought to do what they are told; and there is something wrong with those who don't."<sup>62</sup>

Again, conflict presents a dilemma for role theory, since the model presumes an efficient, integrated, self-regulating social system. In other words, a functionalist approach assumes that conformity and consensus are essential, intrinsic features of social life. Roles are not freely chosen nor subject to idiosyncratic manipulation. They merely define the various interrelated positions that individuals occupy within the social system. Proponents of role theory believe that its scientific basis can be substantiated further by the statistical methods used to ascertain role definitions, so that what most people do and believe becomes synonymous with objective imperatives of the social system. Harnessed to the apparently scientific truth provided by statistical evidence, roles take on an objective, coercive quality, even when contradictory roles and role performances are acknowledged. Moreover, Connell comments, "The association of role theory with concepts of 'deviance' and programmes of therapy is thus not accidental at all."<sup>63</sup> The entire theoretical edifice consists of a grand tautological argument for adaptation to social norms.

I don't want to imply that lesbian and gay liberation activist-authors, along with other members of the gay and women's liberation movements, endorsed the conservative positions held by structural-functionalists like

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Rose employs psychoanalytic theory to challenge feminist sociological studies that update structural-functionalism to forge a theory of gender socialization and sex roles (e.g., Nancy Chodorow); for these feminist sociologists, Rose writes, "the internalisation of norms is assumed roughly to work, [and] the basic premise and indeed starting-point of psychoanalysis is that it does not" (90).

<sup>62</sup> Connell, 15.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

Parsons. Quite obviously, they did not. They hoped to create new models of sexuality and gender, doing away with oppressive concepts of normalcy. They adamantly opposed the roles and processes of socialization that were said to inculcate them, as well as the structures of domination that rely upon the inferior status of femininity and homosexuality. Some advocated destroying the entire system, doing away with all roles, all authority. The antidote to oppression they recommended was the demolition of the structures that secure social domination and control. For example, the Radicalesbians imagined eliminating categories of sexuality (but not gender), entirely: "In a society where men do not oppress women, and sexual expression is allowed to follow feelings, the categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality would disappear."<sup>64</sup>

I doubt that very many, if any, of the movements' polemicists had studied Parsons's or others structural-functionalist texts firsthand. If they had, they might have been less inclined to reiterate the key words used in this discourse: socialization, sex roles, et cetera. It is more likely that they picked up the basic terminology and ways of thinking about social processes of structural-functionalism by virtue of its translation into non-academic descriptions of social life (think, for instance, of the everyday use of the word dysfunctional, another borrowing from structural-functionalist lexicon). The normative dimension of structural-functionalism gave its descriptions of social phenomena the authority of realism, so that sex roles, say, were understood as empirical forms of acting and thinking imposed by an impersonal, objective social order.

Thus, constructing a critique of gender and sexuality without these dominant concepts would have been quite difficult, since popular as well as academic discourse concerned with sexuality and gender was so thoroughly

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<sup>64</sup> Radicalesbians, 241.

permeated by structural-functionalist assumptions about how society is organized and how people operate within it. In projecting a specific theory of social constitution and operation, the gay and women's liberation movements endorsed unwittingly a conceptual framework that posits norms and values as objective features of social order. If this order is not thoroughly obliterated, if the revolution doesn't occur, the social system established and supported by functional imperatives will remain firmly in place. The ideal of liberation around which resistance was to be rallied demanded a romantic belief in the elementary antagonism between individual fulfillment and social constraint, or a variation on Freud's thesis about civilization's discontents. But those who took up such arguments — reformers along with revolutionaries — also borrowed from the despised discourse of social control — allying themselves with theories that assumed the calculability of all human actions, which if adequately analyzed and rationally criticized can be re-engineered.

The gay and women's liberation projects preserved vestiges of structural-functionalism at the core of their critiques and retained these in various practices intended to develop it further. Two widely embraced attempts to rationalize structural solutions to sexism and heterosexism were 1) consciousness-raising groups, which consisted of rule-governed and highly controlled discussions about shared personal experiences intended to reveal the larger political hierarchies and constraints underlying them, and 2) separatist collectives founded by lesbians in order to devise mechanisms that would foster new forms of subjectivity, as well provide incubators for vanguard revolutionary activities. Not even the dissolution of many of these groups and disillusionment of many of their participants would undermine the powerful currents of functionalist thinking, which survives in various concepts bandied about in lesbian political analysis to this day. One is the idea of role models, which is so frequently

invoked that the roles to be modeled seem to be objectively determined.

Another is the belief in and reliance on quantitative data, usually the results of opinion surveys, used by lesbian and gay journalists and policy analysts to plot political progress (or regress), and by lesbian and gay political organizations to set agendas and formulate strategies. This is the distinctively twentieth-century form of objective knowledge about social phenomena, which, as Rose observes, "takes a very material form — diagrams, graphs, tables, charts, numbers — [and] which materializes human qualities in forms amenable to normalization and calculation."<sup>65</sup> A related current is the technical interpretation of and justification for coming out, insofar as an increase in the number of such declarations holds out the promise of shifting statistical distributions, which are then treated as irrefutable measures of objective fact.

But perhaps what this almost casual citation of a dubious theoretical paradigm bespeaks most of all is the authority of social science in shaping common sense beliefs concerning social reality. Proponents of gay and women's liberation may have taken what Parsons et al. had to say about socialization and sex roles at face value, but that didn't mean that they were willing to become

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<sup>65</sup> Rose, 120. The media provide innumerable examples of how statistics are understood as an accurate reflection of reality and the foundation for political analysis. For example, the statistic produced by the 1948 Kinsey report on male sexual behavior, which found that approximately ten percent of American men were exclusively homosexual for at least three years between the ages of 16 and 55, has been cited routinely by gay rights organizations to bolster claims for minority status. When much lower figures were produced by subsequent surveys — as low as one percent — these numbers were interpreted as a threat to the gay rights movement. The New York Times even featured one such story on its front page: Felicity Barringer, "Sex Survey of American Men Finds 1% Are Gay," April 15, 1993, sec. A. Ten days later, Barringer followed up with an interesting counterpoint, "Measuring Sexuality through Polls Can Be Shaky" (New York Times, April 25, 1993, sec. A), although this item did not seriously question the validity of statistical measurement as a measure of social phenomena. The gay/lesbian media participates actively in the same devotion to statistical data, as evidenced in the monthly survey results published by the Advocate, the largest circulation gay or lesbian magazine in the U.S.

compliant social subjects. It isn't surprising, then, to find the authority of social scientists responsible for promoting functionalist explanations of social behavior implicitly endorsed by Warshawsky and Bedoz's Come Out article — "The institution of the nuclear family socializes us to meet the inhuman needs of the system. It defines our roles and pressures its members into fulfilling them" — and vigorously challenged in the next:

Divergence is labelled "sick", "deviate", "unhealthy", "abnormal" by the establishment's social scientists who function as the system's official agents of guilt and shame. They establish arbitrary norms so that those who differ can be made to feel "abnormal"....

Thus the pressure for "deviates" to camouflage [sic] their differences to avoid scorn: the Black passing as white, the clean shaven Jew..., the homosexual who leads a double life. These people have sacrificed their selfhood for the safety of acceptance. They have victimized themselves.<sup>66</sup>

This is where the activists outline their oppositional stance regarding prevailing approaches to "social problems," one critical of the structural-functional maxim that defines deviance as evidence of defective socialization which the social system will necessarily correct, or as role conflict that may trouble an individual but not affect the social order. Either account provides support for the diagnosis of homosexuality as a psychological disorder — embodied by a dysfunctional kind of person. Of course, it was this psychiatric definition of homosexuality that gay liberation was most intent on dismantling, and which coming out was intended to vanquish.

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<sup>66</sup> Warshawsky and Bedoz, 4.

### Expert testimony

Numerous historians contend, with ample archival support, that medicalization superseded morality as the primary mode of the social regulation of sexuality over the course of the twentieth century.<sup>67</sup> By the 1960s, the understanding of homosexuality as a matter best handled by psychological professionals had become ubiquitous, and various therapies were applied in attempts to control, if not "cure," those who were diagnosed as homosexual. One remedy regarded as promising in the sixties was a type of behavior modification called aversion therapy. A patient would be given an injection of apomorphine, which produced nausea while he (less frequently she) was shown images of individuals of the same sex. Or the patient received a jolt of electricity after reading a series of descriptions of homosexual behavior, followed by reading passages describing heterosexual behavior followed by no shock.<sup>68</sup> In effect, the doctors who practiced this therapy hoped to reconfigure what they understood to be a neurological stimulus-response mechanism.

More conservative, and more common, treatments were various talking cures, which may have been more insidious than the overt cruelty of electroshock or injections of noxious chemicals because the patient was expected to assume responsibility for failure if homosexual desires could not be eradicated; in all but a very few instances they could not. Feelings of guilt and shame were oft-cited consequences of such ordeals. While it is quite likely that

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<sup>67</sup> The best known text in this literature is without doubt Michel Foucault, History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978). Another example is Arnold Davidson, "Sex and the Emergence of Sexuality," Critical Inquiry 14 (Autumn 1987): 16-48.

<sup>68</sup> This information is from a paper delivered by Nathaniel McConaghy at the 1970 American Psychiatric Association national convention, quoted in Gary Alinder, "Gay Liberation Meets the Shrinks," in Jay and Young, Out of the Closets, 143.

many gay men and lesbians may not have believed that they suffered from mental illness, the heterosexual imperative was so rigorously enforced through a variety of cultural and legal mechanisms that self-perceptions became moot. Personal narratives from the pre-liberation era in the twentieth century North America and Europe are riddled with accounts of gay men and lesbians seeking professional help to rid themselves of homosexual desires, and of minors whose parents imposed psychiatric treatment upon them.<sup>69</sup>

Homosexuality, it can be said, was a disqualified identity, at the same time that it was an illicit practice. This was addressed cryptically in the founding principles and purposes of GLF, which asserted, "We are going to be who we are."<sup>70</sup> While indicating the importance of self-definition to the movement, movement strategists did not question accepted concepts of what a self is: unified, governed by self-awareness, author of its own desires and actions. Instead, they concentrated on redefining homosexuality as a valid category of personhood. To accomplish this, the enemy was identified — psychologists, psychiatrists, and the media that popularized their ideas — and their expertise was forcefully challenged.

One of the most dramatic actions taken by gay liberation activists was an invasion of the annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association (APA) in

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<sup>69</sup> Perhaps the most sustained narrative of this kind in print is Martin Duberman's autobiographical Cures: A Gay Man's Odyssey (New York: Plume, 1992). Shorter but similar tales of attempted cures for homosexuality can be found in such collections of lesbian coming out stories as Julia Penelope and Susan J. Wolfe, eds., The Original Coming Out Stories (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1989 [1980]) and Margaret Cruikshank, ed., The Lesbian Path (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1985 [1981]). See also, the myriad autobiographical pieces in the gay and lesbian press of the period. Lastly, the first widely distributed film documentary inspired by gay and lesbian liberation, Word Is Out (1977), contains a searing account of a young lesbian's hospitalization and electroshock therapy.

<sup>70</sup> Come Out 1:3 (April/May 1970), 2.

1970.<sup>71</sup> They declared solidarity with the anti-psychiatry movement spearheaded by former patients in mental hospitals and inspired by the writings of radical psychiatrists like David Cooper and R.D. Laing.<sup>72</sup> Jill Johnston, for one, applauded this development, which she predicted would result in a "comprehensive political-psychological theory and counter consciousness that will be a more effective subversive deviation from the patriarchal authoritative hierarchical law enforcement reality oriented materialistic sexually repressive fucked up culture in which we live."<sup>73</sup> In the short term, this promise was actualized, since the challenges to the psychiatric profession provided gay liberation with one of its first victories: in 1973 the APA agreed to remove homosexuality from its list of approved diagnoses, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. And in 1980, gay activists and sympathetic professionals defeated an attempt to reintroduce a comparable diagnostic category.

Therapists began to advertise their acceptance of homosexuality almost as soon as the movement was launched, and a number of lesbians and gay men established professional practices geared specifically to helping others regard their homosexuality in a positive light. The gay press ran columns dealing with psychological issues. For example, Gay regularly published commentary and advice by psychologist Dr. Stephen Kaiso under the headline "The Well of Possibility," signaling the movement's rejection of Radclyffe Hall's conclusion that loneliness is the inevitable consequence of homosexuality. In addition, many

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<sup>71</sup> Alinder recounts the confrontation in "Gay Liberation Meets the Shrinks."

<sup>72</sup> See, for example, David Cooper, Psychiatry and Anti-Psychiatry (London: Tavistock, 1967); David Cooper, ed., To Free a Generation: The Dialectics of Liberation (New York: Collier Books, 1968); and R. D. Laing, The Politics of Experience (New York: Ballantine Books, 1967), which criticize the practice of psychiatry from Marxist-humanist and phenomenological perspectives.

<sup>73</sup> Jill Johnston, "R.D. Laing: The Mistek of Sighcosis," in Gullibles Travels, 256.

of the activities sponsored by the newly constituted lesbian and gay organizations — the recitation of individual coming out stories in writings by members of the movement, as well as in less formal settings, as well as cultural events intended to instill pride in lesbian/gay identity and camaraderie — can be understood as therapeutic. Radio and television talk shows, such as the one Johnston describes in Lesbian Nation, and magazine articles, offered opportunities for lesbian and gay liberationists to confront their psychiatric foes in public forums, since mental health was the preferred frame for media coverage of homosexuality, even after gay liberation proclaimed the rejection of medical expertise.<sup>74</sup>

Retrospective accounts of gay liberation have described the first movement organizations as riddled by divisions. These histories recall how lines were drawn and positions staked out that pitted politics against culture, street demonstrations and militant confrontations against social companionship and pleasure — dancing and psychedelic drugs being two of the favored kinds, in addition to opportunities for sex, offered at GLF social events — and political change against tolerance of gay and lesbian lifestyles.<sup>75</sup> But, from the start, the political rationale for coming out was indistinguishable from cultural

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<sup>74</sup> See, for example, the sidebar which accompanied Time's "Homosexuality in America" cover story, entitled "A Discussion: Are Homosexuals Sick?" Time 94:18 (October 31, 1969): 66-67. A similar piece, "Is Homosexuality Normal or Not?" appeared in Life 7:26 (December 31, 1971): 72.

<sup>75</sup> See Marotta, also Jay. One can find evidence of these splits in the different gay liberation newspapers that appeared in New York City in 1969. Come Out was put out by a cell of GLF that belonged to the politically oriented faction and took a political line consistent with the group's basic radical left orientation. Gay and Gay Power were more culturally oriented and supported the liberal reformist politics of GAA when that organization was set up. Articles in Come Out railed against gay bar culture, because these spaces exploited patrons' marginalization and fears of exposure. Gay and Gay Power treated the bars as valid sites of gay cultural activity and explicitly distanced themselves from the GLF position.

justifications; both promised to promote personal well-being, conceived as self-awareness and self-expression. The Radicalesbians summed up the goal as “realness, feel[ing] at last that we are coinciding with ourselves,” leading to “a revolution to end the imposition of all coercive identifications, and to achieve maximum autonomy in human expression.”<sup>76</sup> The slogan “gay is good,” coined by Martha Shelley in 1970, echoed the Black Pride movement’s “black is beautiful.”<sup>77</sup> And Warshawsky and Bedoz underlined the political effects that would follow: “We will no longer mutilate our true self-potential in an attempt to measure up to false ‘norms’. In liberating ourselves from our shame we make our first attack upon the system.”<sup>78</sup> It doesn’t seem an exaggeration to say that the new gay politics and the cultural counterpart made self-esteem a major priority.

Paradoxically, this kind of rhetoric connects the objectives of gay liberation with what Foucault designated “governmentality” or “mentalities of government,” which characterize liberal modernity.<sup>79</sup> In his elaboration of this concept, Nikolas Rose points out that governmentality does not refer to state power alone but can be applied to any ethical system that seeks to “act upon the lives of each and all in order to avert evils and achieve such desirable states as

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<sup>76</sup> Radicalesbians, 245.

<sup>77</sup> Martha Shelley, “Gay Is Good,” Rat, February 24, 1970, reprinted in Jay and Young, Out of the Closets: 31-34.

<sup>78</sup> Warshawsky and Bedoz, 4.

<sup>79</sup> This is a concept developed throughout Foucault’s later work. See, for example, the essays collected in Michel Foucault: Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1994), as well as Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller, eds., The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

health, happiness, wealth, and tranquillity.”<sup>80</sup> Although we may be inclined to interpret any notion of liberation as inherently opposed to the coercive practices of government, Foucault and Rose argue that the kind of subjectivity characteristic of modern Western democracies — the autonomous self — is itself an exercise of disciplinary authority. This places ever more responsibility on individuals to monitor and regulate their own deeds and beliefs, to know and improve themselves, to become self-governing.

How is this achieved? Through what Rose refers to as the “psy” disciplines and technologies — psychology, psychiatry, psychotherapy, psychoanalysis — “through which self-governing capabilities can be installed in free individuals in order to bring their own ways of conducting and evaluating themselves into alignment with political objectives.”<sup>81</sup> The gay liberation movement attracted notice for its scandalous impulses and intentions, with provocateurs like Shelley throwing down the gauntlet to straight folks in such statements as “We want to reach the homosexual entombed in you, to liberate our brothers and sisters, locked in the prisons of your skulls.”<sup>82</sup> In settling strategies that emphasized psychological factors, though, movement strategists were mainly concerned with shifting the realm of expertise from accredited professionals to individuals. In Rose’s analysis this is a characteristic of modern subjectivity in general: “[E]ach of us has become a psychologist, incorporating its vocabulary into our way of speaking, its gaze into our ways of looking, its judgments into our calculations and decisions.”<sup>83</sup> Likewise, the significance of

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<sup>80</sup> Rose, 152.

<sup>81</sup> Rose, 155.

<sup>82</sup> Shelley, “Gay Is Good,” 34.

<sup>83</sup> Rose, 123.

coming out, routinely explained as an individually accomplished antidote for internalized guilt, fear, shame, and the lack of integrated sense of self, situates this practice as a “therapeutic technology of the self,” which involves techniques for cultivating self-respect and developing a suitable identity narrative.<sup>84</sup>

Self-image assumes an important place in such projects. The very first issue of Come Out featured a piece entitled “A Positive Image for the Homosexual.” Written by psychologist Leo Louis Martello, who became a regular contributor to the paper, the article offers a vision of gay liberation that reflects concerns about its (symbolic) representation: “Homosexuality is not a problem in itself. The problem is society’s attitude toward it. Since the majority condemns homosexuality, the homosexual minority has passively accepted this contemptuous view of itself.... The greatest battle of the homosexual in an oppressive society is with himself [sic], more precisely the image of himself as forced upon him by non-homosexuals.”<sup>85</sup> Thus, the demand that media institutions replace negative stereotypes with positive images emerged as a central feature of lesbian and gay liberation politics early on, and remains high on the list of significant goals. The importance accorded positive images stems from their presumed truthfulness, as opposed to the pathological depictions of lesbians and gay men the liberation (later, civil rights) movement deemed malicious falsehoods. The first candidates as exemplary positive figures could include such bohemian, countercultural icons as Johnston, but once the heyday of confrontational liberation politics had passed — by the mid-seventies — the ideal positive image took on a more respectable cast. The argument for such

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<sup>84</sup> Rose, 195.

<sup>85</sup> Leo Louis Martello, “A Positive Image for Homosexuality,” Come Out 1:1 (November 14, 1969), 16.

images was also refined: publication and broadcasting of positive images would render homosexuality socially legitimate.

Underlying both approaches, though, a more important truth was at stake: the truth of self-knowledge attained through coming out and crafting a self-image that reflects pride and self-possession. These positive images are defined as realistic representations of self-affirming lesbians and gay men, who will then provide role models worthy of emulation by the next generation. Once again, however, the influence of functionalist paradigms of socialization and roles can be detected in the efficacy accorded positive images, as well as the related idea of role models. What, exactly, is modeled as the result of exposure to an image (or narrative) of a self-proclaimed lesbian? Is it simply that the role model is not closeted, and therefore not ashamed of her lesbianism? Is that a role? What possible function could such a role serve? An obvious place to look for an answer might be the article Mary MacIntosh published in 1968, "The Homosexual Role," which explains how such a role is produced as a means of enforcing masculine norms, not a social position occupied by all, or even most men who actually engaged in homosexual practices.<sup>86</sup> MacIntosh criticizes the normative function of the disreputable and marginal role she describes, confirming the connection between role theory and functionalist ways of thinking. In contrast, subsequent discussions about role models and positive images have overlooked the linkage between these concepts and their conservative sources, and are thus limited to attempts to pour new lesbian and gay wine into the old structural-functionalist bottles.

Another, more productive way to think about this question is to consider the pressures brought to bear on social norms, for instance by women who

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<sup>86</sup> Mary MacIntosh, "The Homosexual Role," Social Problems 16 (Fall 1968): 182-92.

don't conform to feminine standards. Add to that the emergence in the nineteenth century of what Ian Hacking calls "a particular medico-forensic-political language of individual and social control" that employed the newly developed scientific technique of statistical analysis to define forms of deviance and rendered norms meaningful.<sup>87</sup> In this environment, a new kind of person, a new social identity was minted, the lesbian. Now, the process of "making up people" Hacking describes is a dynamic one, neither wholly the contrivance of forces of social control nor an innovation of nonconformists. Instead, both interact and react in the process of producing the definition of this lesbian person. His approach allows for innovations and improvisations for which the static and determinist logic of role theory cannot account.

Commenting on how the generation of new kinds of persons affects individuals, Hacking remarks, "Who we are is not only what we did, do, and will do but also what we might have done and may do. Making up people changes the space of possibilities for personhood." For instance, at the beginning of the twenty-first century we can define ourselves as transgendered, transsexual, lesbian, female homosexual, bisexual, heterosexual, or any combination of these. We do not require a medical expert to verify the definitions. A self-determined categorization carries sufficient authority. But, in spite of these proliferating options, Hacking reminds us, "our possibilities, although inexhaustible, are also bounded."<sup>88</sup> Bounded, first of all, by prevailing concepts of how subjectivity can be achieved and lived, how personhood is constituted.

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<sup>87</sup> Ian Hacking, "Making Up People," in Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality, and the Self in Western Thought, ed. Thomas C. Heller, Morton Sosna, and David E. Wellbery (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 226.

<sup>88</sup> Hacking, 229.

By the end of the 1960s, lesbians, along with gay men, created a political movement that promised to remove all barriers that cordoned them off from participation in mainstream social institutions. Talk of liberation was not just a rhetorical gesture; the activists of this period were committed to the ideal of freedom and their ability to realize it. But one of the most formidable boundaries they didn't take into account was precisely that imposed by notions of personal freedom, which were then and remain central to the concept and practice of coming out. Intended as a technique for achieving personal liberation through collective identification, coming out is contingent upon and supported by a paradigm of subjectivity — self-knowledgeable and self-assured — that privileges “mental health” above all. The privileging of coming out suggested that political solidarity with other lesbians could only be attained by ridding oneself of any trace of self-loathing, which was assumed to be characteristic of the condition of being a lesbian in the first place.

The type of lesbian person that would be produced through a combination of self-examination and self-approbation was seen as the antidote to the despised and therefore depressed, self-hating lesbian produced by pathological definitions of homosexuality. The vocabulary and techniques of psychological diagnoses and treatment could be used to convince the leery that the release from self-contempt was worth the risk of being regarded as deviant. Specifically, coming out has been undertaken not only as a project of self-validation but also of self-fashioning. Rose describes this process as becoming an entrepreneur of the self, “seeking to maximize its own powers, its own happiness, its own quality of life, though enhancing its autonomy and then instrumentalizing its autonomous choices in the service of its life-style.”<sup>89</sup> It

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<sup>89</sup> Rose, 158.

wasn't that lesbians were normalized, co-opted by the culture that had disparaged them, but that the gay and women's movements crafted an approach to lesbian identity that could be interpreted as the fullest, most ambitious realization of this entrepreneurial character.

However, the idea of lesbian identity itself has produced a welter of theoretical challenges from feminist and gay thinkers, who point out the problems that accompany any fixed notion of this kind of person. As Judith Butler, one of the most thoughtful and provocative among such theorists, asks, "If to be a lesbian is an act, a leave-taking of heterosexuality, a self-naming that contests the compulsory meanings of heterosexuality's women and men, what is to keep the name of lesbian from becoming an equally compulsory category? What qualifies as a lesbian? Does anyone know?"<sup>90</sup> The category may not be clear-cut, and attempts to give it definitive meaning have produced as much political rancor as unity. Yet, the dilemmas the notion of a lesbian identity produces have been taken beyond the subcultural level, to the pages of large circulation print and broadcast media, occasioned by the trickle-up effect of coming out. The logic of coming out, which rests on the belief that sexuality is a basic — perhaps the basic — dimension of subjectivity, combined with an entrepreneurial concept of individual existence, made lesbian celebrity feasible.

### **Individual initiative**

Glimpses of what lesbian celebrity would become, or that such personages were possible in the first place, was anticipated in the career of one veteran of the militant lesbian liberation movements I've mentioned several times — a prime mover in the Lavender Menace action and co-author of the

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<sup>90</sup> Judith Butler, Gender Trouble : Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1990), 127.

clarion call for radical lesbian revolution, "The Woman-Identified Woman" — as well as one of the vociferous critics of celebrity in its ranks: Rita Mae Brown. By the end of the 1970s, Brown had moved from the underground success of her first novel, Rubyfruit Jungle, issued in 1973 by the small feminist press, Daughters Inc., into the world of establishment publishing, mainstream publicity, and widespread notoriety. Never shy, Brown encouraged her racy reputation by identifying herself as the model for Rubyfruit bad-girl, hot-lesbian protagonist Molly Bolt. Although it seems accurate to say that her subcultural reputation acted as a springboard to the larger public stage, this move was not generally duplicated by many of her contemporaries from the lesbian liberation days.<sup>91</sup> Nor could her celebrity have been predicted by Brown's political history or the writings she produced as a member of the movement, essays that castigated respectable, middle-class feminists, and a collection of poems with the incendiary title The Hand that Cradles the Rock.<sup>92</sup> In 1972, she had proclaimed in print that "star rip-offs must be stopped."<sup>93</sup> By 1978, she and her supporters were knocking on the doors of major Hollywood studios with hopes of bringing Rubyfruit to the big screen, presumably with a star or starlet playing the leading

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<sup>91</sup> Martha Shelley, for instance, didn't make the transition to mainstream celebrity, and although Jill Johnston continues to publish prolifically her writings consist mainly of personal autobiography or art criticism and commentary. Only a recent reprinting of some of her Village Voice columns in Admission Accomplished might indicate to younger readers the part she played in articulating the principles, as well as an analysis, of lesbian liberation. In contrast, Edward Alwood's Straight News: Gays, Lesbians, and the News Media (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996) gives the impression that Johnston's contribution was negligent.

<sup>92</sup> Rita Mae Brown, The Hand That Cradles the Rock (New York: New York University Press, 1971); Plain Brown Rapper (Oakland: Diana Press, 1976) contains essays published in DOB's the Ladder, the East Village underground paper the Rat, and, of course, the Furies.

<sup>93</sup> Brown, "Leadership vs Stardom," 20.

character based on Brown herself.<sup>94</sup> And by 1980, her status as a famous lesbian, in the U.S. anyway, focused the attention of the tabloid press and their paparazzi stringers on the lesbian sexuality of a rising star in another cultural arena, Martina Navratilova.

Despite the fact that the affair between Brown and Navratilova was made public when they were spotted together at the Wimbledon tournament and photographed by reporters from British tabloids, then made the object of much broader publicity that reached readers around the world, this liaison did not manage to render Navratilova a lesbian celebrity — yet. Eventually she became the most famous lesbian in the world, a prototype of lesbian celebrity. A closer look at the twists and turns in the path leading to her stardom is the topic of another chapter in this study. For now, suffice it to say that radical lesbians may have railed against stars, but eventually celebrity culture caught up with the movement. Or, it could be said, the movement's politics of coming out converged with cultural definitions of celebrity. None of this occurred overnight but over several decades, nor has it proceeded without dispute — legal, political, cultural. But the seeds of this development were sown in the initial formulations of what liberation would mean.

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<sup>94</sup> Rubyfruit Jungle Productions, n.d., flyer in Rita Mae Brown materials in the International Gay Information Center Archives, New York Public Library. The flyer was designed to mobilize members of the gay rights movement to put pressure on the recalcitrant producers “because we want this film to have the visibility that can be provided by a major studio. We are not interested in making a film that plays to the already sympathetic. The widest possible distribution is a perfect tool to help break down the barriers of bigotry and reactionism” (n.p.; emphasis added).

#### **4 In retrospect: legends of Mercedes de Acosta and company**

Even though lesbian celebrity is a recent phenomenon, it's quite easy to contend that there have been celebrities in the past who were lesbian, or perhaps bisexual, without encountering too much opposition. Since the early years of the 1960s lesbian and gay liberation movement, the lesbian/gay press has made repeated efforts to establish the enduring presence of lesbians in Western culture. To this end, these publications devoted considerable space to profiles of such famous lesbians as Radclyffe Hall, Gertrude Stein, and Djuna Barnes, who achieved wide recognition. Of course, members of the movement researched even more remote epochs in the quest for ancestral lesbians. In this spirit, the first issue of the Furies included a lengthy article on Queen Christina, the seventeenth-century Swedish monarch, an odd choice given the anti-elitist stance of the radical lesbian publishing collective.<sup>1</sup> More interesting yet is their choice to illustrate the article with photographs of Greta Garbo playing Christina in the 1933 Hollywood biopic. But despite Garbo's underground reputation as a lesbian this tidbit is never mentioned in the piece. Either the author and editors were unaware of this, or they decided not to contradict denials of homosexuality by the famously reclusive movie star, who was still alive. And in 1972, when the article appeared, a disavowal of lesbian identity was enough to make any attribution suspect.

Today the kind of ambiguity Garbo engaged in would be chalked up to prevarication, however forgiving of this we may be. Celebrities from earlier eras are not evaluated according to our present-day standards, since we are aware that they lived and worked at a time when coming out was either not an option

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<sup>1</sup> Helaine Harris, "Queen Christina: Lesbian Ruler of Sweden," Furies 1:1 (January 1972): 10-11.

or lesbian was not even accepted as a valid social identity. In many respects, famous dead or retired actresses and other entertainers constitute a distinct category within the pantheon of lesbian celebrity. Because they climbed the ladder to stardom without submitting to social dictates — what Adrienne Rich and others have called compulsory heterosexuality in particular<sup>2</sup> — they are hailed as courageous. More importantly, the discovery of lesbian histories involving standard icons of glamour and charisma promises to give contemporary lesbians an impressive ancestry, which was previously hidden or censored but can now be made public. Once we can say, without being dismissed as deluded, that Greta Garbo, say, was a lesbian, the presupposition of a cultural idol's heterosexuality, hopefully, will be undermined and homophobia counteracted. Additionally, the disclosure of the secrets of dead lesbian celebrities appears to support the understanding of lesbian history as a linear narrative of progress — from oppression to emancipation, from self-loathing to pride.

I intend to challenge that model of history and the overstatement of invisibility in earlier times that it requires. For these purposes, I offer the example of Mercedes de Acosta: born 1893, died 1968, poet, novelist, playwright, Hollywood screenwriter, journalist, and amateur spiritualist. What makes de Acosta a compelling figure for a study of lesbian celebrity is the breadth of her social — and amorous — connections, which she chronicled in her memoir Here Lies the Heart, which has become a much-cited source of information, anecdote, and innuendo concerning the lesbian lives of a number of very visible women in twentieth-century American culture.<sup>3</sup> And she never lived what we would call a

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<sup>2</sup> Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Signs 5:4 (Summer 1980): 631-660.

<sup>3</sup> Mercedes de Acosta, Here Lies the Heart (New York: Reynal and Company, 1960); hereafter cited as HLH.

closeted life, although in committing her life's story to print she attempted to fabricate one retrospectively.

### **Making a name**

Like lesbian celebrities in general, de Acosta presents something of an enigma, provoking more interest from historical researchers in the past decade than she ever did during her lifetime. Undoubtedly, her enhanced celebrity stems from the combination of her verifiable lesbianism and her familiarity with just about every accomplished actress on Broadway and in Hollywood, as well as ballet dancers, opera divas, cabaret singers, music hall and vaudeville performers, from about 1915 to the late 1940s. Her friends and acquaintances also included Amy Lowell, Mary Garden, Noël Coward, Igor Stravinsky, Alice B. Toklas, Jean Cocteau, Cole Porter, and Cecil Beaton. I doubt, however, that anyone would regard de Acosta as role model material, either before her death in 1968, at the age seventy-five, or now. True, many might envy her affairs with Isadora Duncan, Alla Nazimova, Eva Le Gallienne, Greta Garbo, and Marlene Dietrich, just to name a few of her more eminent lovers. But being a lesbian Lothario is not the stuff of which role models are made, which suggests that role model status can only be attained by a sanitized kind of lesbian whose sexual desires remain incidental, at best. In other words, de Acosta demonstrates an unspoken assumption: the role model is expected to inspire productive endeavor, not evoke scenes of sybaritic pleasure.

So, Mercedes may not be a model lesbian, if setting an example for social acceptability is the standard, but her legend offers a particularly intriguing perspective on the affiliations between twentieth-century celebrity and lesbian culture, one that role models — and the positive images they are said to generate — cannot accommodate. But she has acquired her posthumous fame precisely

because her very visible lesbian persona acts as a divining rod pointing toward a number of lesbians occupying neither marginal nor subcultural positions but residing at the center of U.S. popular culture. That does not mean that de Acosta ever publically proclaimed her lesbianism, although how and why she demurred on this point is not consistent with a narrative of shameful subterfuge or outright denial. No, de Acosta, like twentieth-century celebrities in general, lived according to the precepts of spectacle, and the mustering of appearances, fantasies, and seductions needed to produce it.

Indeed, theater was de Acosta's vocation, although not always her profession. And her background may have predisposed her for a dramatic life. Her mother came from an aristocratic Spanish family and in the mid-nineteenth century inherited a large fortune, although she underwent considerable hardship before she was able to retrieve the estate from a wicked uncle who had stolen it. Her father, also born into the Spanish upper class, narrowly escaped execution by a firing squad by diving off a cliff into the sea that borders on Havana's notorious Moro prison, following his capture as part of a student rebellion against the Cuban government; later he became a successful businessman. They were introduced and married in New York City, where they raised eight children in high style — Mercedes was the youngest — but were extremely careless with money. Her father committed suicide; her mother died almost penniless. As an adult de Acosta lived for many years in Hollywood, although she was not an actress but worked as a screenwriter whose scripts were never produced. Prior to her career in the movie industry, she was a familiar figure in New York art and intellectual circles, a playwright as well as a poet and novelist, but only two of her plays were ever produced in the U.S. One — Sandro Botticelli — was an unqualified failure. The other — Jacob Slovak — had a very short Broadway run due to a series of production miscalculations and mishaps, and,

despite positive reviews, an indifferent public.<sup>4</sup> She published five volumes of poetry and two novels, but her literary career never took off.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, a quibbler could say, de Acosta wasn't really a celebrity, not even in her prime. She may have been granted occasional notice by prominent syndicated society gossips like Cholly Knickerbocker and Elsa Maxwell.<sup>6</sup> But she was most frequently mentioned as an adjunct to her glamorous older sister, Rita de Acosta Lydig, who was considered to be one of the most beautiful, stylish, and artistically cultivated women of her day.<sup>7</sup> Although, like Rita, Mercedes's appearance attracted attention, she was more likely to be called striking or

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<sup>4</sup> Another play, Jehanne d'Arc, was produced in Paris, and flopped, like the earlier Botticelli piece. Both were conceived as vehicles for de Acosta's lover at the time, Eva Le Gallienne. Her play writing career garnered her one success: a London production of Prejudice, which starred a young John Gielgud, featured Ralph Richardson in a secondary role, and was well received by critics. It ran for an entire season in London's West End but was never staged in the U.S.

<sup>5</sup> De Acosta's published work includes the novels Wind Chaff (New York: Moffat and Yard, 1919) and Until the Day Breaks (1928). The poetry collections are Moods (New York: Moffat and Yard, 1919), Archways of Life (New York: Moffat and Yard, 1921), and Streets and Shadows (New York: Moffat and Yard, 1922).

<sup>6</sup> Cholly Knickerbocker, "Cholly Knickerbocker Says," New York American, March 1, 1935. Elsa Maxwell, "Elsa Maxwell's Party Line," New York Post, April 20, 1943. She was also mentioned in several 1923 articles about the Lucy Stone League, an organization that advocated women not changing their last names when they married (Mercedes de Acosta Papers, Rosenbach Museum and Library).

<sup>7</sup> A profile of Rita de Acosta Lydig opens Annette Tapert and Diana Edkins's The Power of Style: The Women Who Defined the Art of Living Well (New York: Crown Publishers, 1994), where she is described as "one of the most dazzling personalities in New York" in the first two decades of the twentieth century (17). Cecil Beaton also included a profile of Rita in his The Glass of Fashion (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1954), which was a similar tribute to women known as fashion trend-setters. In 1940, the Museum of Costume Art in New York held an exhibition of Rita's extravagant clothing, which Mercedes had donated, and in 1975 Diana Vreeland paid tribute to Rita by commissioning a mannequin in her likeness to display items from her wardrobe in a show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art entitled "American Women of Style."

exotic, rather than beautiful. Still, she shared with her sister a lack of interest in keeping up with fashion; she expected others to catch up with her instead. In order to express her particular sensibility, Mercedes created a signature costume, for many years wearing only black or white clothing, a topcoat with a tight waist and circular skirt custom-made for her by the Paris couturier Paul Poiret, shoes with oversized buckles, and a tricorn hat or beret. She also wore trousers long before this was common, and at times a cape, recalling the Spanish outfits favored by Radclyffe Hall.

Not surprisingly, Mercedes became something of a public personage, based in part on her social position coupled with her unorthodox appearance, as well as on the people with whom she was associated. Garbo was undoubtedly the most prominent, and her friendship with de Acosta was especially notable because the actress' reputation for unsociability was legend. Thus, Rebecca West could allude to de Acosta in a 1932 Los Angeles newspaper review of a stage play and assume that her readers would understand the reference.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the biggest boost to Mercedes's celebrity status was the success of Here Lies the Heart, which became a best-seller upon publication in 1960, with sales benefiting, no doubt, from the praise she received in influential newspapers like the New York Times and the Herald Tribune.<sup>9</sup> Newsweek also devoted a half-page to a photo feature on the book, captioned by a brief but tantalizing text: "Greta Garbo, the professional enigma, once spent a memorable six weeks alone with

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<sup>8</sup> The play was a London production of Othello, about which West wrote: "[T]he actor playing the Moor, although highly accomplished, was physically unsuited to the part. He looked just like Mercedes d'Acosta [sic], which is a very good way to look, but not when one is acting 'Othello.'" Rebecca West, "I Said to Me," Los Angeles Herald Examiner, May 31, 1932.

<sup>9</sup> Arthur Todd, "'The Place Cards Read Like an All-Star Cast at a Benefit,'" New York Times Book Review, March 29, 1960, 6. Rose Field, "Memoirs of a Lady Who Knew Them all," New York Herald Tribune, March 27, 1960.

her on a tiny islet in a mountain lake. She has been a friend of Isadora Duncan, of Marlene Dietrich, of Stravinsky, of Cole Porter, and scores of others whose names are now liberally dropped by her in her memoirs. Her own name: Mercedes de Acosta — poet and playwright.”<sup>10</sup> Maybe the best way to characterize Mercedes would be as a minor celebrity, just as she called herself a “minor poet,”<sup>11</sup> but avant-garde lesbian celebrity might also fit. She could also be described as an expert on celebrity culture in her time.<sup>12</sup>

### **The in crowd**

Although de Acosta recalled waiting with other children outside the stage door of a Broadway theater to receive a souvenir thimble from the legendary Maude Adams after a performance of Peter Pan, most of her early introductions to celebrities were made either by Rita or her mentor Bessie Marbury. In fact, she first met Marbury, a playwrights’ representative and theatrical impresario, through Rita. Both older women were members of New York elite society and hosted salons that drew prominent artists, writers, and other intellectuals of their day (one of their mutual friends, for example, was Sarah Bernhardt). Marbury was also a lesbian, almost forty years de Acosta’s senior, and the younger woman benefited from her friendship in numerous instances. For instance, it was Marbury who arranged Mercedes’s first Hollywood screenwriting assignment in 1931, a script for Pola Negri entitled East River. Unlike Lydig, whose life was occupied with creating tasteful environments for herself and her guests, as well

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<sup>10</sup> Newsweek, March 7, 1960, 102.

<sup>11</sup> de Acosta, HLH, 102.

<sup>12</sup> Indeed, in 1961 the National Concerts and Artists Corporation listed a lecture by de Acosta on the topic of “Friends and Celebrities” among their offerings (brochure in de Acosta Papers).

as assembling a peerless wardrobe, Marbury dedicated herself to building her theatrical agency and later electoral politics. She adhered to utterly conventional bourgeois standards when it came to appearances, although not in her very aggressive style of doing business. Her companion and lover for most of her adult life, Elsie de Wolfe, was similarly ambitious, although de Wolfe's *métier* was closer to Lydig's. She started out as an actress famous for the latest Paris fashions she wore as costumes but not for her acting ability, and later became the first and one of the most influential interior decorators in the United States.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, both Marbury and de Wolfe were early twentieth-century pioneers in what today we call image management or press relations. Both excelled in promoting spectacles for popular consumption. Marbury figured out that she could procure free advertising for her ventures by providing the press with attractive and plentiful photos and interesting copy, while de Wolfe did the same on her own behalf.<sup>14</sup> They met in 1886, when Marbury was just beginning to represent such popular French playwrights as Jacques Feydeau and Victorien Sardou in the U.S. and de Wolfe was receiving respectable notices in the society press for her appearances in amateur theatricals. By the end of the nineteenth century Marbury was a powerful international broker of plays, and later engineered various performers' careers (e.g., the dance team Vernon and Irene Castle), commissioned stage productions (including Jerome Kern's first musical),

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<sup>13</sup> De Wolfe died in 1950, but in 1997 the New York Times ran a feature on her in the weekly "Home" section: Mitchell Owen, "Can't Great Rooms Outlive Movie Sets?," New York Times, March 20, 1997, sec. C. She was also included in a piece about legendary interior decorators, Meredith Etherington-Smith, "They Did Windows," New York Times Magazine, April 14, 2000, 24-32.

<sup>14</sup> On Marbury's various promotional coups, see her autobiography, Elisabeth Marbury, My Crystal Ball (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1923), in which she writes about the various methods she devised for stirring up interest in the projects she sponsored. On de Wolfe's acumen for publicity, see Jane S. Smith, Elsie de Wolfe: A Life in High Style (New York: Atheneum, 1982).

organized lecture tours (by, among others, Oscar Wilde and Count Robert de Montesquiou-Fezesnac, the model for Proust's homosexual aristocrat Baron de Charlus), and was one of the first women to serve on the National Committee of the Democratic Party. De Wolfe, meanwhile, found employment on the professional stage, aided in large part by her lover's connections, but quit in 1905 and embarked on her decorating career. Marbury came from a prominent New York family, while de Wolfe had a less secure foothold in high society, but both women were determined to be financially independent by earning their own incomes — and did. In fact, they both prospered and amassed considerable wealth. Yet, they were very different in one respect: Bessie excelled in promoting other people's reputations, while Elsie's renown came largely from cultivating her own and convincing others of her rightful claim as a trend-setter.

Marbury and de Wolfe made no secret of their relationship within their social circle; apparently, they were called "the Bachelors" by their friends.<sup>15</sup> How they represented themselves in more public contexts was another matter. For instance, in her autobiography, Marbury dwells on her close friendships with homosexual men like playwright Clyde Fitch (best known for the Broadway hit Beau Brummell) and actor Clifton Webb, but never mentions their sexuality (although in Fitch's case, she does allude to this aspect of his character). She also takes pride in her association with Oscar Wilde and even boasts about selling his Ballad of Reading Gaol to the New York World when no British publisher would touch it. At the same time, however, she distances herself from his highly public prosecution for sexual crimes, commenting, "His was a clear case of psycho-perversity ... it would have been a more humane thing to have him placed under the care of physicians rather than to have delivered him over to jailers." It isn't

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<sup>15</sup> Smith, 50.

clear whether this was meant to quell speculations about her own sexuality, or whether she regarded her love for de Wolfe as entirely different in kind from male homoeroticism. On the next page Marbury then castigates Wilde not for his homosexuality but for his monumental egotism and "lack of common sense."<sup>16</sup> Weighing these contradictory judgments, it seems that her main complaint is that he wasn't more discreet. As de Acosta recalled her, Marbury loved a "spicy" joke, and by her own testimony she was not a prude.<sup>17</sup> On the basis of her exuberant autobiography, it is reasonable to surmise that Marbury didn't see herself as in any way prey to "unnatural" desires.

Furthermore, in her autobiographical discussion of her relationship with de Wolfe, she makes no effort to disguise their intimacy. Indeed, she dedicated the book to Elsie, adding these words as an epigraph: "Together we sorrowed. Together we rejoiced. Together we failed. Together we succeeded...." Along with the insistence of these multiple "together"s and her fond portrayal of their relationship of thirty odd years, Marbury also included a photograph of a sitting room in one of their homes bearing the caption "The Marbury-de Wolfe Residence," a double portrait of the two women, and a close-up image of de Wolfe, all testimony to her importance in Marbury's life story. Nevertheless, Marbury seems compelled to explain why she never married. Her answer, though, is cursory, almost flippant: "I never had a really good offer."<sup>18</sup>

Marbury's memoir was published in 1923, when she was sixty-seven years old; she died in 1933. De Wolfe also wrote and published an

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<sup>16</sup> Marbury, 99-100.

<sup>17</sup> de Acosta, *HLH*, 71. Marbury also disliked snobs, and had strong opinions on many subjects, including modernist art, which she detested, with the exception of the Ballets Russe.

<sup>18</sup> Marbury, 35.

autobiography, in 1935, although by the time she did so the now renowned decorator and taste-maker had produced her own solution to the inevitable marriage question and the suspicions that informed it: in 1926, at age sixty, she married a British peer, Sir Charles Mendl. However, she notes coyly, “[T]he marriage created something of a sensation at home and abroad. For some reason or other ... my friends ... had never thought of either of us as the marrying kind.”<sup>19</sup> From her friends’ perspective, the reason for astonishment is obvious, although de Acosta tells us that Marbury was less astonished than heart-broken.<sup>20</sup> After World War I the two women spent very little time together and had developed different interests, entertained different friends, and even preferred to live in different countries (de Wolfe spent many months of each year at the house in Versailles she and Marbury bought and renovated together), but there had been no unqualified rupture. Nor does de Wolfe go to great lengths to clarify for the reader’s benefit the discrepancy between her decision to marry and the many years she lived with Marbury. Writing about her life with Bessie, she recounts in detail their initial encounters and growing affection, as well as the pleasures of setting up housekeeping together. She also paraphrases conversations between them that include endearments like “honey” and never disguises the fact that they were deeply committed to one another. Nonetheless, she inserts an account, entirely fictional it turns out, telling about a long term but also long distance love affair with an unnamed man, just in case her marriage late in life would not adequately offset the impression left by the descriptions of the Marbury-de Wolfe alliance.

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<sup>19</sup> Elsie de Wolfe, *After All* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1935), 217.

<sup>20</sup> de Acosta, *HLH*, 207. The marriage to Charles Mendl did not prevent Marbury from bequeathing most of her estate to de Wolfe when she died in 1933, a bequest that made headlines in the New York press. See Elizabeth Marbury clippings file, Billy Rose Collection, New York Public Library.

It is quite possible that when she decided to tell her life story in public at age seventy, Lady Mendl, née Elsie de Wolfe, might have wanted to refurbish her image further by giving herself a long-standing heterosexual pedigree. A convincing interpretation of the fable has been provided by de Wolfe's biographer Jane Smith, who interprets it as "the first visible twinge of concern over her reputation."<sup>21</sup> Although an outright avowal of lesbianism would have been too outrageous, even for the flamboyant de Wolfe, this feint seems uncharacteristic of such an otherwise outspoken, unapologetic woman. Most likely, she agreed with the prevalent belief that great women who would be remembered for their contributions to culture were not lesbians — Gertrude Stein, perhaps, being the exception and not one that de Wolfe regarded as worthy of emulation. And although, de Wolfe's reticence could be compared to more recent refusals to be pigeon-holed as a lesbian, the timing of her manufactured straightness must be seen in the context of specific historical circumstances quite different from the present. In the mid-thirties, the idea of lesbianism as a psychological disorder, as well as a form of social deviance had become firmly entrenched in both medical theories and practices and accepted on a popular level as common knowledge. Lesbians might not agree with these

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<sup>21</sup> This is a tribute to Smith's ability to respect de Wolfe's actual sexual preference, insofar as her own idea of the de Wolfe-Marbury relationship suffers from a pronounced heterosexual bias, as in the following passage: "Bessie and Elsie in fact assumed the roles of husband and wife according to the most sentimental of late-Victorian models. Bessie's instincts were domestic; she was a paterfamilias looking for a family, and, in Elsie, that was what she found.... Photographs of the two women in their first years together are a revealing mimic of the typical family portraits of the day" (50-51). The idea that pairings like de Wolfe and Marbury's can be explained as imitations of heterosexual marriage has been thoroughly debunked by Judith Butler in "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991): 13-31.

judgments, but definitions and attitudes that condemned lesbianism remained practically unassailable.

### **Souls of discretion**

The twelve years separating Marbury's and de Wolfe's autobiographies — the early 1920s to the mid-1930s — were important ones for lesbian culture. This period also coincided with de Acosta's third decade of life, during which her associations with various celebrities were cemented and love affairs with several occurred — including her five year affair with Eva Le Gallienne and her liaison with Gladys Calthrop, Noël Coward's set and costume designer, who had been involved with Eva, too. De Acosta lived in the thick of the New York theater community, and her reflections on the era give a sense of the prevailing cultural climate, as well as her own approving attitude toward it:

[D]uring these years the young ... kicked over the last vestiges of Victorian influence which had circumscribed and inhibited their lives. They escaped from the influence of that old lady who had made hypocrites of more than a generation. Now at last impulses concealed or suppressed were allowed to assert themselves, and young people of both sexes, thrilled with their new personal freedom, bounded out into the open. Who can blame them if they sometimes bounded a little too high and sometimes fell a little too low?<sup>22</sup>

For de Acosta, Michael Arlen's popular and controversial play The Green Hat, starring lesbian actress Katharine Cornell in the 1924 Broadway production, summed up the Zeitgeist: "It was a play in which the heroine was utterly reckless but always gallant. Gallant and dangerous were in a sense the passwords of the

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<sup>22</sup> de Acosta, HLH 68.

twenties... At the end of The Green Hat Iris March gallantly drove her Hispano Suiza off a mountaintop."<sup>23</sup>

One aspect of the free-spirited ambience in cosmopolitan cities like New York during the 1920s was the erosion of the previously well maintained boundaries between the homosexual subcultures — based mainly in Greenwich Village, Harlem, and the Times Square district — and fashionable society.<sup>24</sup> De Acosta took note of this, too, in a draft of her memoirs (although she removed all the homosexual references in what she published):

Everyone rushed up to Harlem at night to sit around places thick with smoke and the smell of bad gin, where Negroes "in drag" danced around with each other until the small hours of the morning. What we all saw in it is difficult to understand now. I suppose it was the newly found excitement of homosexuality, which after the war was expressed openly in nightclubs and cabarets by boys dressed as women, and was, like drinking, forbidden and subject to police raids, which made it all the more enticing.<sup>25</sup>

Assuming the same stance of a disinterested observer, de Acosta also wrote about similar themes in relation to a 1929 trip to Berlin, accompanied by Calthrop and "several young men," where they saw female prostitutes "on the

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<sup>23</sup> de Acosta, HLH, 128. De Acosta notes that the model for Iris March was believed to be Nancy Cunard, "whom I greatly admired," and who, not surprisingly, was a lesbian.

<sup>24</sup> George Chauncey Jr. has documented and analyzed these developments in his important history, Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay World, 1890-1940 (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

<sup>25</sup> de Acosta, HLH third manuscript, ca. 1960, 221, de Acosta Papers. Hereafter the various draft manuscripts for Here Lies the Heart will be cited by the number in the sequence of composition; all are dated ca. 1960.

streets [who] were actually men" and "women who dressed and looked exactly like men."<sup>26</sup>

As these comments suggest, homosexual culture in the twenties had attained a level of visibility, which, as historian George Chauncey Jr. has noted, contradicts received ideas about the furtiveness of gay lives prior to the 1970s. Likewise, the temptation to read Marbury's or de Wolfe's gestures towards heterosexuality as evidence of their being in "the closet" must be reconsidered as not only historically inaccurate but also reductive. When both their autobiographies appeared, the metaphor of the closet that has become shorthand for the strategies lesbians adopt to mask their sexual desires and identities was unknown. Instead, Chauncey writes, in the first half of the twentieth century lesbians and gay men described themselves as living a "double life," which

allowed them to have jobs and status a queer would have been denied while still participating in what they called "homosexual society" or "the life." For some, the personal cost of "passing" was great. But for others it was minimal, and many men positively enjoyed having a "secret life" more complex and extensive than outsiders could imagine. Indeed, the gay life of many men was so full and wide-ranging that by the 1930s they used another — but more expansive — spatial metaphor: not the gay closet, but the gay world.<sup>27</sup>

"Coming out," too, had a different meaning when it was first coined. It was used in the context of the grand gay balls held in large halls in Harlem and midtown

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<sup>26</sup> de Acosta, HLH, second MS, 426.

<sup>27</sup> Chauncey, 7.

Manhattan, where an appearance in drag constituted a debut akin to the coming out into society that occurred at debutante balls.

As the lists of guests at their parties and clients indicate, Marbury and de Wolfe participated in a subdivision of the gay world populated by members of elite society and the entertainment professions, best exemplified by Marbury's close friend, neighbor, and partner in various charitable projects Anne, who was J. P.'s daughter, or de Wolfe's frequent visitors Cole Porter and Cecil Beaton. De Acosta kept the same or similar company. But by the late 1920s, the emancipated sexual mores de Acosta relished were under attack from various moral watchdogs, and rumblings of reaction began to stir. In 1927 the New York City police arrested the cast of Mae West's play Sex, as well as the actors in a Broadway hit dealing with lesbian love called The Captive. The Hearst newspapers campaigned for theater censorship using the latter as justification. West's announcement that she intended to stage a play defending homosexuality, The Drag, on Broadway added fuel to the fire. Soon after the New York State legislature passed an amendment to the public obscenity code that banned any plays "depicting or dealing with the subject of sex degeneracy, or sex perversion."<sup>28</sup> In the same year, threats of government regulation leveled at the major film studios to keep portrayals of sexuality — other than the hetero, destined-for-wedlock, or already-married-and-monogamous kind — out of the movie houses led to the establishment of the Hays office, a system of self-policing with little actual effect. Since no enforcement mechanism was implemented, what critics considered licentiousness continued. Thus, the advocates of censorship persisted, and in order to forestall legislation to this effect the Hollywood studios agreed to conform to a production code in 1934.

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<sup>28</sup> Chauncey, 313.

The Code, as it was known, banned all sorts of explicit sexual expression and obvious innuendo on screen.

Around the same time the repeal of Prohibition also opened the doors to more direct repression of urban homosexual subcultures. When commerce in alcoholic drinks became legal once again in 1933, state control over the public entertainments and amusements was asserted, very much to the detriment of lesbians and gay men. In Chauncey's analysis, "Repeal made it possible for the state to redraw the boundaries of acceptable sociability that seemed to have been obliterated in the twenties ... and literally criminalized much of gay sociability."<sup>29</sup> In many respects, the daily lives of Marbury, de Wolfe, and their friends were not nearly so constrained by social conventions as were those of working- or middle-class lesbians. Still, the same standards of propriety applied to their public personae if they wanted to be taken seriously as social paragons. And they did, insofar as each woman presented her life's narrative as a template for an honorable career. Marbury, at least, didn't invent a fictional male lover; she only tried to rationalize her unmarried status. In contrast, de Wolfe chose to publish her memoirs at the point when the closet was under construction (although the term itself wasn't used before the 1960s<sup>30</sup>).

### **Tattle tales**

The lesbians who were professional performers depended much more upon public esteem than either Marbury or de Wolfe, and thus had to worry much more about having their names linked with what were deemed abnormal sexual practices. For these actresses, dancers, and singers, celebrity required

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<sup>29</sup> Chauncey, 334-335.

<sup>30</sup> Chauncey, 6.

coming to terms with the segment of the publicity apparatus that often operated beyond their or their employers' control: the rapidly expanding profession of gossip writing (or broadcasting by other means), which matured, so to speak, with the media industries that disseminated it. By the end of the nineteenth century reports of goings-on in society circles became a staple of daily newspapers. In addition, Town Topics, a weekly paper devoted strictly to this kind of sensational journalism, first appeared in New York City in the 1880s and was augmented by two other gossip sheets, the Tattler and Broadway Brevities and Social Gossip. In their pages could be found news about the likes of Rita de Acosta Lydig and reviews of performances by amateur actors like Elsie de Wolfe. However, the most prominent impresarios of the time, Broadway producers, held very different views from those that are taken for granted today. They did not consider information about the private lives of their star performers a seemly focus for publicity. Discussing her experience with Daniel Frohman, the most powerful producer during this period (and one of Marbury's closest associates), the British music hall star Billie Burke commented, "[He] introduced me to New York quietly, avoiding publicity stunts, strictly forbidding me to appear in public or even see other plays. It was his Napoleonic principle that the illusions of the theatre would be shattered if the public saw too much or know too much about the star."<sup>31</sup>

Frohman's wisdom was shared by respectable journalists and governed accepted practices until 1924, when Walter Winchell's popular column dishing out Broadway gossip first hit the streets. As Winchell's reputation grew his stylistic innovations in reportage covering all facets of entertainment and high society also took hold. Certainly, his fingerprints can be found all over the pages of

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<sup>31</sup> John Mosedale, The Men Who Invented Broadway: Damon Runyon, Walter Winchell and Their World (New York: Richard Marek, 1981), 31.

movie fan magazines, and his signature style of stringing together sentence fragments, spiced with slang and neologisms, separated only by ellipses, was copied by at least one, Movie Mirror. A few samples particularly relevant to my topic provide examples of this feverish staccato style:

Guess everything is hotsy-totsy again between Marlene (body-guarded) Dietrich and Joseph (Oedipus Rex) Von Sternberg [sic] ... they attended the premiere together of 'Maedchen in Uniform' ... Marlene wore that famous tailored suit once more ... and lots of folks wish to gosh she'd start wearing dresses for a change and leave the pants to the men folk...  
... talking of that trip to Paris ... Greta hit all the hot spots in Montmartre ... even visiting a jernt where they have she-go-los to dance with the women tourists ... but Greta didn't do any of tripping of the light fantastic...<sup>32</sup>

As this report of Garbo's consorting with "she-go-los" indicates, hints of lesbian tendencies were not out of bounds for fan magazines, at least not in the early 1930s. Still, the easily deciphered allusion to lesbian culture in the item on Garbo is unusual, although the reported sighting of Dietrich in male attire is not.

The few references to de Acosta in such magazines are telling in this regard. Her presence in Hollywood, in Garbo's company, is duly noted, although the first time this happens she remains an unnamed "woman companion" who goes for daily hikes with Garbo in the Hollywood hills.<sup>33</sup> It's unlikely that de Acosta's identity was a mystery to those devoted to following the movie star, whose every action was deemed newsworthy, but it may be that they were exercising caution when it came to trumpeting the name of someone

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<sup>32</sup> Marquis Busby, "Hot News," Movie Mirror 3:4 (February 1933): 8.

<sup>33</sup> This enigmatic reference appears in a caption of a full-page publicity photo of Garbo in Modern Screen 2:3 (August 1931): 28.

who was not on the studios' promotional roster. Within a few months this reticence was abandoned, when the de Acosta-Garbo pair received a less oblique acknowledgment:

Garbo has a new friend! And when Garbo becomes enough interested in anyone to have even a rumored friendship ... it is news in Hollywood. This time it is Mercedes Acosta [sic] ... a feminine writer imported from New York to write screen stories for Pola Negri. Miss Acosta is a very unusual lady ... affecting Russian costumes ... very white skin ... strange and sometimes weird facial expressions. She was seen at Pola's beach party and her "different-ness" caused a great deal of excited comment. Her appearance is so distinctive that she can be compared to no one ... perhaps that is what intrigues the never-so-friendly Swede.<sup>34</sup>

After another short interval they were again spotted together:

[T]he lunchers at the Ambassador Hotel have been pleasantly surprised recently to ... behold a very stylishly garbed young woman with a feminine companion laughing and gossiping at a nearby table. The young woman is none other than Aloof Garbo.... Her companion at luncheon was Mercedes Acosta [sic] and it is possible that they may have been talking about philosophy and such — but if so they must have hit on purely humorous angles, for they laughed considerably.<sup>35</sup>

Garbo's famous antipathy to fans' desires to know more about her (she reportedly burned unopened fan mail) has been interpreted in a variety of ways: cynics have wondered if her avoidance of publicity was a cunning public relations ploy to create an aura of mystery that elevated her above other

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<sup>34</sup> "Film Gossip of the Month," Modern Screen 2:6 (November 1931): 15.

<sup>35</sup> Carter Bruce, "Garbo Steps Out — Dietrich Goes into Seclusion," Modern Screen 3:3 (February 1932), 70.

glamorous but more accessible screen stars, while more recent commentators explain it as a frightened effort to keep her lesbian sexuality secret.<sup>36</sup> Clearly, Garbo's exceptional efforts to retain her privacy did not always succeed, although no publication ever mentioned a romantic or sexual component in her friendship with de Acosta.<sup>37</sup> As the report of Garbo's consorting with "she-golos" indicates, however, hints of the star's lesbian activities did manage to leak out.

Around the same time the fan magazines were getting off the ground, large circulation urban dailies introduced regular reports dealing with the movies. Louella Parsons, who was assigned to write a regular column on motion pictures at the Chicago Herald-Record in 1914, claimed to be the first full-time reporter working this beat. Eventually, through a series of relocations and the

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<sup>36</sup> Barry Paris, author of Garbo: A Biography (New York: Knopf, 1995) reports that Garbo's business manager Harry Edington is said to have encouraged her standoffish behavior as a way to incite interest in the star. Paris also repeats MGM publicity chief Howard Dietz's assertion that Garbo's refusal to speak to the press, for whatever reason, proved to be "the best publicity notion of the century" (179). For an example of the closet-case scenario, see Axel Madsen, The Sewing Circle — Hollywood's Greatest Secret: Female Stars Who Loved Other Women (Secaucus, NJ: Birch Lane Press, 1995), xiv. Madsen bases his theory on a remark by director Edmund Goulding, although all Goulding said is that Garbo was afraid of reporters snooping in her bedroom; he didn't say anything about what they might have found. See also, Michael Bronski's obituary of Garbo, "She Did Really 'Want to Be Alone,'" Gay Community News 17:41 (1990), cited in Judith Mayne, Cinema and Spectatorship (London: Routledge, 1993), 163.

<sup>37</sup> Although a few came close. An article about a stake-out at Garbo's residence produced this tidbit: "Around eight o'clock of that particular morning, a fresh young blonde of some eighteen summers was seen to skip out the front door of Mercedes' house and into the garage, out of which she drove a small closed car into the circular driveway, stopping directly opposite the front entrance. When she jumped out to go inside she left the motor running and the car door open.

"It was all of fifteen minutes before the blonde reappeared with Garbo — blue trousered legs showing beneath a tightly buttoned trench coat and blue beret tilted jauntily over straight blonde hair — following close behind. Both girls hurried into the car." Rita Page Palmborg, "What's Really Happening to Garbo?," Modern Screen 4:6 (November 1932): 28.

resolute patronage of William Randolph Hearst, Parsons became one of the primary sources and symbols of Hollywood gossip, rivaled only by her counterpart at the Los Angeles Times, Hedda Hopper.<sup>38</sup> Although ostensibly independent reporters, these writers relied as much on material fed them by studio publicists and press agents as on any other method of gathering the information that went into their articles. As the author of a joint biography of Hopper and Parsons remarked, “[W]ithin the publicity departments of major studios such powerhouses as Hedda and Louella each had a man assigned to plant items at the top of their columns and another to place squibs at the bottom.”<sup>39</sup> But they were not passive mouthpieces for the studios, and could, if they chose, use their columns to attack a given star or an expensive studio production of which they disapproved. Hopper had no qualms about flaunting her power and was often remembered for a particularly wry remark about her home in Beverly Hills: “That’s the house that fear built.”<sup>40</sup>

In effect, the balance of power between Hopper and Parsons on one side and the studios on the other was maintained at a level of a stalemate, with most actors caught between the two forces. Eventually, these two women came to stand for reactionary nationalism — both supported efforts to ferret out Communists and other “subversives” in Hollywood in the post-World War II period, much like the political direction Winchell took in the late 1940s — and they are remembered as “conservative, prudish, narrow-minded small-town women in an essentially conservative and prudish community, and they used their gossip as a club to keep celebrities in line rather than as a needle to make

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<sup>38</sup> Hopper’s columns were also syndicated, and published in such major dailies as the New York Daily News, the Chicago Tribune, among others.

<sup>39</sup> George Eells, Hedda and Louella (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1972), 339.

<sup>40</sup> Eells, 15.

celebrities scream.”<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, Hopper was not above a bit of self-parody — as when she played herself as the archetypal rumor monger in the 1939 film The Women. Nor did either gossip columnist consistently use her privileged access to the public in order to simply enforce traditional morality.<sup>42</sup>

I began to question the power wielded by the gossip writers over terrified lesbian and gay Hollywoodites when I came across an intriguing line in Here Lies the Heart. Recollecting a Christmas dinner she attended in 1932 at the Hollywood home of costume designer Adrian, de Acosta wrote, “I brought Marlene whom he had never met, and, together with Hedda Hopper and several other friends, we tried to evoke a Christmas spirit.”<sup>43</sup> I wondered how Hopper, the consummate tattler, could attend this gathering without word about such queer goings on in Hollywood leaking to the public at large. But I couldn’t find any evidence that it had. Or maybe the other guests were so adept at disguise that she would never guess. Further research contradicted both explanations: Hopper, it turns out, enjoyed the company of gay men, which explains her presence at Adrian’s, whose homosexuality is now a matter of fact.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, as W. K. Martin writes, de Acosta and Dietrich “were unusually open about their

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<sup>41</sup> Gabler, 256.

<sup>42</sup> It’s not surprising to learn that neither Parsons nor Hopper was forthright about her own personal history. For details about the elaborate fictions each woman invented for herself, see Eells.

<sup>43</sup> de Acosta, HLH, 244-245.

<sup>44</sup> Eells finds Hopper’s affinity with gay men difficult to fathom, which is reflected in a disparaging statement he quotes, uttered by David (“Spec”) McClure, Hopper’s assistant: “She had a strange attraction to fags. They were good dancers. A lot of them were witty, talented people. They didn’t paw her. The only problem she had when she got home was to keep them from coming in and drinking all her liquor” (207).

affair. They entertained together, traveled together, and spent their days together when their schedules permitted."<sup>45</sup>

Martin interprets Dietrich's willingness to risk her movie career as testimony to her determination to resist a studio-imposed ideal of feminine propriety. The threat she faced was quite explicit, insofar as Dietrich, like every other actor working under contract for one of the Hollywood studios, was bound by a standard "morality clause," instituted in 1921. This clause mandated that "any actor or actress who commits any act tending to offend the community or outrage public morals and decency, will be given five days' notice of the cancellation of his contract"<sup>46</sup> In practice, as it is now well known, this meant not that actors refrained from activities that would violate the clause but that publicists were saddled with the task of keeping stories that indicated that such transgression had occurred out of the press. Or they did their best to frighten lesser stars into excessive secrecy. Of course, if studio executives wanted to discipline a disobedient player, they could invoke the clause, but as far as major stars were concerned, this never happened. The studios had a greater interest in promoting the image of Hollywood as a wholesome, or at least law-abiding, community than in parading the misdemeanors of errant members before the public. For that reason, homosexuality was not only treated as a private matter, but relegated to a realm of extreme secrecy. Of course, such acts of partition only ensured the fascination produced whenever the division between public and private knowledges becomes confounded, as happens so often in celebrity discourse.

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<sup>45</sup> W. K. Martin, Marlene Dietrich (New York: Chelsea House, 1995), 95.

<sup>46</sup> Cal York, "Plays and Players," Photoplay 21:1 (December 1921): 80.

For de Acosta, the professional hazards of exposure were less onerous, insofar as screenwriters who were not famous authors were virtually anonymous and therefore not newsworthy. On the other hand, with no husband or regular male escort in sight, combined with her conspicuous "different-ness," de Acosta's brazenness was perhaps more remarkable than Dietrich's. Quite deliberately, it seems, she projected an unambiguous lesbian image, which was met by an equally willful oversight by the salaried traffickers in gossip. Thus, de Acosta's visibility underscores Hedda Hopper's participation in the active production of "ignorance" about lesbians in Hollywood. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points out, ignorance is never a blanket absence of knowledge — an absence that in sexual matters can easily be attributed to naiveté and remedied by infusions of enlightened "knowledge" — but rather a structuring element in a particular regime of truth and power relations. Put simply, ignorance is an effect of power, and may also be an exercise of power.<sup>47</sup>

Apparently, de Acosta understood Hopper's power-knowledge game well if she dined in her company with her current lover (Dietrich, by all accounts, made little attempt to conceal her other sexual affairs, either). But the pact of secrecy between de Acosta, Dietrich, Adrian, and Hopper was meaningless without the collusion of all the cultural apparatuses that produced popular culture — the studios and theater producers, the press and press agents — and none of this would have worked without the participation of the celebrities themselves. Still, there is no doubt that de Acosta and her famous lesbian friends and acquaintances benefited from a sort of dispensation extended by the gossip press, whereby society women and very popular entertainers were allowed to be visible lesbians, as it were, without anyone ever using this word to describe

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<sup>47</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 4.

them in a public forum. No moral or political commitment was required of gossip writers for them to adopt this code. Above all, their silence was professionally expedient at a time when scientific techniques of social regulation were gaining support in intellectual and political circles. In this context, mass culture was increasingly regarded as an important locus of social reproduction and therefore was called upon to foster what was deemed normal and restrain deviance.

### **Social contracts**

The strategies adopted by the women performers in de Acosta's circle were rarely more drastic than keeping quiet about their sexual partners and activities whenever they thought this information might be broadcast. There is no evidence of widespread anxiety about being discovered or extreme efforts to create airtight heterosexual images. For instance, it is often assumed that these women married to avoid scandal, but even that implies a fear of exposure that remains unsubstantiated. De Acosta was married, in 1920, but said she did this to please her mother. From what she wrote about her relationship with her mother, as well as that with her husband, this rationale is entirely plausible. Mercedes never assumed her husband Abram Poole's last name, nor did she live with him during most of the time they were married. She even spent her wedding night at her mother's house and wrote about this incident in her autobiography.<sup>48</sup> Honeymooning in Europe, she found time to cultivate new lesbian friendships, with British theater archivist Gabrielle Enthoven, for

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<sup>48</sup> Still, when Abram finally asked her for a divorce after fifteen years she says that the request came as a "great shock... It had never occurred to me that Abram and I would ever be divorced." *HLH*, 261.

example.<sup>49</sup> She also carried on several affairs — with Eva Le Gallienne and Gladys Calthrop — quite publicly during the years when she shared living quarters with Poole in New York City immediately following their marriage.

Another unorthodox marriage compact was Elsie de Wolfe's, whose private secretary Hilda West, described how she and her boss consulted Burke's Peerage in search of a candidate for a titled husband who might be interested in marriage to a wealthy if not well-bred American. The designated peer, Charles Mendl, turned out to be agreeable, although conjugal sexual relations played no part in the bargain.<sup>50</sup> Katharine Cornell and her husband, director Guthrie McLintic, seem to have been deeply devoted to one another, although her sexual preference was for women and his for men.<sup>51</sup> Eva Le Gallienne not only didn't marry but also was named in divorce proceedings involving one of her lovers. She endured taunts in the press but shrugged them off and went on with her work.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>49</sup> HLH 123-124.

<sup>50</sup> On de Wolfe's decision to marry, see Smith, 223-224. According to the biographer, Mendl made little secret of his liaisons with young, pretty women, often actresses, and said of his wife "For all I know ... the old girl is still a virgin" (304).

<sup>51</sup> The presumed heterosexuality of Cornell and McLintic is unquestioned in two relatively recent biographies: Tad Mosel, with Gertrude May, Leading Lady: The World and Theatre of Katharine Cornell (Boston: Little Brown, 1978), and Lucille M. Pederson, Katharine Cornell: A Bio-biography (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1994). Terry Castle corrects this impression in Noël Coward and Radclyffe Hall, which reproduces a photo of Cornell and Nancy Hamilton, basking nude in the sun alongside Coward, McLintic, and Coward's lover (37), and in the caption matter-of-factly identifies Hamilton as Cornell's lover.

<sup>52</sup> In Eva Le Gallienne: A Biography (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996) Helen Sheehy documents New York theater critic George Jean Nathan's routine disparagement of Le Gallienne's performances, amidst otherwise positive notices, and notes Nathan's especially nasty item on her in his 1940 Encyclopaedia of the Theatre, which was embellished with homophobic jibes (258). Le Gallienne's lesbianism was also mocked in a 1928 Vanity Fair cartoon,

Only one of de Acosta's actress friends may have used marriage to camouflage her lesbian activities and proclivities, and even here the circumstances are not entirely clear-cut. The actress in question was Alla Nazimova, who is now all but forgotten but was justly described by New York Times film critic Bosley Crowther as "the Greta Garbo ... of the years around 1920."<sup>53</sup> She became famous as the result of her widely acclaimed interpretations of what have become classics of naturalist drama, Ibsen's and Chekhov's work in particular, and she was a national celebrity in the U.S. long before she made her first movie in 1916.<sup>54</sup> But Nazimova is largely remembered now, if at all, as an actress who played femmes fatales in silent films, epitomized by her performance in the 1922 film version of Oscar Wilde's Salome, which she also wrote, directed, and produced.

Bessie Marbury was friendly with Nazimova, and in 1915 gave de Acosta a ticket to see her in War Brides, an anti-war melodrama that drew record-breaking audiences to the Palace vaudeville theater in New York. De Acosta made a point of introducing herself shortly thereafter, and the two became lovers for a brief period (and friends until Nazimova's death in 1945). Nazimova had numerous other lesbian relationships, most of these after the dalliance with de Acosta, including a three year affair with Le Gallienne and romances with both wives of Rudolph Valentino. In 1916 a substantial offer from Metro Pictures

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reproduced in Robert Schanke, Shattered Applause: The Lives of Eva Le Gallienne (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992), n.p.

<sup>53</sup> Bosley Crowther, "Alla Nazimova's 1922 Film 'Salome' at the Museum [of Modern Art]," New York Times, February 15, 1967. Alla Nazimova clippings file, Billy Rose Collection, New York Public Library.

<sup>54</sup> Nazimova's biographer, Gavin Lambert, cites a notice she received while touring in 1908: "'There is not a town of any consequence in the United States today,' a columnist wrote in the Washington Post, 'where the coming of this young actress would not create interest among theatregoers, for her fame has spread over the land'" (146).

— \$13,000 a week — lured her to Hollywood, where she did little to stifle publicity that contained allusions to her lesbian tendencies. Nor did she hide her sexuality from her employers: in the early 1920s she proposed making a film based on Aphrodite, a novel by Pierre Louÿs, author of lesbian classic Bilitis, which was to include lesbian scenes as part of its depiction of pagan culture in pre-Christian Alexandria (the studio canceled the project when they figured this out). And her women-only parties at her Hollywood home — which, in another gesture that underscored her exotic image, she named the Garden of Alla — were legendary. According to Gavin Lambert, “In the flamboyant early days of her stardom in silent movies, Nazimova enjoyed dropping hints about her bisexuality, which became one of Hollywood’s best unkept secrets.”<sup>55</sup>

During this period, from 1912 to 1927 to be precise, the public was repeatedly reminded that Nazimova was married to actor Charles Bryant. Certainly, this distracted attention from her sexual relationships with women, and other men. And for Bryant, the association with the star gave him great professional and financial opportunities. In the production credits for A Doll’s House and Salome, as well as in most film indexes, Bryant is named as director, but Nazimova did the actual work. She also wrote the screenplays for both films but used a synonym, Peter M. Winters, to disguise this aspect of her contribution. And, with consequences that later came to haunt her, Nazimova signed an contract assuming responsibility for Bryant’s taxes. However, the marriage was phony: Nazimova married an actor named Sergei Golovin in Russia in 1904 and had never been divorced from him. Her house of cards crumbled in 1925, when reporters got wind of Bryant’s marriage to a young

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<sup>55</sup> Lambert, 13. He adds that Nazimova once told a reporter, “My friends call me Mimi and sometimes Peter” and wore a “blue serge suit of mannish cut” to the interview (210).

woman from Connecticut but, since the press had never been apprised of a divorce from Nazimova, they demanded an explanation of the couple's legal relationship. Nazimova was disgraced by the disclosure of her pretended marriage, and tried to repair the damage by inventing an equally fictitious divorce. Ignominiously, she was saddled with paying Bryant's tax bill at a time when her own earnings had been greatly diminished.

Nazimova's story may read like a wacky and semi-tragic variation on the cover-up strategy — evidence of at least one celebrity closet avant la lettre — but this one has a few more twists that call for another interpretation. A scandal indeed ensued upon the discovery of Nazimova's unmarried status, but it was not about lesbianism. And, instead of taking the opportunity to chide the star for her immoral ways and reveal even more damning information, the Hollywood gossip industry presented a united front in her defense. In fact, they had done so for years. Louella Parsons was aware of the fact that Nazimova and Bryant were never married but "deliberately falsified it — and others followed her lead."<sup>56</sup> Even after the lie became public, Parsons and other authorities on stars' private lives continued to repeat the myth.<sup>57</sup> Amazingly, the spurious story managed to survive in spite of its refutation, to the point where Nazimova's obituary written by Parsons reproduced the discredited information.<sup>58</sup> The lesson to be gleaned from this episode (in addition to the obvious affirmation of Parsons's authority) is not about the enforced invisibility of lesbians but a much broader effort to

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<sup>56</sup> De Witt Bodeen, "Nazimova: Her Film Career Was a Pale Reflection of Her Genius as an Actress," Films in Review (December 1972), 596.

<sup>57</sup> The only article printed about Nazimova while she was alive that didn't echo this misinformation was a profile written by Djuna Barnes, a lesbian who may have been uninterested in propping up the actress' wifely facade. Djuna Barnes, "Alla Nazimova," Theatre Guild Magazine 7:9 (1930): 32-34.

<sup>58</sup> Louella Parsons, "Alla Nazimova," Los Angeles Examiner, July 14, 1945.

make celebrity narratives conform to very narrow social norms, to the point of disregarding facts when they interfered. The gossip press rescued Nazimova from ignominy because she was a big star, acclaimed as a great actress — not above rebuke, but almost. And she was also part of a system that was predicated on creating fictions that were accepted as truth. This was a knowledge that couldn't incorporate a lesbian story as anything other than evidence of pathology and, therefore, overlooked what didn't fit.

### **Mercedes redux**

Up to this point, I have proceeded as if the missing narratives of lesbian celebrity could be assembled from the fragments and hints left behind by the women whose names I've cited. I've used their own writings or followed their biographers' tracks to lend credence to my ideas concerning the parameters of lesbian celebrity in the pre-gay liberation period. But in doing this I have been performing a kind of intellectual violence, applying a descriptive term, lesbian celebrity, to these women when it would have been, for them, an oxymoron. Ultimately, this effort is bound to fail: these women were celebrities, and they were involved sexually with other women; they may have even recognized themselves and each other as lesbians. And they, along with myriad other stars, were surely objects of fans' lesbian fantasies.<sup>59</sup> But lesbian sexuality was never discussed directly and lesbian identity was never ascribed — certainly not in the media that confirmed and amplified their celebrity — in the terms it has been since the late 1960s. Until then a star's heterosexuality would be taken for granted unless an unambiguous proclamation was issued. Of course, this was

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<sup>59</sup> A Nazimova fan, Anita Owen, wrote a song "Alla" around 1920 that became a best-selling phonograph record and piano roll, the refrain of which was: "Alla my heart is lonely/I want you only/Your eyes are e'er before me,/Alla I'll pray to Allah/To keep you safe for me." Quoted in Lambert, 228.

never done, because, from the late-nineteenth century onwards — amplified significantly in the 1930s — the language of moral depravity and mental illness were the only intelligible concepts of lesbianism available.

In fact, by the time de Acosta set out to write her autobiography in the late fifties, lesbian culture was in the midst of a period of intense surveillance and censure, the culmination of the reaction against sexual diversity and tolerance that began with the repeal of Prohibition. As Chauncey has noted, gay life became “less tolerated, less visible to outsiders, and more rigidly segregated [from straight culture] in the second third of the century than the first.”<sup>60</sup> What was visible by the late forties, thanks to the media, was the campaign to demonize homosexuality as politically dangerous, an innate condition that rendered all lesbians and gay men psychologically deficient, morally deformed, and inherently untrustworthy. At the same time, the logic of the celebrity system as it developed over the century created a demand for intimate narrative accounts about stars’ private lives, as the editors of fan magazines realized by the end of World War I. This required coherent stories about families, shopping and dining habits, vacations and pastimes, and, most importantly, romances. The occupation of a celebrity watcher, performed by both journalists and fans, consisted of filling in these details and keeping up with new developments in the stars’ lives.

Thus, by mid-century, the lesbian autobiographer was faced with a choice between producing a very sketchy account of sexual matters or hoping that willful ignorance would prevail. This is where de Acosta’s autobiographical project becomes particularly interesting, not for its contribution to lesbian history but for what she didn’t, or couldn’t, publish in 1960. She had set herself a

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<sup>60</sup> Chauncey, 9.

difficult task: it wasn't just that she would have to write about lesbian attractions and attachments if the book was to have any claim to authenticity. But many of the people she would name in this context were well known, several of them were major stars, and a number of them were alive. And if she did refer to herself or any of her friends as lesbian or use any equivalent expression, she would then be compelled to address the topic within the terms available at the time — as a disease.

The motto de Acosta adopted as her insignia, and had embossed on her personal stationery, was "Verdad y Silencio" (Truth and Silence). In fact, Here Lies the Heart often performs a delicate balancing act in an apparent effort to reconcile these two values that would usually be deemed incompatible for a writer. On one hand, her book offers a study in discretion, never once mentioning the word lesbian or naming anyone a homosexual (although she does use the word "homosexuals" once, in a list of the diverse house guests of an eccentric sculptor). On the other hand, its sexual "truths" are everywhere implied. In many respects, she had more in common with her friend Janet Flanner, whose "Letter from Paris" columns in the New Yorker, written between 1925 and 1939, were full of news about lesbian cultural figures without drawing attention to the recurrence of this motif.<sup>61</sup> De Acosta needed to tread

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<sup>61</sup> Excerpts from Flanner's New Yorker columns are included in Janet Flanner (Genêt), Paris Was Yesterday: 1925-1939, ed. Irving Drutman (New York: Harcourt Brace/Jovanovich, 1988). Many of the same women also appear in the photographic portraits taken during the late 1920s by Flanner's fellow expatriate Berenice Abbott, whose exhibitions again presented such lesbians as Djuna Barnes, Margaret Anderson, Jane Heap, Sylvia Beach, Adrienne Monnier, Flanner, and her lover Solita Solano in the same company as James Joyce, Max Ernst, and Peggy Guggenheim. Abbott's pictures — many of them with women in masculine garb and, my favorite, Janet Flanner in top hat with two masks around it — underscore the point that lesbian invisibility as currently construed was not a problem in the 1920s. A selection of Abbott's portraits are published in Berenice Abbott: Photographs (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990).

very carefully, and caution led her to tidy up and pare down her memories of love and sex with women in the retrospective account of her life she made public.

If successful, the complicated work that goes into this sort of revisionist project should be inconspicuous, or at least that is the author-editor's hope. Judging by her book's critical reception, she achieved this aim. Detractors did not accuse her of fabrication but instead faulted her for being unorthodox and elitist; such headlines as "Aberrant Hedonist Writes All" and "Writer 'Drops Names' Through Autobiography" sum up the contents of these pieces. Another review, "Greta Garbo's Pal Has Much to Tell," dismisses de Acosta's social circle as "the greatest collection of psychos outside Bellevue" but doesn't question the truth of the tale.<sup>62</sup> And those who recommended the book praised it, in the words of one reviewer, "as a historical document, as an authentic social history."<sup>63</sup> Women's Wear Daily promoted the book's veracity, too, when it repeated de Acosta's fanciful story about convincing Dietrich to don trousers (in fact, the Berliner had worn this mode of apparel long before she landed in the U.S. and to publicity parties in Hollywood soon after she arrived, causing a minor scandal).<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> S. M. A., "Aberrant Hedonist Writes All," Houston Chronicle, April 3, 1960; W. G. R., "Writer 'Drops Names' Through Autobiography," Indianapolis Star, March 6, 1960. The quote about "psychos" is from Betsy Buffington, "Greta Garbo's Pal Has Much to Tell," publication and date unknown. All reviews are in the de Acosta Papers.

<sup>63</sup> Richard McLaughlin, "Adventures of an Esthete," The New Leader, June 13, 1960, 29.

<sup>64</sup> Lester Gaba Looks at Display," Women's Wear Daily, April 12, 1960, 13. This is not a review but an item about the use of de Acosta's book in a window display at Saks Fifth Avenue, with a mannequin holding the book and wearing a monocle. The writer mistakenly identifies this prop as "Mercedes trademark," although it was a mainstay of early twentieth-century, upper-class style and could be read as a sly reference to the store's and WWD's awareness of the lesbian dimension of de Acosta's life story. On Dietrich's scandalous appearances in trousers, see Martin, 60.

Professional book reviewers may have been willing to believe her, but de Acosta had her own reservations about candor and was willing to say so in public. In an interview with Joseph Wershba of the New York Post promoting the book, she told him,

"I don't think any person can write an absolutely truthful autobiography. You can't tell about situations involving other people — except perhaps after your death. You can't do it because of libel and because of your own good taste. You can tell the truth up to a certain point. Beyond that, you hurt people."<sup>65</sup>

In private, she also grappled with this dilemma but came up with a somewhat more convoluted, less confident answer. The first draft of her autobiography, which is remarkable for its radical dissimilarity to the published version, contains this passage in its opening pages:

[I]ntelligent lies are many times nearer the truth than unintelligent truth, and in many cases more stimulating. I understand that many truths are only half truths, and that in many cases — for the comfort and happiness of everyone at large — it is clearly each person's duty to occasionally cultivate falsehood.

And yet, even after this discovery, I found it very difficult to lie and still find it so.

Am I truthful because of a deep desire for the Truth? Or am I just a coward?<sup>66</sup>

She seems to be preparing the reader to accept her story as true, but she plants seeds of doubt in the first paragraph that undermine her case. The muddiness of

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<sup>65</sup> Joseph Wershba, "Daily Closeup" New York Post, April 18, 1960.

<sup>66</sup> de Acosta, HLH, first MS, 10.

the reasoning here says one thing rather clearly: there are some events she was uncomfortable putting in print. To solve this, she employed a tactic that proved disastrous in this initial effort: she omitted all references to anyone with whom she has been involved sexually, with the exception of Isadora Duncan — no Nazimova, no Dietrich, no Hollywood dinner parties or house guests, no Calthrop or Maria Annunziata Kirk (known as Poppy, Mercedes's last long-term lover); not even her husband is mentioned. The most stunning absence is Garbo, who becomes the center of the published version of Here Lies the Heart.

There is another, more fascinating discrepancy between de Acosta's initial effort and the authorized autobiography — passages in the former which illustrate how and why, until she was seven, she was raised as a boy. She writes in the first draft,

[M]y mother decided I was to be a boy... She ... sometimes called me Raphael, a name she apparently had in mind for me had I been a boy, and one which I have all my life since regarded as more my own than one with which I was christened.<sup>67</sup>

And she describes at length the "tragedy" that disabused her of this notion when several male playmates gave her a lesson in the anatomy of sexual difference after her protests that she wasn't a girl:

"Prove you're not a girl", they screamed.

I put my poor little hand down on my body hopelessly seeking for something which was not there. In that one brief second everything in my young soul turned monstrous and terrible and dark.... When ... it was

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<sup>67</sup> de Acosta, HLH, first MS, 28-29.

finally admitted that I was a girl I fell into a delirium. For three days I raged in bed and ran a high temperature.<sup>68</sup>

A few pages further on, she returns to this theme. Even after acknowledging that she wasn't a boy she is still adamant about not being a girl, telling a nun who disputes this fact, "I am not a boy and I am not a girl, or maybe I am both — I don't know. And because I don't know, I will never fit in anywhere and I will be lonely all my life."<sup>69</sup>

Having offered these illustrations, de Acosta's story then veers toward a more reflective tone strikingly reminiscent of The Well of Loneliness, reflecting upon how she subsequently interpreted her childhood confusion and the theory of sexuality she developed as a result:

And perhaps even this childhood tragedy, with its roots of despair, has since flowered into a beautiful tree and while, at some moments, it has shadowed my life from the sun, that very shade under which I have lingered has cooled my spirit and enable my eyes to see deeper and further than the people who travel always in the blazing sun. It has made me see and understand the half-tone light of dawn and twilight, whose vibrations are ever the most mystical and romantic, so too have I come to regard these half tones of life and the people who walk in their rhythm, as the most beautiful.... To the outward form of sex which the body has assumed I have remained indifferent. I do not understand the difference between a man and woman, and believing only in the eternal value of love, I cannot understand these so-called "normal" people who believe that a man should love only a woman, and woman love only a man.... I

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<sup>68</sup> de Acosta, HLH first MS, 30.

<sup>69</sup> de Acosta, HLH first MS, 32.

believe in many cases this is why the “normal” people are usually much less inspired, seldom artists, and much less sensitive than the “half-tone” people.<sup>70</sup>

The rhetorical appeal to nature as a support for homosexual desire is what calls to mind The Well. Whereas Radclyffe Hall’s lesbians exhibit characteristics in line with those propounded by the positivist sexologists she respected, de Acosta’s ideas about lesbian sexuality are a mixture of gender inversion and Freud’s theories about sexuality as an unconscious disposition shaped by early childhood experiences. In addition to her representation of her gender confusion, she writes about having a “mother complex,” all of which indicates that she was familiar with psychoanalytic language concerning sexual identity.<sup>71</sup> She then erases any residual notions of pathology that either school of thought might encourage by subordinating both to precepts of various Eastern religions she had studied. In other words, she adopted many of the attitudes toward homosexuality prevalent in the mid-twentieth century, with a dab of mysticism thrown in to temper the homophobia that medical concepts of homosexuality foster.

Otherwise, her first draft consists of a series of chapters on famous people she had met and conversed with — Sarah Bernhardt, Eleanora Duse, and Anna Pavlova, for instance — as well as some space devoted to her early childhood and family. If published, this book would have been a timid product for someone with de Acosta’s ability to deliver a first-hand account of the mid-twentieth-century theatrical and film communities in New York and Los Angeles. It may have been an editor or de Acosta herself who noticed the dearth

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<sup>70</sup> de Acosta, HLH, first MS, 33-34.

<sup>71</sup> de Acosta, HLH, 24.

of gossip-quality information about celebrities in what she had written and decided that a new approach was necessary. In any case, she returned to her typewriter and produced a fresh manuscript that became the basic blueprint for the published autobiography. Her second draft for Here Lies the Heart included many of the stories about family and famous people reported in the first, although reorganized to fit into a more coherent chronological sequence; to this she added a wealth of recollections about her career and myriad friends — including, as I have pointed out, various lovers in disguise — as well as elaborating the social and historical contexts where she encountered this sizable cast of characters. Curiously, the musings about sex and normalcy quoted above disappeared completely. The story about being raised as a boy and her confusion about her true gender was retained in subsequent drafts but reworded and whittled away as she worked over the manuscript, with the sole remaining paragraph on the topic being penciled out on the galley proofs — that is, just before the book went to press.

Placing these two versions of de Acosta's life story side by side, a number of other contrasts emerge. Words that might be interpreted as signs of lesbianism in the first draft are nowhere to be found in the published work. Still, she let stand a number of references to individuals and situations with homosexual overtones: Pairs of men are regularly named as companions (e.g., New Republic editor Stark Young and architect Bill Bowman, diet doctor Gayelord Hauser and his companion Frey Brown), as are women, who sometimes have masculine nicknames (e.g., Gabrielle Enthoven and Cecile Sartoris, G.B. Stern or "Peter — as G.B. is called by her friends"<sup>72</sup> and Diana Wynward). Descriptions of a person's appearance may contain attributions of

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<sup>72</sup> de Acosta, HLH, 244.

masculinity to a woman or femininity to a man: Bessie Marbury, for instance, "had the brain of a man, well balanced and keen, lodged in a massive, masculine-shaped head."<sup>73</sup> On first meeting Nazimova, de Acosta was surprised that the great actress "seemed like a naughty little boy."<sup>74</sup> Clifton Webb "was slender and willowy and had a flair for wearing clothes,"<sup>75</sup> while Quinton Tod "dressed to perfection and was neatness itself."<sup>76</sup> A bit more scandalously, she wrote about John Barrymore's "feminine character" and what she saw as his "need to be dominated," although these observations were cut out prior to publication.<sup>77</sup> However, she lets stand an anecdote about Barrymore's wife, Michael Strange, who wore "velvet jackets which she had made in the style of Alfred de Musset ... a Walt Whitman shirt ... heavy leather riding gloves with wide cuffs ... 'the type of glove George Sand wore' [and] ... a man's soft hat, generally one of Jack's."<sup>78</sup>

In addition to such subtle allusions to transvestite or transsexual temperaments and homosexual culture, the final version of the book includes various anecdotes that implicate de Acosta as a participant in this queer milieu, either directly or by association with people she befriends. For instance, she tells about an incident at a convent school she attended, where she acted as a go-between for two nuns in love with one another. She describes star gazing on Fifth Avenue with her best school friend as an adolescent: they pursued the Barrymores, John and Ethel, and Mercedes says she "swooned" over Ethel while

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<sup>73</sup> de Acosta, HLH 72.

<sup>74</sup> de Acosta, HLH 74.

<sup>75</sup> de Acosta, HLH 77.

<sup>76</sup> de Acosta, HLH 262.

<sup>77</sup> de Acosta, HLH 180.

<sup>78</sup> de Acosta, HLH 194.

her friend preferred John.<sup>79</sup> Living in New York as an adult, she fell in with a group of British show business lesbians — including the celebrated musical comedy actress Teddie Gerard — and their gay comrades, one of whom amused them all by being evicted by his hostess, Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt, because he and a second butler failed to appear at an important dinner party. About this misdemeanor de Acosta wrote, “[I]t was not difficult for Mrs. Vanderbilt to conclude that wherever these two missing young men were, they were together.”<sup>80</sup> And, in much more serious vein, she dispenses plentiful hints about the sexual nature of her most enduring relationships with women — Le Gallienne, Garbo, Dietrich, and Poppy Kirk — never explicitly but still giving the impression of the passion that was involved. For instance, she recalls, “I suddenly had a letter from Poppy saying that she wanted to return to Paris [where de Acosta was living] and suggesting we share a flat together. I put in a call to Mexico City and we decided she would fly to Paris as soon as I found an apartment.”<sup>81</sup>

Other women who were de Acosta’s lovers are treated much more obliquely. Ona Munson, for example conducted an ardent transcontinental affair with de Acosta in the mid-1940s — when de Acosta lived in New York and Munson in Hollywood, but de Acosta places more emphasis on their first meeting, in 1932 at the home of Ernst Lubitsch, Munson’s lover at the time. When the narrative moves on to later years, de Acosta writes only that Munson “often came to spend the night when she was shooting at Republic Studios in the

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<sup>79</sup> de Acosta, *HLH*, 42.

<sup>80</sup> de Acosta, *HLH*, 125.

<sup>81</sup> de Acosta, *HLH*, 343.

San Fernando Valley.”<sup>82</sup> Similarly, about the start of her affair with Gladys Calthrop, she says, “That enchanting and beautiful person, Gladys Calthrop, had boarded the Majestic as Southampton. We spent most of the trip together and had a very pleasant crossing,” followed by a couple of sentences describing Calthrop’s work.<sup>83</sup> After this nonchalant description Calthrop disappears until she is mentioned in relation to a fire in a house de Acosta and her husband were renovating; de Acosta had already set up a work room for herself, and Calthrop, she notes off-handedly, was living there at the time.<sup>84</sup>

It is easy enough to gloss over these apparently insignificant details, although a close reading of de Acosta’s prose does suggest a decoding strategy of sorts. Between the references to Calthrop, for instance, de Acosta departs from her usual list of travels, social encounters, and sketches of the people she knew to tell an anecdote about her theft of an exotic black tulip from the hostess’s flower arrangement. This recollection begins with the sentence, “Flowers have at times moved me the way certain beautiful women have moved me,”<sup>85</sup> echoing the words “beautiful and enchanting” used to describe Calthrop a few pages earlier, implying that this woman, like the tulip, was also an object of her desire.

Garbo, however, was a special case. As I’ve already pointed out, their “friendship” was publicly acknowledged; even de Acosta’s obituaries mentioned it, as did the previously cited gossip columnists and reviewers of Here Lies the Heart. For Garbo, though, publicity was anathema, an attitude that so deeply

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<sup>82</sup> de Acosta, HLH 305.

<sup>83</sup> de Acosta, HLH 182.

<sup>84</sup> de Acosta, HLH 201.

<sup>85</sup> de Acosta, HLH 199.

violated the tenets of celebrity culture that she was often accused of using her antipathy to reporters as a canny ploy intended to generate an air of mystery, that is, as a way to attract attention and generate intrigue. Her refusal to give interviews was so unimaginable for the Hollywood press that they referred to it incessantly and took to calling any such actions on the part of a star "pulling a Garbo" or "going Garbo."<sup>86</sup> The one thing that was guaranteed to alienate the antisocial star was to publish anything about her that claimed to be based on intimate knowledge. Yet, having recast her staid autobiography as a chatty memoir, de Acosta must have realized that she would have to deal with Garbo. As it turned out, after the book was published Garbo never spoke to or corresponded with de Acosta again. Although predictable, this still must have been painful, since it is clear from how de Acosta wrote about her — replete with superlatives— that Garbo was the most important woman in her life, except, perhaps, her mother and her sister Rita.<sup>87</sup>

The texture of the prose de Acosta used to describe Garbo is adulatory to an extreme, as well as fervent, conveying a grand passion, at least from Mercedes's perspective. Contrary to her reputation for melancholy and hauteur, Garbo in de Acosta's rendition is kind, warm, cheerful and fun-loving, not to mention, one of the greatest artists who ever lived. And she supplies descriptions of time spent in Garbo's company that are decidedly romantic. One occurs soon after they met, when Garbo invited de Acosta to spend six weeks alone with her

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<sup>86</sup> See, e.g., Cal York, "Gossip—East and West," *Photoplay* 23:5 (April 1932). Interestingly, this was the expression used to discuss the frequent trips to Hawaii made by Janet Gaynor, the girl-next-door star, without her husband and applied also to just-as-famous MGM costume designer Adrian, who Hollywood insiders knew well was gay.

<sup>87</sup> Before the book was published, though, de Acosta removed a statement crediting Garbo with "unfailing honesty" in her dealings with the press, since de Acosta must have realized that this was an insupportable assertion.

on an island in Silver Lake in the Sierra Nevada: "How to describe the next six enchanted weeks?... Six perfect weeks out of a lifetime. This is indeed much. In all this time there was not a second of disharmony between Greta and me or in nature around us."<sup>88</sup> That was in 1931. And in 1935, several years after de Acosta and Dietrich had become steady if not monogamous lovers and the affair with Garbo appeared to have cooled off, Mercedes received a cable from Greta upon returning to New York from Europe: "I will meet you for dinner a week from Tuesday at eight o'clock at the Grand Hotel [in Stockholm]"; de Acosta booked passage on a ship leaving the next day, kept the appointment, and spent (at least) a week with her beloved.<sup>89</sup>

This last endearment is not de Acosta's term but seems quite appropriate given the adoration she lavished on Garbo. But de Acosta worked very hard to make sure that the sexual relation with Garbo, or any other woman for that matter, remained offstage. That work is evident on the manuscript pages de Acosta produced as she shaped the book's final form. In the second and third drafts, as well as the galley proofs, those sections of the text dealing with their early encounters are heavily amended, as if she had to struggle to get the tone just right. Most interesting in this regard are the short but significant deletions that removed hints of intimacy: recounting her first visit to Garbo's house she deleted phrases that mention Garbo taking her hand at two different moments.<sup>90</sup> When she tells the story about Garbo's impulsive return from Silver Lake to pick her up so they can vacation together, she shortened the words attributed to Garbo — "I'm on my way back for you" — by crossing out "for

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<sup>88</sup> de Acosta, *HLH* 224.

<sup>89</sup> de Acosta, *HLH* 269.

<sup>90</sup> de Acosta, *HLH* second MS, 462.

you."<sup>91</sup> And that night, before they depart for the lake, de Acosta had written, "I put her to bed on the porch, although we were both too excited to do much sleeping," but decided to remove this sentence, too.<sup>92</sup>

These items are just a sample of the many adjustments made by de Acosta where Garbo was concerned, but she was similarly engaged in purging other material that might imply a lesbian perspective — literally, in the sense that she might reveal too much about how she looked at women. An appreciative passage about Garbo's legs was removed. Nor was Garbo the sole object of her revisionist efforts. Her description of Teddie Gerard was shortened by eliminating the observation that the actress "had a beautiful body."<sup>93</sup> Additional emendations involved the removal of hints of masculine identifications, her own and others. Again, her representation of Garbo was most heavily scrutinized, as when de Acosta first altered the concluding words in a sentence about a script she hoped to write for her lover, "She had told me she longed to have a part in which she could dress as a man" to "in men's clothes," but reconsidered and crossed out the entire sentence. She removed a line that read, "She was more like a naughty boy than a great film star." In the section dealing with the time spent on Silver Lake, she changed her appraisal of Garbo's rowing ability from "like a man's" to "superb." Similarly, she deleted lines that tell about Dietrich ordering "sixteen complete men's outfits" from de Acosta's tailor and appearing at the studio dressed in "an entire man's suit." Why she demurred in this instance is unclear, since Dietrich's fondness for masculine attire was well known. Discussing the early days of her affair with Kirk, she wrote, "That night Poppy

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<sup>91</sup> de Acosta, HLH second MS, 473.

<sup>92</sup> de Acosta, HLH third MS, 357.

<sup>93</sup> de Acosta, HLH galley proofs, n.p.

cooked dinner for me and I invited her to come and stay with me. I then understood why Rodin married his cook!" but later reconsidered and deleted this analogy of their relationship to a marriage. About herself, she wrote in the penultimate draft, "[W]ho of us are only one sex? I, myself, am sometimes androgynous. When I consider all these complex problems, I have to put aside this book for a bit so as not to end by just throwing it out of the window."<sup>94</sup> This, too, was subsequently discarded.

In one of her later revisions de Acosta added a curious story about conversations with the flamboyant socialite Mabel Dodge Luhan, who during a stay in Hollywood as Adrian's guest had encouraged Mercedes to write an autobiography about "personalities she had known," just as Luhan had done in her *Intimate Memories*.<sup>95</sup> In what could be interpreted as an indirect expression of misgivings about the autobiography she was in the midst of preparing for publication, de Acosta recalled her discomfort with Luhan's suggestion that she portray friends and acquaintances "with a certain amount of malice, some suggestion of scandal." "Look at the number of people you know intimately," de Acosta remembered Luhan telling her. "You could begin with Adrian."<sup>96</sup> But if Luhan's own willingness to make her sexual life public — as she had done by writing about her love affair with D. H. Lawrence — was to serve as the example for de Acosta, to "begin with Adrian" would mean giving a candid report of the costume designer's homosexuality, which would almost certainly ruin his career. Instead, de Acosta tried out the method on Luhan herself, who, she remarked, "had written, in many instances, quite cruelly about a number of people who

<sup>94</sup> de Acosta, *HLH*, third MS, 338.

<sup>95</sup> Mabel Dodge Luhan, *Intimate Memories* (New York: Kraus Reprint Company, 1971 [1933-1937]).

<sup>96</sup> de Acosta, *HLH*, third MS, 439.

had crossed her path — or perhaps more precisely — whose path she had crossed, for Mabel is always the aggressor.” Oddly, this is the sole instance where de Acosta or her editors expressed a concern about the possibility of legal action, writing in the margin, “Libel? I’d cut now.”<sup>97</sup> The entire section on Luhan was deleted.

Indeed, de Acosta seems uninterested in using her autobiography as an opportunity to settle past grievances. The notable exception is Elsie de Wolfe, the only person subjected to spiteful appraisal in the book. De Acosta describes her as an “an exceptionally untalented actress” and, as an interior decorator who never “did anything really creative or original.”<sup>98</sup> In one of her drafts although omitted from the published version, de Acosta also insinuated that some of the French antiques de Wolfe imported were fakes, and the income she produced by selling the bogus Louis XIV and Louis XV furniture was the reason the French government awarded her the Legion of Honor, rather than her work as a nurse during World War I, which was the official justification.<sup>99</sup> Why de Wolfe is singled out for this kind of contemptuous treatment is not absolutely clear. It may be that de Acosta was enacting revenge for her long dead friend Bessie Marbury, who de Wolfe abandoned when she married Charles Mendl. More likely, though, these nasty comments were revenge for de Wolfe’s 1927 law suit against Rita Lydig, attempting to recover \$12,000 the bankrupt socialite owed her. Otherwise, the few unkind comments that de Acosta allowed herself to articulate in various drafts — for instance, an aside that mentions Nazimova’s lack of a “harmonious blend of great art and great soul” — were eliminated in

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<sup>97</sup> de Acosta, HLH, third MS, 438.

<sup>98</sup> de Acosta, HLH, 73.

<sup>99</sup> de Acosta, HLH, third MS, 120.

the final version.<sup>100</sup> Yet even with all her efforts to sanitize her memoirs, it is difficult to imagine that she could have foreseen the trial her character would undergo when stories about her affairs with the eminent actresses she knew moved from subcultural folklore into history.

### **Who's who**

The transition is fairly recent — it happened in 1990. That year, the unwritten rule that proscribed any mention of lesbianism in relation to renowned, glamorous performers in the press or writings on the lives of stage and screen personalities began to break down. Of course, there were a few references to lesbian actresses in popular literature on Hollywood before that date, most notoriously in Kenneth Anger's campy gossip tomes Hollywood Babylon and Hollywood Babylon II. The first drops names like Janet Gaynor, Lili Damita, and Claudette Colbert, along with Dietrich, Nazimova and the two women he claims she introduced to Rudolph Valentino and who, Anger says, were also lesbians — Jean Acker and Natacha Rambova.<sup>101</sup>

Significantly, 1990 was also the year Garbo died. The renewed interest in this supremely reclusive movie star occasioned by her demise unleashed a spate of new biographies, all of which acknowledge her lesbianism, with de Acosta credited with providing the evidence. For example, Antoni Gronowicz's 1990

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<sup>100</sup> de Acosta, HLH, third MS, 121.

<sup>101</sup> Kenneth Anger, Hollywood Babylon (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1975); Kenneth Anger, Hollywood Babylon II (New York: Penguin, 1984). On Valentino's marriages see Hollywood Babylon, 108-113. However, the story about introductions is not entirely accurate insofar as Nazimova did not introduce Acker to Valentino, although Acker was Nazimova's estranged lover when she married him. On the other hand, Rambova was introduced to Valentino when she was designing the sets and costumes for Nazimova's Camille; on both relationships, see Lambert, 210-240.

Garbo: Her Story purports to be a verbatim account of conversations between the author and Garbo, in which she freely discusses her affair with de Acosta, although the anecdotes differ significantly from those recounted in Here Lies the Heart.<sup>102</sup> In an appendix to his Garbo biography published five years after Gronowicz's, Barry Paris catalogues the myriad factual errors contained in Garbo: Her Story and convincingly challenges Gronowicz's claim of authenticity. In contrast, Paris's own Garbo uses de Acosta's text as the basis for his account of their relationship.<sup>103</sup> In the two books, de Acosta remains a secondary character, but in two additional contributions to the post-1990 Garbo literature — Loving Garbo, by Hugo Vickers, and Greta and Cecil, by Diana Souhami, both dealing with Cecil Beaton's infatuation with the celebrated beauty — de Acosta is accorded a more central role, since she and Beaton formed a bond based on the suffering each endured as a devoted but repeatedly frustrated lover of the great star. Both authors use de Acosta's papers, not just her published autobiography but the preparatory manuscripts for the book, as well as her correspondence with Beaton, to document the curious triangle. In addition, Beaton's letters and diaries provide these writers with plentiful comments about de Acosta, often condescending remarks made for Garbo's benefit.<sup>104</sup>

Second in importance to Garbo in the celebrity ranking of de Acosta's lovers is Marlene Dietrich, who has been the subject of at least five published biographies (in English) prior to the nineties, none of which mention de Acosta, or other female lovers for that matter. Since then, however, Dietrich's lesbian

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<sup>102</sup> Antoni Gronowicz, Garbo: Her Story (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990).

<sup>103</sup> Paris, 555-563.

<sup>104</sup> Hugo Vickers, Loving Garbo: The Story of Greta Garbo, Cecil Beaton, and Mercedes de Acosta (New York: Random House, 1994); Diana Souhami, Greta and Cecil (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994).

involvements have been discussed and analyzed in Donald Spoto's Blue Angel: The Life of Marlene Dietrich, Steven Bach's Marlene Dietrich: Life and Legend, Maria Riva's Marlene Dietrich, by Her Daughter, and W. K. Martin, Marlene Dietrich, not to mention various books that remark upon her lesbianism in a broader context.<sup>105</sup> Then there's Eva Le Gallienne, who published two autobiographies — the first in 1934 and another in 1953 — neither of which discusses de Acosta, in spite of their passionate affair that lasted over five years.<sup>106</sup> However, Robert Schanke's 1992 and Helen Sheehy's 1996 biographies of the distinguished actress are replete with information about this chapter in Le Gallienne's life, along with details concerning various relationships with women she lived with and loved. Yet another example is Alla Nazimova, whose career is chronicled in a 1997 biography by Gavin Lambert, the only book-length study of the once famous actress. Again, de Acosta appears in this context, as Nazimova's lover for a brief period, but also as a friend for the remainder of the actress's life. De Acosta also puts in a brief appearance in Michael Morris's Madam Valentino: The Many Lives of Natacha Rambova, which quotes de Acosta's recollection of seeing Rambova and Valentino dance in 1923, as well as her statements about the lasting friendship they developed on the basis of their shared interests in

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<sup>105</sup> Donald Spoto, Blue Angel: The Life of Marlene Dietrich (New York: Doubleday, 1992); Steven Bach, Marlene Dietrich: Life and Legend (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1992); Maria Riva, Marlene Dietrich, by Her Daughter (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993); and Martin. Martin's biography is part of the "Lives of Notable Gay Men and Lesbians" series of biographies edited by gay historian Martin Duberman, designed to appeal to lesbian and gay teenagers.

<sup>106</sup> Eva Le Gallienne, At 33 (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1934) and With a Quiet Heart (New York: Viking Press, 1953).

Eastern religions, in Here Lies the Heart.<sup>107</sup> But because one of the main purposes of his biographical project is to affirm Rambova's heterosexuality, Morris treats de Acosta's professed friendship as suspect.

It is no coincidence that this revival of de Acosta's memory comes at a time when the lesbianism of great movie stars from Hollywood's heyday is under scrutiny, and her celebrity stock has definitely appreciated as a result. In Axel Madsen's The Sewing Circle, subtitled Hollywood's Greatest Secret: Female Stars Who Loved Other Women, she at last achieves star status in her own right. In keeping with its promise of unmasking a conspiracy of silence, the book's jacket sports a set of lavender-tinted portraits — Tallulah Bankhead, Judy Garland, Joan Crawford and Barbara Stanwyck, all recognizable in spite of the black rectangles that obscure their eyes. To find de Acosta in this company, one need read no further than the book jacket, which dubs her "a lover to the stars" and repeats an anecdote attributed to Alice B. Toklas: "Say what you want about Mercedes, she had the three most important women of the twentieth century," although opinions vary on who, in addition to Garbo and Dietrich, Toklas had in mind.<sup>108</sup> Also, the book's survey begins with a sketchy biography of de Acosta, and her erotic adventures are the subject of several chapters, as well as additional passages, granting her a mythic quality in the process. In this spirit, Madsen reiterates an anecdote attributed to Truman Capote, who is reported to have

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<sup>107</sup> Michael Morris, Madam Valentino: The Many Lives of Natacha Rambova (New York: Abbeville Press, 1991).

<sup>108</sup> Madsen, 71. The candidates for de Acosta's third important lover that Madsen proposes in the text — Gertrude Stein or Eleanor Roosevelt — betray his preference for sensational speculation, since there is no evidence that de Acosta was more than a distant acquaintance of Stein (which, obviously, Toklas knew very well) or that she and Roosevelt ever met. Curiously, Souhami offers a similar quote, citing a letter from Toklas to Anita Loos as the source, but her version sets the number of lovers at two and names the obvious women — Garbo and Dietrich (ix).

invented a game that challenged players to “connect people sexually through as few beds as possible,” and for which, he maintained, “the best card to hold was Mercedes, because ‘you could get to anyone — from Cardinal Spellman to the Duchess of Windsor.’”<sup>109</sup>

In the place of secrecy and gossip, The Sewing Circle promises revelation and substantiated truth, but the opposite is what Madsen actually produces, as he inflates and invents “facts” that are routinely contradicted by the historical record. The errors are too numerous to list; to offer an example, in one short paragraph I spotted five, in addition to several exaggerations.<sup>110</sup> For the most part, these mistakes bespeak sloppy research and do not effect the overall narrative, but more egregious is the author’s failure to cite sources for much of the sensational information he presents. In a number of instances, Madsen’s litany of de Acosta’s sexual conquests appears to be based on a reading of Here Lies the Heart that assumes that any woman mentioned by de Acosta as a friend — Maude Adams and Katharine Cornell, for instance — must have been a lover, even when there is no information offered (or, as far as I know, available) to

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<sup>109</sup> Madsen, 71. The citation given for this quip is Vickers, 12. Vickers’s source is correspondence from John Richardson.

<sup>110</sup> The text to which I refer concerns Nazimova’s career, and reads in part: “She studied music at the St. Petersburg Conservatory.... She played leads at the Moscow Art Theater under Konstantin Stanislavsky and emigrated to America in 1906.... In 1921, she became Nancy Reagan’s godmother when newly divorced Edith Davis toured with her. Nazimova’s nephew, Val Lewton (Vladimir Ivan Leventon) ... became David O. Selznick’s story editor and in the 1940s a director of horror movies.” (97-98) The errors are these: She did not play leading roles in the Moscow Art Theater, only minor parts. She never studied violin at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, although her teacher in Yalta did. She came to the U.S. in 1905 and was indeed Nancy Reagan’s godmother, although the father was not anyone named Davis but a Kenneth Robbins to whom Edith Lockett was still married when she toured with Nazimova. Val Lewton produced, did not direct, horror movies like The Cat People and I Walked with a Zombie. Lambert’s carefully researched Nazimova and materials in the Nazimova clippings files in the Billy Rose Collection at the New York Public Library are the source for these corrections.

support this conclusion.<sup>111</sup> The combined effect of this factual mishmash, absence of references, and breathless tone of scandal insinuates that the entire topic of lesbian sexuality and relationships is unworthy of a serious treatment. And that seems quite consistent with what Madsen set out to accomplish. When dealing with lesbian celebrities, he warns us in his introduction, we're confronted with women who willfully obscured the truth and found that "[s]taying in the closet was altogether satisfying, sometimes even intensely romantic."<sup>112</sup> In effect, Madsen's careless attitude toward history says that it doesn't matter whether or not these events happened; what matters is that an aura of insincerity and craven hedonism surround the women he names.

Nonetheless, The Sewing Circle seems to satisfy the requirements for the kind of revisionist history of lesbian accomplishments and the enhanced visibility that is desired as a result, as does a volume of interviews by Boze Hadleigh entitled Hollywood Lesbians.<sup>113</sup> Indeed, Madsen's and Hadleigh's books are mentioned as inspiration for a photo-text feature in the gay and lesbian monthly Out, which praises them as "not a requiem but an homage ... recalling what the credits never revealed."<sup>114</sup> But the kind of homage offered may produce effects quite different from those usually associated with homage. Although different in form and only somewhat redundant in content, both books nevertheless share the style of an eager gossip who believes lesbians are inherently scandalous —

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111 My quarrel with Madsen is not that he says that Cornell was a lesbian; she was, although this aspect of her life has yet to be given extensive treatment in any book length biography.

112 Madsen, xv.

113 Boze Hadleigh, Hollywood Lesbians (New York: Barricade Books, 1994).

114 Hilton Als and Darryl Turner, "Double Exposure," Out (November 1995): 101.

not very different from opinions in de Acosta's day but now made overt.<sup>115</sup>

What has changed are the opportunities for holding this discussion in public, or for using racy subject matter openly to market one's wares. The appeal of these books is not unlike that of representations of lesbianism in most pornography, potentially engaging for heterosexual male consumers and lesbians, as well as for anyone interested in any configuration of stars' sex lives. But that is not how these volumes are advertised (compared, say, to advertising for Kenneth Anger's Hollywood Babylon diptych, which is quite frank about the books' voyeurism). Instead, the authors and publishers claim to present reality, the unvarnished truth, as if these books were conventional collective biographies.

Curiously, Madsen's cavalier use of de Acosta as a lesbian lodestone is mirrored in several of the aforementioned, generally more cautious biographies. As I have pointed out, de Acosta's own account is liberally cited as a source of information, but in a number of cases the reliability of her version of events is questioned. Usually her credibility is undermined by repeating the views of someone she knew who had developed an antipathy to de Acosta and, therefore, dismissed Here Lies the Heart. Sheedy does this, quoting Le Gallienne's assessment — "so full of lies that it's positively incredible!"<sup>116</sup> Vickers employs a similar strategy, although he grants that "the stories have stood the test of time."<sup>117</sup> Spoto, too, notes such exceptions, although he tacks on a defense of de Acosta's probity: "Friends who resented her frankness tried to

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<sup>115</sup> Only in the case of Patsy Kelly, who had no reservations about saying, "I'm a big dyke. So what? Big deal!" (62) — and that on the condition that these words not appear in print until her career had definitely come to a halt — does Hadleigh not resort to others' testimony to justify who he includes in his book and much of what he says in the text concerning his subjects' sexuality.

<sup>116</sup> Sheehy, 429.

<sup>117</sup> Vickers, 254.

deny the most torrid romantic revelations, often referring to the book as 'Here the Heart Lies.' But ... the basic truth of de Acosta's book (if not the accuracy of every detail) is indeed unassailable."<sup>118</sup> Perhaps one of the most vicious assessments of her character, though, is Riva's, who calls de Acosta "creepy" and says that she "looked like a Spanish Dracula," a comment that has been reproduced by several other Dietrich biographers, as well as by Madsen.<sup>119</sup>

After reading these repeated challenges to de Acosta's honesty and references to other disagreeable aspects of her personality, I was not surprised to read in Vickers's book that Janet Flanner "loathed" her.<sup>120</sup> Just one more strike against her, I thought, and there were already so many. Moreover, there is nothing in de Acosta's own chronicle that suggests that this may not have been the case. In Here Lies the Heart, de Acosta describes Flanner merely as a friend who paid a visit in 1941. Everyone she wrote about was a "friend," so it is not difficult to imagine that this may have been an overstatement. Therefore, it was quite surprising to find a lighthearted, poetic but amorous letter from Flanner, the lines of which form the outline of a tulip, among de Acosta's papers. Written in 1928 after one of Mercedes's visits to Paris, the letter-poem is an unmistakable expression of endearment. One line reads, "She ate daintily; consuming a sweetened crumb like a singer taking a high note. She ate flesh talking of flowers and flesh" (reminiscent of de Acosta's musings on flowers and women, occasioned by the anecdote about stealing a tulip); the rest are similarly tender

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<sup>118</sup> Spoto, 105.

<sup>119</sup> Riva, 153.

<sup>120</sup> Vickers, 160.

tributes to Mercedes.<sup>121</sup> Vicker's willingness to believe Flanner's dislike of de Acosta, although a minor matter, again leaves an impression of her as an untrustworthy character. And what was the source for Vickers's information? As it turns out, a conversation between the author and a friend of Poppy Kirk's, who might easily have harbored unkind feelings for Poppy's overbearing lover.<sup>122</sup> Ah, gossip.

Gossip, it becomes plain, is the linchpin of knowledge about dissembling lesbian celebrities. Even though, in the final analysis, gossip presents difficulties for assertions of historical fact, it should not automatically be disqualified as reasonable conjecture. Moreover, tracing the convolutions of gossip's transmission and reception may provide insights into the production of knowledge about lesbians. This may be why gossip is precisely what Michael Morris attempts to put to rest in his biography of Rambova. His main target is Kenneth Anger, whose statements concerning the lesbian relationship between Nazimova and her dearest friend (as well as Valentino's homosexuality) are the subject of an impassioned rebuttal in the book's final pages. It may be that Morris is concerned about how such stories endure as cultural myths, reinforced by such representations as Ken Russell's kitschy 1977 film *Valentino*, which portrays Rambova as an ambitious, ruthless, domineering woman who cavorts

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121 Other lines of the drawing/poem also describe de Acosta: "She had a small white body, like a marble park, in which her eyes lived as brown nightingales./Her hair was ligneous, black, and like a combed bush: her ears reddened like the berries./Her appetites were few, and they in her head, living there in grandeur like political prisoners who had changed, not broken, laws./Her shoes were those of ladies who used to be heeded." And the outline of two petals spelling out "Janet" and "Mercedes" adorn the top of the flower. The only other Flanner memorabilia among de Acosta's papers is a series of snapshots of the two and several other women that appear to have been taken on a New York City terrace either during or immediately after WWII (one woman is in uniform); everyone is smiling. Letter in de Acosta Papers.

122 Poppy Kirk's friend was Sybille Bedford.

with Nazimova while exploiting her hapless husband.<sup>123</sup> Morris's furious rejoinder to allegations that either Valentino or Rambova, or both, had homosexual relationships ultimately produce more curiosity about the rumors than conviction about their falsehood.

The question of Rambova's sexuality is not confined to the anti-Anger postscript, though. Morris repeatedly interrupts his narration of Rambova's life to dispell any suspicions that might arise from her associations with lesbians — Elsie de Wolfe, whose brother married her mother; Nazimova, of course; and de Acosta. Regarding Here Lies the Heart, he accuses de Acosta of misrepresenting their acquaintance as a *friendship*, as if the connection to a known lesbian like Mercedes would weaken his claim that Rambova was not a lesbian. Again, letters to de Acosta from Rambova leave a very different impression, indicating that they corresponded frequently, maintained a cordial friendship, and even planned to collaborate on a script.<sup>124</sup> In response, as it were, Lambert presents gay director George Cukor as an irreproachable authority who affirmed that Rambova and Nazimova were lovers and reproduces a photograph of the two women lounging about in pajamas that can be interpreted as support for this declaration.

Rather than attempt to decide, once and for all, whether Morris or Lambert had uncovered the truth, it might be more productive to consider what these arguments entail. The rewritten histories of de Acosta and her friends should caution us against interpreting lesbian celebrity as an unequivocal sign of

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<sup>123</sup> Although filled with absurd touches, such as having the Nazimova character appear in a costume and headdress modeled on an outfit she wore in Salome, as well as outrageously hyperbolic performances, Russell's film remains remarkably faithful to reputable historical accounts of Valentino's rise and fall as a movie idol.

<sup>124</sup> Morris, 131. Rambova's letters are in the de Acosta Papers.

progress. It can be construed just as readily as a prop for an authoritarian, censorial morality that regards lesbians as inherently corrupt, devious, and deceitful.

### Scene changes

Garbo's death in 1990 coincided with heated debates over the practice of "outing" in the gay press and elsewhere.<sup>125</sup> In that context, disclosures about the de Acosta-Garbo affair could be conscripted to bolster lesbian visibility. Granted, knowledge of Garbo's homosexuality had circulated in lesbian culture for many years, thanks largely to de Acosta's autobiography. De Acosta's efforts to disguise their relationship as a close friendship had not fooled those predisposed to read between the lines, as a letter about Here Lies the Heart published in a 1960 issue of the lesbian monthly the Ladder confirms: "Your readers will not want to miss Mercedes de Acosta's autobiography.... She devotes a large portion of the last half of the book to her long intimacy with the enigmatic and bewildering Greta Garbo, and for many this will be the most interesting part of the book."<sup>126</sup> The knowledge implied by this squib did not yet qualify as truth. That had to wait for the feminist and gay liberation movements of the seventies to chip away at the barriers separating unauthorized lesbian gossip from what qualifies as a real, or even plausible representation of celebrity culture. When

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<sup>125</sup> Judith Mayne points out the connection between Garbo and the flurry of outings in the early 1990s and cites three Garbo obituaries in the gay press as harbingers of more widespread acknowledgment of her sexual involvement with women in Cinema and Spectatorship (London: Routledge, 1993): 160-164.

<sup>126</sup> B. G., The Ladder 4:11 (August 1960): 25-26.

that became possible, de Acosta was ready for resurrection although not unambiguous celebration.<sup>127</sup>

There is no contemporary figure comparable to Mercedes de Acosta (although she could be considered a forebear of Cuban-born nightclub impresario and gadfly Ingrid Casares). She might, however, be brought up to date by means of a retro-chic maneuver, embraced as a rediscovered camp icon, a status confirmed by her friendships with Truman Capote and Andy Warhol in the mid-1950s. With Warhol, in particular, she shared an interest in glamour, fame, Garbo, and shoes.<sup>128</sup> A signature Warhol butterfly decorated the invitation to the book party for Here Lies the Heart, held at Warhol's favorite Upper East Side hangout, Serendity 3. This connection also suggests another interpretation of de Acosta's significance regarding lesbian celebrity. Like her friend Andy's life and work, Mercedes's story — as she told it and others have retold it — directs

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<sup>127</sup> De Acosta died in 1968, and it's tempting to speculate what she would have had to say about the women's and gay liberation movements then taking shape. In a sense, she did stake out a position: her lifelong belief was that art always transcended politics.

<sup>128</sup> Apparently, de Acosta met Warhol through his lover Charles Lisanby, who was a scenic designer and former assistant of Cecil Beaton, also a member of a group of fashionable gay men with whom Warhol was involved socially in the 1950s and early sixties. According to Bob Colacello, in Holy Terror: Andy Warhol Close Up (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), Warhol's amanuensis for several decades and the first editor of Warhol's celebrity gossip sheet Interview, "Andy considered daCosta [sic] the height of elegance because not only were her shoes made in Europe, but her shoe trees were made by a violin maker." This was not quite accurate: the shoe trees belonged to Rita Lydig. De Acosta describes them in Here Lies the Heart as evidence of her sister's exquisite taste. In his somewhat bitter memoir of his life with Andy, Colacello then repeats a famous anecdote about a picnic attended by Warhol, de Acosta, and Garbo, where Andy gave a drawing of a butterfly to Garbo, which she discarded and he recovered; he inscribed the drawing "butterfly crumpled by Greta Garbo" (23). Warhol's Garbo fetish was also enacted when he commissioned a photograph of himself assuming the same pose Garbo took in a famous portrait by Edward Steichen. Insofar as Warhol is routinely invoked whenever the expansion and influence of celebrity on contemporary culture is considered, it is noteworthy that one of his own celebrity references was the lesbian Garbo.

attention to the theatricalism of celebrity, its affinity to stage management and showmanship. But rather than dismissing hers or anyone else's celebrity as politically suspect because too superficial, too illusory, we might consider how the staging of lesbian celebrity brings otherwise unacknowledged contradictions between cultural ideals and social practices — including sexual ones — into focus.

## **5 Popular mechanics: advanced technologies of lesbian celebrity**

In 1985, at age twenty-nine, Martina Navratilova had an image problem. This wasn't a crisis concerning her body image, a case of suffering the damaging effects of images of idealized femininity that so many feminist critics of the "beauty culture" write about: girls who starve themselves because they don't look like fashion models or Barbie, young women who take fatal combinations of diet pills, mature women who have liposuction to reduce their dress size, older women who undergo expensive surgery to eradicate the signs of sagging flesh. No, this was a different kind of image problem, a problem with the media's assessment of her character. This is the same as saying she had a problem with celebrity, since a star's image is the quintessence of celebrity. Nevertheless, less than a decade later Navratilova had attained world-wide eminence on a scale few in her profession ever achieve, with members of the press leading the applause.

Certainly, Navratilova's prestige was based on her record-setting number of tournament victories, and other major accomplishments in her sport, something that is not directly influenced by unflattering press coverage. But a significant feature of her reputation was that she represented, in a variety of very public arenas, the realization of full-fledged lesbian celebrity — not a star who is secretly lesbian, nor a lesbian who becomes famous within the ambit of lesbian culture and may be called upon to act as its delegate to what is called the mainstream. Because this type of celebrity had been practically impossible until it was bestowed on her, it did not come without challenges, conflagrations, reproaches, and embarrassments. Perhaps this was the price paid for being one of the first, if not the first, lesbian superstars, but these events may also contribute to an understanding of lesbian celebrity beyond a single success story.

In many respects, Navratilova's history as a courageous seventeen-year-old defector from Communist Czechoslovakia and her performance on the tennis courts should have made her a darling of the sports press. At this point in her career she was ranked number one on the professional women's tennis tour for six of the past seven years, had won the coveted Grand Slam and the greatest amount of prize money in her sport to date. But these accomplishments didn't seem sufficient to counteract the media's nagging attention to what they perceived as her shortcomings. How could she solve this image problem? She could afford to hire someone to help her navigate the shoals of public scrutiny, and she had. She was a client of Peter Johnson, a top business agent at the International Management Group (IMG), the largest firm in the business of representing star athletes and other notables. (In 1982, their client list included the Pope.) And she could take his advice and publish an autobiography that would address all the embarrassing issues routinely mentioned in press coverage of her outstanding athletic achievements, and she did, with the help of New York Times sportswriter George Vecsey.<sup>1</sup> At the top of the list of image management projects was redressing the fallout from her lesbian reputation.

### **Newsmakers**

The reason that references to lesbians and lesbianism were a regular feature of press reports about Navratilova is no mystery: her affair with Rita Mae Brown that lasted from 1980 to 1981 presented the press with an invitation to add this episode to the stock of knowledge they routinely retrieved from the

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<sup>1</sup> Martina Navratilova, with George Vecsey, Martina (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1985). The book appeared on the best-seller list on the New York Times for ten weeks.

archive of individual idiosyncrasies.<sup>2</sup> This was an offer they couldn't refuse, because it added a spicy element to any major story on her. She even cooperated, after a fashion, when she expressed fears that she would be judged adversely because of her association with Brown during an interview in 1981 with a reporter from the Daily News. A naïve Navratilova asked him not to publish these remarks, but the paper judged the information too juicy to pass up (the reporter was considerate enough to delay the publication of the revelations for a few months, until she had been granted U.S. citizenship).<sup>3</sup> But sports journalists hadn't waited for Navratilova to say publicly what they already knew and peppered their stories with allusions to her sexual relationship with Brown well before the News made it official, so to speak.

When they first became involved and were besieged by reporters for the British tabloids at Wimbledon in 1980 Navratilova denied the affair outright, announcing at a press conference, "I find it offensive and ridiculous that anyone should think that I am gay."<sup>4</sup> However, the evidence that she not only traveled with the well-known lesbian novelist but also that they had bought a pricey house in Virginia together piled up so fast that, without applying the L-word to Navratilova herself, sportswriters (and presumably readers) were able to connect the dots.<sup>5</sup> Next came the public upsurge of anxiety about lesbians on the

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<sup>2</sup> Other favorite items included in the official Navratilova narrative ca. 1981 were her defection in 1975, her proclivity for effusive emotional displays on the court, and her inability to win the U.S. Open.

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Pileggi, "Merrily She Rolls Along," Sports Illustrated 56:21 (May 24, 1982): 102-116; see also, Gilda Zwerman, Martina Navratilova (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1995), 93.

<sup>4</sup> Adrienne Blue, Martina Unauthorized (London: Victor Gollancz, 1994), 96.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., Barry Lorge, "Clear Skies for Navratilova," Washington Post, January 8, 1981, sec. F; Sarah Pileggi, "Martina's Garden Party," Sports Illustrated 54:15 (April 6, 1981): 63-64.

women's tour that erupted in the wake of Marilyn Barnett's lawsuit against Billie Jean King, the grand dame of women's tennis, in which Barnett claimed that she should be compensated financially for seven years of devotion to her ex-lover.<sup>6</sup> When the story first broke, Navratilova and Brown had already split up but both were either interviewed or mentioned in articles published in the national press.<sup>7</sup> The views of Nancy Lieberman, who had little to do with professional tennis but was Martina's newest girlfriend, were also solicited, although their amorous relationship was never mentioned in these articles.

So in 1981 Navratilova was out, but not really. Brown may have exaggerated her own importance as the only public lesbian in the U.S. at the time, but she was indeed a public figure — more so outside the tennis world than the not yet indomitable Navratilova — due to the success and notoriety of her first novel, Rubyfruit Jungle.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, no one would imagine that the liaison

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<sup>6</sup> For a detailed account of the uproar, see Mary Jo Festle, Playing Nice: Politics and Apologies in Women's Sports (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> Barry Lorge, "The Aftermath: Verbal Vultures Descend on Women's Tour; King Affair Puts Women's Sports on Trial," Washington Post, May 7, 1981, sec. D; Jerry Kirshenbaum, "Facing Up to Billie Jean's Revelations," Sports Illustrated 54:20 (May 11, 1981): 13-14; Neil Andur, "Homosexuality Sets Off Tremors," New York Times, May 12, 1981, sec. B; Thomas Boswell, "A Delightful Exception to the Rule," Washington Post, June 30, 1981, sec. D.

<sup>8</sup> Rita Mae Brown, Rubyfruit Jungle (New York: Bantam Books, 1977). In her autobiography, Rita Will: Memoir of a Literary Rabble-Rouser (New York: Bantam, 1997), Brown claims, erroneously, "I inhabited a peculiar territory as the only public lesbian in a nation of 200 million people.... It wasn't that other public figures weren't thought to be bisexual or lesbian, for instance Marlene Dietrich, but I said it, no sidestepping or crawfishing" (328). This kind of self-aggrandizement isn't particularly unusual for Brown. She also takes credit for single-handedly starting the lesbian liberation movement: "I was going to pull together gay women. This would be a neat trick since, as far as I knew, it had never been done in the context of mass organizing in all of Western history.... No one had directly appealed to gay women" (234). She mentions earlier efforts by D.O.B. but asserts that they don't count because the group "might as well have come from the Paleolithic Age" (ibid.)

with Brown was not sexual and the tennis player was not a lesbian. But when Brown told a reporter from the Washington Post that Navratilova had left her for Lieberman, her ex promptly denied it.<sup>9</sup> For the most part, though, Navratilova didn't bother disclaiming a romance with Lieberman, since Nancy was all too ready to do that for her. Lieberman was adamantly not out. She crafted a semi-credible story that she was a straight admirer and fellow jock who would rescue Navratilova from a serious, potentially career-ending slump in her game, which she blamed on Brown's harmful influence. Navratilova repeated the same account. The sports press accepted the story and reproduced it endlessly, perhaps because Lieberman was also an established professional athlete, known as Lady Magic to fans of women's basketball, not a prominent lesbian writer. Even if they knew Lieberman's story was as fictitious as Brown's novels, they now had an excuse to look the other way.<sup>10</sup> According to accounts of a press conference that the new couple held at their home in Dallas shortly after they became "roommates," Navratilova announced that, with Nancy's help, she intended to concentrate on improving her tennis, and Lieberman said that she planned to introduce Martina to potential boyfriends.<sup>11</sup> Bisexuality became Navratilova's official alibi, just like it was for King when she held a press

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<sup>9</sup> Stephanie Mansfield, "Rita Mae Brown, Martina Navratilova, and the End of the Affair," Washington Post, August 13, 1981, sec. C.

<sup>10</sup> For instance, Axthelm mentions Navratilova's denials about a sexual relationship with Nancy in "Martina: A Style All Her Own," Newsweek 100:10 (September 6, 1982): 44-48. Stephanie Salter quotes Lieberman's mocking dismissal of reporters' curiosity about Navratilova's sex life and insists that their relationship is chaste in "Citizen Navratilova: Is She Home at Last?" World Tennis 29:7 (December 1981): 30-35.

<sup>11</sup> The press conference is described in Sarah Pileggi, "Merrily She Rolls Along," and Brown, Rita Will, 354., as well as in all the Navratilova biographies.

conference to admit the seven-year affair with Barnett and explain her version of events.

Subsequent press coverage of their discreet liaison endorsed this version of the two women's arrangement, even when descriptions of their intimacy seemed to indicate otherwise. For instance, Life magazine reporter Brad Darrach observed, "They work out together, travel to tournaments together, have screaming fights and hysterical giggles together, visit Nancy's mother together"; he also noted that they share a bedroom.<sup>12</sup> It was years before Lieberman acknowledged that their relationship was sexual. She made this confession in her 1992 autobiography as testimony to the sinful life that preceded her transformation into a born-again Christian, wife, and mother.<sup>13</sup> Navratilova only discussed Lieberman as a past lover after this disclosure.<sup>14</sup>

Long before "don't ask; don't tell" became shorthand for official U.S. government policies intended to enact a compromise between gay rights advocates who demanded that homosexuality not disqualify men or women from service in the armed forces and their homophobic opponents, the same principles governed a tacit bargain struck between the sports press and lesbian or gay athletes. Navratilova (and undoubtedly countless others) went along with the strategy, because it allowed them to keep in check nosy, scolding members of the press, or at least those that always treated homosexuality as a sensational topic. Indeed, this was what pundits recommended for lesbian tennis players assessing the King debacle. For instance, a New York Times story,

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<sup>12</sup> Brad Darrach, "Portrait: Martina Navratilova," Life 6 (February 1983): 19-21.

<sup>13</sup> Nancy Lieberman-Cline, with N. Jennings, Lady Magic (Champaign, IL: Sagamore, 1992).

<sup>14</sup> See Michelle Kort, "Martina Navratilova," Advocate 639 (October 5, 1993): 46-53.

**"Homosexuality Sets Off Tremors,"** cites the expertise of a psychologist who worked as a consultant for various major sports teams and "advocated anonymity for homosexual athletes" (presumably anonymity as homosexual athletes).<sup>15</sup>

Still, for Navratilova the rules of this particular game were never strictly enforced, mostly because she refused to comply fully. Shortly before the breakup with Brown and just weeks after the news of the suit against King leaked out, a Washington Post sportswriter remarked that Navratilova had committed "the cardinal sin of athletic superstardom. She's labored to become a person but hasn't yet gotten around to working on a palatable image."<sup>16</sup> Given the context, by palatable he meant not lesbian. During the Lieberman years she managed to keep most inquisitors concerned with revelations about her sexuality at bay, although the press never let readers forget about the past association with Brown. And when she and Nancy parted in early 1984, the image problem flared up again when Judy Nelson appeared on the scene. Nelson's professional identity at the time was mother, which meant that she couldn't masquerade as a trainer or workout buddy as Lieberman had. By 1984 Navratilova was close to unbeatable, and sports reporters couldn't simply ignore her. Therefore, they couldn't ignore Nelson either. Besides, neither woman seemed especially eager to conceal the fact that they were lovers. However, sports writers and editors did not congratulate Navratilova for finding a congenial, supportive companion but instead chided her for refusing to answer questions about her private life.

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<sup>15</sup> Neil Andur, "Homosexuality Sets Off Tremors," New York Times, May 12, 1981, sec. B.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Boswell, "A Delightful Exception to the Rule," Washington Post, June 30, 1981, sec. D.

The press duly reported the appearance of the “newest traveling companion” and “best friend” of the 1984 Wimbledon champion, but more extensive remarks about Nelson were nasty.<sup>17</sup> She was described as an opportunistic hanger-on to Navratilova’s entourage, who was seen making inappropriate gestures — blowing kisses and sending notes to Martina during a match. A writer for Sports Illustrated even blamed Navratilova for his and other members of the press’s mean-spirited coverage of Nelson because the tennis star “flaunted her private life.” The reproof goes on: “Besides, she selects generally newsworthy friends — professional athletes [Lieberman?], a lesbian writer of romans à clef [Brown] — and now the blonde Texas mother of two whose heretofore unrevealed talents for publicity put her on the short list with Zsa Zsa Gabor, Ed Koch, Hollywood Henderson, and Pia Zadora.”<sup>18</sup> Pete Axthelm, a tennis reporter for Newsweek, echoed these sentiments in a column entitled “The Curse of Unlovable Champs” (there were only two unlovables mentioned; the other was tennis’s tantrum throwing bad boy John McEnroe), where he opined that Navratilova “alternately brandishes her unorthodox life-style and recoils from those who seek to explore it, [and therefore] remains a remote figure and a force more readily marveled at than loved.”<sup>19</sup> Axthelm had previously authored a feature article for Newsweek, a cover story no less, which was generally flattering profile of the tennis player and described Navratilova as

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<sup>17</sup> Frank Deford, “Talk about Strokes of Genius,” Sports Illustrated 61:3 (July 16, 1984), 16.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Pete Axthelm, “The Curse of Unlovable Champs,” Newsweek 104:13 (September 24, 1984), 62.

**“complex,” “fascinating,” and “honest.”<sup>20</sup> The story also dealt with Lieberman on her terms — replicating the best-friend-who-is-not-a-lesbian character sketch when he most certainly knew otherwise. This may account for his pique when several years later Navratilova withheld choice soundbites and thumbed her nose at his and other sportswriters’ expectations concerning the protocol to be observed by homosexual athletes — a code to which she had previously adhered.**

**In the final pages of her autobiography, Navratilova deals with the needling from the press she received when Nelson appeared on the scene in 1984. Beyond that, she is extremely reticent on the subject. She outlines their courtship and her move to Fort Worth to be near Judy, but love, sex, or that her new house is inhabited by both of them are never mentioned.<sup>21</sup> In the book, she also downplays lesbianism routinely but nevertheless mentions attractions to women — mainly crushes on female teachers and other tennis players — several times and at one point says that she came to realize that these feelings had not been “just a phase.” In addition, the Brown episode receives ample attention — an entire chapter and various comments elsewhere. Navratilova’s regrets about the affair are evident but these have more to do with having been distracted from her calling by Rita, who cajoled her into going to museums and theaters instead of the practice courts, than with having her love life made public.<sup>22</sup>**

**Perhaps the attention Navratilova devoted to Brown in her autobiography was meant as a public response to the novelist’s continued efforts to undermine her refusal to come out unambiguously. In 1983, Brown pursued**

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<sup>20</sup> Axthelm, “Martina: A Style All Her Own,” 45; emphasis added.

<sup>21</sup> Navratilova, 308-310.

<sup>22</sup> Navratilova, 213.

her campaign in a roman à clef on the professional women's tennis tour, Sudden Death, which details the fierce rivalries and underhanded dealings that go on behind the scene on the professional women's tennis tour.<sup>23</sup> The book features an up-and-coming tennis pro, Carmen Semana, who ditches her older, intellectual girlfriend when the exposure of their sexual relationship by an unscrupulous reporter threatens her career. Carmen gives in to pressures exerted by her agent, professional organization, tour sponsors and promoters, and marketing executives, who urge her to end the relationship or disgrace women's tennis and ruin her chances for product endorsements. As a kind of divine retribution, Carmen is then consumed with guilt and loses the cherished Grand Slam, the prize she had imagined would be won by giving into the representatives of institutionalized homophobia. The book presented a credible moral dilemma, no doubt, but it was not prophetic. By the time it appeared Navratilova's ascent to tennis superstardom was well underway, and she won a "little" Grand Slam in 1984.<sup>24</sup>

Although it's difficult to determine how much and with what results the reports about Navratilova's love life in the press affected her popularity with tennis fans, these stories were the major available sources of information about her. Thus, what they printed and what they left out pretty much circumscribed the fans' knowledge. Portrayed as a sometimes lesbian, with other less-than-perfect features such as being a junk food junkie and overweight as a result (in her early twenties), as well as an Eastern European bred and trained under Communist Party auspices, she appeared for years in the press in an unflattering

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<sup>23</sup> Rita Mae Brown, Sudden Death (New York: Bantam Books, 1983).

<sup>24</sup> Conventionally, the Grand Slam consists of winning Wimbledon and the Australian, French, and U.S. Opens in one calendar year. Navratilova won the four matches consecutively, but in 1983 and 1984.

light to tennis fans, most of whom, not surprisingly, did not greet her warmly or cheer her very heartily when she won. However, in her own estimate, the real image problem did not stem from her disfavor with fans but from the press that influenced them and, subsequently, the sportswear and other manufacturers who did not engage her to endorse their wares.

### **Package deals**

Image problem number one — lesbian Martina — led directly to image problem number two — uncommodifiable Martina. Or, rather, criticisms of her handling of the Brown affair and repeated references to this episode in the press overflowed into the multidimensional universe known as “professional sports” that she needed to navigate. And a significant dimension of that universe was the sphere where players’ agents negotiated endorsement deals with product manufacturers. In the case of top players, the income from these contracts might surpass greatly the prize money a player won. Indeed, it was — and still is — not uncommon that a promising new player, if deemed photogenic and wholesome or hetero-sexy, could benefit more from endorsement contracts than many of her more seasoned and accomplished elders.<sup>25</sup> An instructive example is described by John Feinstein in Hard Courts: Real Life on the Professional Tennis Tours: in 1990, he writes, “[Zina] Garrison, the fourth-ranked player in the world, didn’t even have a shoe or clothing contract,” compared with not-quite-fourteen-year-old Jennifer Capriati, who in the same year signed endorsement

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<sup>25</sup> New York Times op-ed columnist Maureen Dowd cites the example of Anna Kournilkova, who was “the highest earning player in women’s tennis” when the article appeared, despite her failure to win a major tournament, in “Nymphet at the Net,” New York Times, June 4, 2000, sec. WK.

contracts for \$4.5 million even before she turned pro.<sup>26</sup> In this case, the explanation for the enormous disparity has nothing to do with sexuality or nationality, but race. Garrison is African-American, and Capriati is white. By the late 1990s racial identity may no longer be so utterly decisive, as can be seen in the plentiful product promotions involving Venus and Serena Williams, the African-American sisters who rose to the top ranks of women's tennis at the end of the decade, but it clearly was for Garrison.

Navratilova indicates that her image problem — and she uses the phrase — hurt her mightily in this branch of the business, a theme she returned to consistently in her assessment of her career. Discussing her situation in 1981, when her plans for a comeback were being formulated, she said, "I could make a fortune in endorsements for equipment and apparel. Still I was really concerned about my image — not so much who I thought I was, not so much what the public thought, but what the gnomes and the gremlins in the business world thought. The unseen 'They' who decides what the public feels."<sup>27</sup> Almost a decade later, she expressed similar rancor to Feinstein: "[Monica] Seles is making more money from Yonex [the racket manufacturer] than I am.... It isn't a matter of needing the money; it's other people putting some kind of value on you."<sup>28</sup> And as recently as 2000, in an interview for the Advocate, Navratilova reiterated her disappointment about this neglect.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> John Feinstein, Hard Courts: Real Life on the Professional Tennis Tours (New York: Random House, 1992), 121.

<sup>27</sup> Navratilova, 236-237.

<sup>28</sup> Feinstein, 390.

<sup>29</sup> Cathay Che, "Martina Navratilova," Advocate, April 30, 2000, 47-48.

Navratilova may have hoped that as her career picked up steam in 1981 endorsement contracts would follow, but Billie Jean King's experience the same year provided sobering evidence that this wasn't likely. The taint of lesbianism could scotch any impending deal and preclude others in the future. In a book on various scandals in women's sports, Mary Jo Festle lists the economic fallout of the so-called "galimony" scandal that affected King directly:

Negotiations for a Wimbledon clothing line deal [she had won the women's singles there five times] worth \$500,000, which had virtually been finalized, fell through after the news came out. She also lost endorsements with a Charleston hosiery company, a Japanese clothing company, and a blue jeans contract worth \$300,000. She took for granted that over the next three years she lost at least \$1,500,000. She took for granted that many other companies would not renew their contracts with her once they ran out and doubted that new products would sign her. In fact, a year later, she was the only major player in the world without a clothing endorsement contract.<sup>30</sup>

Navratilova, who was spared the kind of public embarrassment King endured, wasn't shut out of the endorsement business entirely but, as the comments above indicate, manufacturers rarely offered her lucrative deals, a development she interpreted as punishment for her sexual preference. She wasn't poor, however, although unlike other players of her stature her fortune was built mainly on prize money won over the years — over \$20 million at the time of her retirement from singles competition in 1994.

In fact, Navratilova was the first female athlete to win over one million dollars in one year, 1982, for which she could again thank King, although this

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<sup>30</sup> Festle, 239.

time the effects of King's actions were more welcome. In 1970 King had led a boycott of the professional tennis tour by women players who wanted to demonstrate their unwillingness to accept the disparity between the prize money handed out to men and women in their sport, as well as the unequal number of tournaments and matches within major tournaments like the U.S. Open, which likewise whittled away their potential earnings. However, the argument put forward by King and other supporters of equal pay and treatment by professional organizations was not that women claimed to be athletically equivalent but that they were as good, if not better, entertainers; they produced a show to which spectators flocked. Arguing the case, King claimed, "For two years we've outdrawn the men at Forest Hills [the former site of the U.S. Open] by whatever criteria they've used, but this year the men's money was two and a half times the women's."<sup>31</sup>

This is not a position Navratilova was eager to defend, since she regarded herself as an athlete and deserving the same opportunities as men on that account alone. Moreover, she was critical of other players she suspected of being more interested in celebrity than in athletic accomplishment.<sup>32</sup> But Feinstein, who presents an in-depth study of the sport from the perspective of a conscientious sports journalist, concurs with King and comments that "box-office appeal counts just as much, if not more, than on-court ability" in determining the amount a player might be offered as a "guarantee," which is a hefty fee paid to a popular player for merely showing up for a tournament and a source of considerable income for top-ranked players like Navratilova.<sup>33</sup> Once she became

<sup>31</sup> Curry Kirkpatrick, "The Ball in Two Different Courts," Sports Illustrated, December 25, 1972, quoted in Festle, 150.

<sup>32</sup> See her comments in this regard in Navratilova, 60.

<sup>33</sup> Feinstein, 99.

one of the most successful players in the world — she was ranked number one for 223 weeks over eight years — she could count on receiving offers of such guarantees, but high-paying and image-enhancing endorsements still eluded her.

The entertainment factor in women's tennis had further repercussions, which involved unofficial influence exerted by entertainment entities like television networks on supposedly unbiased decisions made by tennis officials. For instance, Feinstein reports, "The U.S. Open is run by CBS. The USA Network, which does the weekday cablecasts, has some say, but CBS is clearly in charge. CBS is so much in charge that agents will call the network to find out what court their clients are being assigned and even when to lobby just a bit for a spot on a show court."<sup>34</sup> For Navratilova to truly ignore how entertainment values increasingly governed her sport would be akin to an impractical disingenuousness, not something a successful professional athlete in the late twentieth century could really afford. Although she may have found it demeaning, her professional achievements required that she act like a celebrity, which meant conceding that she was also an entertainer. This brings us to image problem number three.

### **Like a woman**

In her own assessment, Navratilova's biggest image problem was not lesbianism *per se*, nor was it the negative effect of advertisers' disregard, although this may have been the effect that she dwelled upon long after she had amassed a good-sized fortune.<sup>35</sup> The major problem she described in her autobiography was femininity or, rather, her shortcomings in that department.

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<sup>34</sup> Feinstein, 381-382.

<sup>35</sup> Navratilova's total income during the years she played tennis professionally is not public information; therefore, any actual amounts are unavailable.

The book opens with an anecdote about being mistaken for a boy at age twelve, which she informs the reader was quite common and led to worries about being abnormal.<sup>36</sup> Throughout the text she returns to similar questions, noting how she eventually came to realize the importance of cultivating a feminine appearance and how, under Lieberman's tutelage, she began to take steps in this direction. A lesson in makeup at the Vidal Sassoon salon in New York in 1981 is mentioned, related to her decision to lighten her hair and have it styled more fashionably.<sup>37</sup> Tellingly, the section of photographs included in the book begins with a glamorous head shot, not an image of the athlete at work or a snapshot borrowed from the Navratil family album.

The press responded favorably to the renovated Navratilova. Articles published in 1982 still referred to previous times when she seemed dowdy and awkward, and they delighted especially in recalling the epithet coined by the dean of tennis commentators, Bud Collins, to describe pudgy post-defection Martina: the Great Wide Hope. But they also mentioned approvingly her new streamlined look. Axthelm's story in Newsweek made much ado about her makeover and quoted the champion as saying, "I've been growing into [my body] and the last few years I've felt more like a woman than ever before."<sup>38</sup> This may be a slightly inaccurate figure of speech, since one of the most frequently mentioned improvements in Navratilova's appearance was that she lost some twenty odd pounds. The author then adds that this newfound

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<sup>36</sup> Navratilova, "Prologue," n.p.

<sup>37</sup> Navratilova, 238.

<sup>38</sup> Axthelm, "Martina: A Style All Her Own," 48.

femininity was assisted by cosmetics but that such superficial touches are only the outer manifestation of "a bright new inner Martina."<sup>39</sup>

However, the cover photo that announced the feature article didn't picture a particularly feminine Martina, but instead shows a very muscular and aggressive tennis player in motion, as does the first photo of her inside the magazine. If anything, Navratilova's concern with her appearance may have been a canny attempt to placate the professional organization that governed her sport, the Women's Tennis Association. Anxious about the rumors and evidence of lesbians in their ranks, the WTA tried to encourage femininity among younger players, instructing them in its 1986 edition of the Guide to Playing Professional Tennis. "Whether you are glamorous, athletic, businesslike, or intellectual, make sure your image is one that the press will latch on to in a positive way. Take time over your appearance. Select tennis clothes carefully and pay attention to what you wear at player functions.... How you conduct yourself off the court may have more significance to your career than anything you ever do on the court."<sup>40</sup> At a time when she was intent on becoming the best player in the history of her sport, Navratilova would have been unwise to make enemies among those who controlled it.

It's easy to read the extravagant anxiety Navratilova expressed in her autobiography about not being considered sufficiently feminine as an attempt to deflect attention from questions about sexuality or as a coded discussion of the same. To some degree, this seems justified. On the other hand, it may be helpful to remember that the tension between women's athletics and concepts of

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<sup>39</sup> Axthelm, "Martina: A Style All Her Own," 45. This text appears in a photo caption for an image of an elegantly attired and heavily made up Navratilova during an appearance on the Tonight show.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Festle, 243.

femininity have not always involved suspicions of homosexuality. Susan Cahn makes this point in her historical study of the changing views regarding women's participation in sport in the United States from the nineteenth century until the end of the twentieth. Common to the entire epoch, Cahn explains, were worries about erosion of masculine values, which could be sustained on the basis of claims of men's physical superiority exhibited in athletic contests.<sup>41</sup> However, when women first demanded admittance to playing fields and ball courts opponents expressed fears that physical exertion would damage the athletes' reproductive organs.

Then, as now, women who excelled at sport were apt to be accused of being "mannish," but for many decades the adjective "mannish" was associated with any sort of sexual appetite, which was widely believed a masculine trait. Since true femininity was believed to be characterized by the lack of interest in sex, and these sportswomen were assumed to be heterosexual, the earliest female competitive athletes were accused of being oversexed. The assumption that sports lead to and/or foster deviant female sexuality arose only in 1930s, when medical expertise became the arbiter of the discourse concerning a number of sexual practices, especially homosexuality. "Between 1900 and 1930," Cahn writes, the

sexual debate in sport centered on the problem of unbridled heterosexual desire, the prospect that "masculine" sport might loosen women's inhibitions toward men. But by the 1930s female athletic mannishness began to connote failed (rather than excessive) heterosexuality.... The impression of heterosexual "failure" contained a further possibility as

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<sup>41</sup> Susan K. Cahn, Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women's Sport (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 20.

well: The amazonian athlete might be not only unattractive but unattracted to men — she might prefer women.<sup>42</sup>

Lesbianism replaced licentiousness as the danger awaiting women who ventured into this masculine domain.

Many women interested in sport were not discouraged by the rhetoric meant to deter them, and counterarguments in favor of the benefits of physical exercise eventually prevailed. In addition, a compromise of sorts was struck that eased women's entry into what was generally perceived as male territory when female sports competitions were transformed into entertaining spectacles, designed to attract spectators interested primarily in ogling women's bodies. As early as the 1880s, enterprising promoters of women's sports in the U.S. realized this possibility, while the women who participated by displaying their bodies in ways that were deemed unseemly were accused of being prostitutes.<sup>43</sup> Cahn also reports that in the 1920s, sports tournaments for women often included beauty contests, and press reports on athletic displays by women were likewise prone to express similar interests.<sup>44</sup> Of course, the tradition lives on, after a fashion, in Sports Illustrated's annual swimsuit issue and athletes' recruitment as models by fashion vendors.<sup>45</sup> At the height of her career in 1985 Navratilova, too, could be found posing in various designer outfits in the pages of Vogue.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Cahn, 165.

<sup>43</sup> Cahn, 14.

<sup>44</sup> Cahn quotes an item from the Baltimore Sun, which informed its readers that a 1925 women's track meet, "was a girly show if there ever was one" (78).

<sup>45</sup> For commentary on recent appearance of women tennis stars as models in various stylish magazines, see Robin Finn, "Game, Set, Glamour," New York Times, November 23, 1998, sec. B.

<sup>46</sup> Mark Strand, "Martina!...the Woman, the Champion," Vogue 175:4 (April 1985): 342-347.

This culmination of her quest for feminine validation was then repeated when she opened the doors of her Fort Worth home to a photographer from Architectural Digest the next year. Along with the adulatory text about her tasteful home decorating skills, the reader can spot one of the photos by Bert Stern that appeared in the Vogue spread sitting on a bedside table.<sup>47</sup>

Navratilova was not the first female sports star to embark on a campaign to counteract a masculinized image by consciously undertaking a makeover. Decades earlier, Babe Didrikson, perhaps the most accomplished of all American women athletes, devised a similar strategy of image management and effected a more drastic transformation than Navratilova's. After she first received notice for her two gold and one silver medals in track and field events at the 1932 Olympics, Didrikson was routinely described by the press as "boyish," although they might as well have said "butch" since the androgynous look of the 1920s flapper had gone out of style and muscular, flat-chested women with cropped hair like the young Didrikson had become associated with sexual deviance. She made little effort to appear otherwise, until once established in the national spotlight. Then she remade her looks from head to toe — prettied up with longer permed hair and makeup, wearing only skirts in public — and she even acquired a husband to complete the transformation. She also changed the sport in which she competed to the more ladylike game of golf, which she then dominated for several decades. Apparently, the press and public never questioned her "mannishness" ever again, and she managed to conceal a long-standing lesbian relationship with one of her protégées until after her death in 1955.

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<sup>47</sup> C. D. B. Bryan, "Architectural Digest Visits: Martina Navratilova," Architectural Digest 43:9 (September 1986): 118-123.

Compared with Didrikson, Navratilova's newfound femininity entailed rather minor adjustments. The more substantial makeover she underwent took her in what appears at first the opposite direction genderwise. Around the same time that she was doing her best to look pretty at key PR moments she was also engaged in a rigorous workout and training program in order to rebuild her body into a powerful physical instrument. Her athletic talent, often described as "natural," had begun to dissipate, a decline she attributed retrospectively to a lack of discipline: too little practice and too much rich food. Again, Lieberman was the instigator of the new regimen, although Navratilova's dedication to maintaining a strict diet and a carefully planned program of strenuous exercise and practice lasted long after their breakup in 1984. She assembled a staff comprised of at least one coach, a nutritionist, a trainer, and various others hired to maintain peak performance of the champion's body, dubbed Team Navratilova by members of the sports press who had never seen a similar congregation of physical expertise in a female athlete's employ.

By 1983, the descriptive language used by the press began to shift from descriptions of the usual list of performance highlights and characteristic on-court maneuvers to Navratilova's impressive anatomy. *Life*, for example, introduced her as the "F-15 of tennis ... [who] embodies the state of the art, the ultimate in technical refinement and combat performance."<sup>48</sup> *Time* quoted Virginia Wade, the British tennis champion, as saying, "So fit, so fast, so quick off the mark, so athletic, so confident. To me, she's like a finely tuned sports car, a Ferrari really."<sup>49</sup> *Vogue* sounded the same note, commenting that "her physique is intimidatingly muscular," and even ran a sidebar that detailed her

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<sup>48</sup> Darrach, 20.

<sup>49</sup> Tom Callahan, "Martina's Turn at the Top," *Time* 122:2 (July 11, 1983): 40.

training program for readers who might be aspiring tennis pros, although they omitted instructions for weight lifting.<sup>50</sup> Perhaps this aspect of her workout was overlooked because, despite the feminization campaign abetted by Vogue itself, her fitness routine produced a body that evoked alarming visions of powerful superwomen. The Life article was the most explicit in this regard: "Her neck is a woven column of muscle. Her arms and legs are sinewy, powerful, roped with big veins. She has hands like a workman and her belly is a washboard of flexible ridges. Except for the small breasts and shapely hips, her superbly conditioned physique might be that of a man."<sup>51</sup> She was testing and pushing gender boundaries in a sport that always prided itself on the lady-like comportment of its players. As one concession to this tradition, Navratilova, just like all of her fellow competitors, still wore a skirt while engaging in ferocious battles for titles, prize money, and fame. Despite this symbolic concession to traditional femininity, for a long period of time — from 1981 to 1987 — she won many of the first and scads of the second, which gained her the third, without question.

### **Cyborg logic**

The machine imagery applied to Navratilova didn't stop at the fascination with her new streamlined body. The computer technology used by both her nutritionist and a strategist hired to help analyze her own and opponents' playing styles and weaknesses supported the idea that she had been transformed into a cyborg. The cyborg has become a favorite metaphor among theoretically adventurous analysts of the forms of subjectivity characteristic of postmodern cultures. Perhaps the best known proponent of this approach is Donna Haraway,

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<sup>50</sup> Strand, 343; Janice Kaplan, "Star Secrets: How Martina Does It!" Vogue 175:4 (April 1985): 344.

<sup>51</sup> Darrach, 20.

whose "Cyborg Manifesto" presents an elaborate argument for the utility of this figure for understanding social interactions between and among subjects in advanced industrial societies. According to Haraway, "A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism," "a creature in a post-gender world," "monstrous and illegitimate" but also capable of modeling radical political responses to forces of domination that prevail at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries.<sup>52</sup> At the outset of her essay, Haraway makes clear that her cyborg is a myth, although not therefore disqualified from political discourse, since, as she argues effectively, the governing concepts of all social identities are similarly fictional. In other words, she embraces the anti-essentialist theoretical frameworks developed by feminist, postcolonial, and queer theorists for whom the appeal to any "natural" identity or difference is inherently oppressive, as in the case whenever the idea of "woman," for instance, informs restrictive and pernicious policies and practices.

Like many others who employ the trope, Haraway finds cyborg logic at work in the command centers and dispersed production sites of the military and communications networks of postmodern culture, but when it comes to cyborg identity she prefers to examine the fantastical images found in science fiction rather than those that conform to documentary realism. How curious, then, to encounter a much more mundane cyborg text — an illustrated story about an ambitious but in many respects quite ordinary athlete attempting to improve her performance. Encouraged by Lieberman, whose experience in basketball taught her that an athlete must achieve optimum conditioning if she is to reach the top of her game, Navratilova began a serious exercise regimen in 1981 and in 1982 embarked on a radical new diet. The results were evident immediately. In 1982

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<sup>52</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Cyborgs, Simians, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149-154.

she won ninety out of ninety-three matches, eighty-six of eighty-seven in 1983, and six consecutive Grand Slam titles beginning with Wimbledon in 1983. In 1984, her fellow players on the women's pro tennis tour acknowledged her dominance when they composed and sang an adaptation of Michael Jackson's "Beat It" at a party during the Eastbourne tournament in England: "Martina, you're too good/Just give us a break/You're beating us so bad/It's too hard to take/Quit eating that food. And lift no more weights/Stop it! Stop it!/Have some more sex/Have some more booze/It doesn't matter if you win or lose."<sup>53</sup> By all accounts, the seemingly indomitable player altered forever the criteria for fitness in women's tennis. Ultra-femme Chris Evert, for example, began to lift weights in an attempt to remain competitive with her chief rival (though her efforts ultimately failed). And Navratilova had done this not by merely applying the tried and true wisdom common in her field — practice and more practice — but by embracing an entire system of physical and mental conditioning devised by various experts in sports medicine and game strategy.

One of the most striking representations of cyborg Martina appeared in the April 1983 issue of World Tennis magazine. The cover featured a smiling Navratilova, with electronic circuit boards embossed on her forearm and hand, while the opening photo depicted her standing with arms angled away from her torso, like a paper doll, against a background pattern that resembled an integrated circuit. Could the metaphor be any more explicit? Then there's the testimony of Robert Haas, a specialist in sports medicine who worked out Navratilova's new diet based on computer analysis of her blood chemistry. "She is the first tennis player to put herself in the position to be scientifically manipulated to enhance her performance," Haas told World Tennis. "She will be

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<sup>53</sup> Deford, 14-15.

the first example of what I think will be a new breed of athlete." He also predicted that she would become "the first bionic tennis player."<sup>54</sup> Haas also had a hand in writing the computer program that evaluated the condition of her muscles at a given point so that exercises could be tailored appropriately, as well as the computerized scouting program Navratilova's coach used to devise the game plan to be used when playing a specific opponent. Of course, such attempts to apply rational calculation in athletic arenas have been undertaken by managers and coaches in a variety of team sports, where players are instructed to enact maneuvers much like pieces on a chess board. Tennis is different, however, because it demands spontaneity on the part of the individual player, who is on her own while on court (consultation with coaches during a match is forbidden) and must be able to adjust her playing strategy to counter her opponent's action at a moment's notice. In Navratilova's case, the cybernetic edge was most fully developed in the scientific approach she adopted in preparing herself to play the game, then realized in playing it.

However, for Navratilova, remarks that attributed her near unbeatability to some kind cybernetic engineering were insulting, and she routinely denounced such notions whenever they cropped up. However, her published comments indicate that what peeved her most was the implication that her excellence was not her own achievement, not that she used these specialized techniques to enhance her game. For example, she told a reporter for Sports Illustrated. "To think that I have put in so much work ... to then be dismissed as some sort of computer whiz, a programmed wonder woman."<sup>55</sup> And she

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<sup>54</sup> Wayne Kalyn, "Building the Brave New Martina," World Tennis 30:11 (April 1983): 56-61, 104.

<sup>55</sup> Frank Deford, "She Put Herself into High Gear and Headed North," Sports Illustrated 59:13 (September 19, 1983), 30.

responded to a writer for Time, who introduced the topic with a reference to “counselors and coaches, who peck at computers as she plays, as though they were operating her by remote control,” by informing him that “[t]he computer has done nothing for my tennis but wonders for my diet.”<sup>56</sup> But despite her insistence on technology’s minimal influence on her accomplishments, she took an active part in promoting a technological approach to the game.

### **With authority**

Navratilova may have poo-pooed the importance of science and technology when interviewed about the secrets of her success while it was happening, but in later years, when her career was winding down she extolled these methods and their underlying premises. The platform she found for promoting her physical fitness system, as well as a general philosophy concerning the benefits of conditioning, was unusual. She did not embark on a second career as a coach of younger players or a writer of an advice column in a sports magazine.<sup>57</sup> No, she became a writer of detective fiction and co-authored three such novels between 1994 and 1997. At one level, these books seem an obvious public relations gimmick intended to keep her name in circulation, but they can also be read as a kind of retrospective assessment of her career, as well as a commentary on her lesbian celebrity.

Writing mystery novels may have appealed to Navratilova because, as Julian Symons comments it is akin to sport: a game with a set of rules established

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<sup>56</sup> Callahan, 40.

<sup>57</sup> Not that Navratilova didn’t dabble in these more conventional post-retirement activities. She performed a brief stint as a columnist on health and fitness for a new magazine for women, Condé Nast Sport, in 1998 and, as I discuss in this section, she works as a television commentator at Grand Slam tournaments.

by the earliest practitioners of the genre, Poe and Conan Doyle, which those who compose such stories adhere to faithfully and those who read them also understand and follow. One rule, for instance, is that the criminal should be introduced early and cannot be the detective or a professional crook. Another is fair play; that is, no clues can be fraudulent. When the criminal's identity is finally revealed, the reader should be surprised but not because she was given deceptive information. "Starting from the assumption that the detective story was a game," explains Symons, "the rules had two purposes, first to describe the nature of the game and then to show how it should be played.... [C]lues had to be provided, and it was necessary that the detective should draw from them rational and inevitable conclusions."<sup>58</sup> A more unlikely analyst of the form, Marxist economic and political theorist Ernest Mandel, also points out the mechanical quality of these novels: "[T]he classical detective story is a formalized puzzle, a mechanism that can be composed and decomposed, unwound and then wound up again like the works of a clock."<sup>59</sup> In this respect, Mandel finds detective fiction the apt counterpart of other technology-based cultural forms introduced in the mid-nineteenth century, photography for instance.

Navratilova and her co-author, Liz Nickles, stayed well within the boundaries of the classical form in their collaborations, staging three elaborate criminal schemes for the protagonist, Jordan Myles, to untangle over the course of the three novels. An additional level of intrigue is added, though, when Navratilova's celebrity persona hovers over the pages of these otherwise unremarkable texts. Like all novels in the genre, the main character in the

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<sup>58</sup> Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel: A History* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 105.

<sup>59</sup> Ernest Mandel, *Delightful Murder: A Social History of the Crime Story* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 18.

Navratilova-Nickels concoctions is the detective who solves the mysteries, with the help of a side-kick, a former police detective who is more knowledgeable about the nuts and bolts of detection and provides advice and occasional protection from murderous criminals. But, despite whatever one might expect, this amateur PI is decidedly not a fictionalized Martina Navratilova. Instead, she is a formerly promising but never triumphal tennis professional who suffered a debilitating accident and became a physical therapist, now employed at a state-of-the-art sports clinic. Also, her sexual involvements are heterosexual, and she has dark hair.

Still, Navratilova is not entirely offstage. The dust jacket for the second novel, Breaking Point, features a photograph of the familiar tennis star with her laptop instead of a more typical pictorial rendition of the main character or an emblematic scene. Her face also adorns the jacket for Killer Instinct, the third novel, against a blood red image of a dead tennis player.<sup>60</sup> In the first of the series, The Total Zone, Navratilova is more neatly integrated into the text, insofar as her name comes up repeatedly in conversation among characters chatting about the tennis world. Moreover, another character in that book, Mariska Storrs, is an undisguised Navratilova near-clone: defector from the Soviet Union, lesbian, who speaks words about the longevity of her career that can be found in biographical portraits of the real Martina.<sup>61</sup> In the third novel, Killer Instinct, another top-ranked émigré champ named Seranata Aziz is referred to by a younger player as “the Lege,” which in tennis lore is what teen

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<sup>60</sup> Martina Navratilova and Liz Nickles, Breaking Point (New York: Random House, 1996) and Killer Instinct (New York: Ballantine Books, 1997).

<sup>61</sup> The line is, “I’ve been in the twilight of my career longer than most people have careers.” Martina Navratilova and Liz Nickles, The Total Zone (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 8.

phenom Jennifer Capriati called Navratilova in 1990.<sup>62</sup> Jordan Myles, too, is allotted snippets of the author's biography. For example, she prefers to drink her bottled water without ice, which hard-core fans will recognize as one of the Lege's quirks, and she goes to work as a part-time television commentator at major women's tennis tournaments, as Navratilova did for CBS and HBO after her retirement from singles competition. And, just like her famous creator, one of Jordan's friends from her days on the tennis tour is Billie Jean King.<sup>63</sup> Such self-conscious references satisfy the fan, whose interest in the novels is likely to stem from interest in the tennis star, and simultaneously remind the reader of the author's authority when it comes to commentary on the inner workings of the pro tennis scene. There is an additional dimension to the confusion between the author's identity and that of the protagonist: it produces a compelling mystery for the reader — finding the true Martina — and thus pleasure in the game of solving it, even if never gratified.

Detective fiction may offer another lure, in addition to that of pursuing clues when it involves the writer's display of expert knowledge, which Mandel understands as a way to "endow one's commodities with additional use value," beyond mere thrills and escape from everyday concerns.<sup>64</sup> This expertise may be the result of extensive research, but as Mandel points out it may also be acquired during a previous career, and he cites a number of examples from Michael Crichton to Umberto Eco. Clearly, Navratilova belongs in this category and, as such, offers retrospective commentary on social relations within professional tennis.

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<sup>62</sup> Navratilova and Nickles, *Killer Instinct*, 6.

<sup>63</sup> Navratilova and Nickles, *Killer Instinct*, 3, 194.

<sup>64</sup> Mandel, 78.

Not surprisingly, the media and its power to produce celebrity is a common topic in these pages. The Total Zone, Navratilova-Nickles' initial offering, introduces our hero as she negotiates the crowd gathered at a massive media event, a gala awards presentation honoring outstanding athletes at Madison Square Garden, no doubt similar to many such affairs Navratilova attended. Jordan quickly becomes involved in a scuffle with the paparazzi, who muscle her out of their way to get a shot of a major sports star. Lesson number one: the media are dangerous, and if there is any mistaking this implication it is dispelled by the appearance of security guards on the scene. Lesson number two: the media and professional sports are a symbiotic pair. At one point in the novel, an old tennis hand who had seen all the great players in action (modeled on the legendary tennis expert and aficionado Ted Tinling) instructs Jordan in the similarities between great competitive athletes and great movie actors: "Kelly [a Chris Evert stand-in] created a persona the fans liked, and she acted the part totally. The media knows what the public wants to read — and if they want to sell stories that's what they'll give them. If she had worked in Hollywood, Kelly could have won an Oscar."<sup>65</sup>

As things turn out for the young tennis starlet who is a client at Jordan's clinic and commits suicide in mysterious circumstances just before the Wimbledon tournament, the pressure to perform both athletically and theatrically can be deadly. In the end, however, the media does not emerge as the true culprit; rather, it is an obsessive fan and a manipulative father who share the blame for the young woman's death. However, the twisted psyches of both villains can be attributed to the media-related phenomenon of celebrity worship: The fan stabs a player who might defeat his idol in an important match (shades

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<sup>65</sup> Navratilova and Nickles, Total Zone, 97.

of the Steffi Graf fan who stabbed Monica Seles to eliminate her from competition). The father forces his daughter to be a tennis celebrity even though she would rather not (shades of too many tennis fathers to mention).

The second novel is less concerned with the media, concentrating instead on the evils of unscrupulous sports managers and promoters instead. Still, spectacle is what these bad guys bank on, and therefore the media is always a handmaiden to their schemes. By book three Jordan has become a full-fledged member of the press contingent at the big matches. Her new position allows her to contemplate the unblinking gaze of the camera-eye, which “enhances each [player’s] move as if you are a specimen under a microscope.”<sup>66</sup> But she manages to overcome her reservations and eventually becomes something of a celebrity as the host of a magazine show called Women/Sport. In this capacity she once again encounters the effects of greedy wheeler-dealers who want to make megaprofits in the business of pro sports. In this case, Jordan is courted by an ambitious firm interested in enlisting her to do an infomercial for a sports drink and related products designed to increase an athlete’s endurance. The entire enterprise becomes the site of heinous acts, everything from deception by Jordan’s lover and colleague at the clinic, the scientist who invented the new products and tries to browbeat her into accepting the endorsement deal, to the string of dead bodies poisoned inadvertently by the drink. When Jordan assembles the evidence she figures out that the formula for the high-tech brew contained toxic quantities of vitamin A and potassium for anyone with a slightly defective heart: the familiar twentieth-century story of science run amok, although science also provides the clues that allow Jordan to figure out the mystery.

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<sup>66</sup> Navratilova and Nickles, Killer Instinct 4.

In her sideline as a television personality, Jordan risked colluding in these atrocities by promoting the drink, although media institutions are again exonerated. In fact, it was her TV job that allowed her to stake out a position independent of her lover, who was too busy trying to capitalize on his chemistry experiment that he became careless and callous. Her post-tennis identity brings her fame, and therefore freedom, that surpasses what she achieved during her fleeting career on the courts. No longer under the microscope or a mere spectator, she is now aligned with the media's power.

### **Body politics**

The changing interpretation of the relationship between media and sports that occurs over the course of the three mystery novels may indicate how author Navratilova revised her thinking about this complex issue after she had spent time in the press booth at Wimbledon and elsewhere. But the treatment of the second major locus of power that emerges — sports science — remains consistent in the books, as well as consistent with Navratilova's own history. In addition to providing the perspective of an insider in the professional tennis milieu, Jordan is portrayed as a credentialed proponent of the sort of disciplinary methods Navratilova mastered in order to achieve international athletic stardom — diet and fitness programs, complemented by techniques designed to improve mental conditioning, so that the athletic body can achieve peak performance in an individual sport like tennis, where optimum mind/body integration and functioning are the goal. In this respect, Jordan is the star's alter ego, and she assumes an authoritative position that her inventor couldn't occupy. It is this pervasive theme in the fiction that allows an extension of the discussion of how Navratilova came to represent herself and underlines the significance of that representation.

What Navratilova tapped into and took advantage of as an athlete is best described in terms of the modern political framework that Michel Foucault calls bio-power and the related concept bio-politics. As Foucault defines it, bio-politics involves the concentration of political power in the administration of life, as compared to power wielded through systems of punishment and death-threatening obligations, such as compulsory military service. Foucault argues that bio-politics, more specifically what he calls the "anatomy-politics of the human body," is a modern formation "centered on the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls."<sup>67</sup> This abstract description resonates particularly well with Navratilova's formula for human achievement as she put it into practice and into writing. Although Navratilova's project at first appears aimed at mobilizing timeless and universal human capacities, it is in fact related directly to a particular set of social, historical developments that have produced the human-machine cyborg monsters about which Haraway writes.

The premises and practices at the Desert Spring Sports Science Clinic where Jordan works, as well as those adopted by Navratilova in the 1980s, offer an excellent expression of how bio-power is constituted. Consider, for example, Jordan's introductory description of her workplace and the roster of professional colleagues:

The lushly landscaped grounds included fifteen tennis courts with Deco turf, hard Har-Tru, red clay and grass surfaces, rebound Ace and even an indoor Supreme court; a regulation basketball court; a baseball and softball field; a soccer field; a 500,000-gallon superpool; and a new

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<sup>67</sup> Michel Foucault, History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1980), 139.

eighteen-hole golf course. We drove past the cutting-edge fitness center that also housed physical-therapy facilities and the technical core for computerized nutritional profiling and tracking and video motion analysis of golf swings and tennis strokes. The staff buildings, next to the parking lot we now pulled into, contained the offices of the cream of the crop culled from all aspects of medicine, including sports psychologists, rehabilitationists, acupuncturists, homeopathic specialists, licensed nutritionists, an osteopath, and a visiting professor of kinesiology and bioengineering.<sup>68</sup>

Details about what some of these technicians actually do are sprinkled throughout the text, as are examples of how athletes apply them in their daily lives. For example, Malik, a basketball star who wants to transform himself into a tennis star, exhibits for the clinic staff his self-monitoring system:

"I keep a record of everything.... I got in here what I eat, the supplements I take, how much I sleep, the stretches I do, and my complete training program, of course; my log from the gym, aerobic and anaerobic, number of reps, amount of weight, number of strokes on each machine."<sup>69</sup>

The brother of another client in one of the other novels reviews the potions in his sister's refrigerator: "[E]vening primrose oil. Flaxseed oil. Vitamin E — four hundred units. Vitamin C. Beta-carotene. Choline."<sup>70</sup> And the list goes on for an additional ten lines or so. These and similar lists leave an impression of endless possibilities for improvement of the body-machine, ample fuel for a bio-

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<sup>68</sup> Navratilova and Nickles, The Total Zone, 26.

<sup>69</sup> Navratilova and Nickles, Killer Instinct, 91.

<sup>70</sup> Navratilova and Nickles, Total Zone, 68.

mechanic's dream of building a better cyborg. Of course, the prototype is Navratilova herself.

Presented in these programmatic terms, the bio-engineering of Navratilova's body might seem at odds with her commitment to improving her image, since the affect she produced with her scientific exercise and diet regime conformed in many respects to the monstrous mythological cyborg in Haraway's text. But perhaps these two aspects of Navratilova's reinvention of herself need not be taken as contradictory, especially if we consider that the self-fashioning processes involved in producing a desired self-image are also exercises of bio-power. A few additional words from Foucault may clarify: bio-power, he explains, "[brings] life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and [makes] knowledge-power an agent for the transformation of human life."<sup>71</sup> Going blond and putting on blush were as much calculations as building muscle, since she could practically see the earnings side of her bank book swell with every visit to the hairdresser or dab of the makeup brush as she made herself more marketable. In addition, it seems fair to take at face value Navratilova's statements that her attention to grooming made her feel better, since she was spared the snide comments about her eating binges and could get on with collecting prizes and praises for her on-court skills.

### **Mixed reviews**

What is curious in Navratilova's biography is the apparent absence of a concomitant project of lesbian self-fashioning, since the Navratilova saga refers consistently to the importance of both mental and physical well-being, which reads remarkably like the typical rationale for coming-out. For many years, long

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<sup>71</sup> Foucault, 143.

after the Brown affair and during the time when she made no effort to conceal her sexual relationship with Judy Nelson, statements about Navratilova's sexuality — by her as well as by the press — remained ambiguous. Not until the breakup with Nelson in 1991 and the publicity generated when Nelson sued her for half her earnings during the years they were together, which added up to multi-millions in prize money alone, did Navratilova say what everyone knew already. In fact, in an interview with Barbara Walters on the TV magazine program 20/20 that many consider her formal coming out, Navratilova did not mention the word lesbian, although she said quite explicitly that their relationship involved sex, as well as love.<sup>72</sup> Before long, she began lending her name, and sometimes more, to various lesbian and gay political campaigns — criticizing public policy on AIDS, appearing at benefits for AIDS organizations, becoming a plaintiff in the ACLU challenge to Colorado's constitutional amendment that prohibited gay rights legislation in the state in 1992, as well as sundry other contributions. In the spring of 1993 she appeared as a featured speaker at the national lesbian and gay March on Washington. Still, she never came out in the sense usually associated with the term. For many years she refused to discuss the matter. Then, without fanfare, she was out, calmly replying to a question from a gay reporter, "Do you think it helps that people look at you and say, 'The best woman's tennis player of all time is a lesbian?'" with the response, "I can only hope so."<sup>73</sup>

Being a lesbian celebrity should have been a picnic for Navratilova after years of hounding by the press about her refusal to talk about her sexuality. But

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<sup>72</sup> For a transcript of much of the interview, see Sandra Faulkner, with Judy Nelson, Love Match: Nelson vs. Navratilova (New York: Birch Lane Press, 1993), 151-156. For an example of the interpretation of the interview as Navratilova's first public coming out announcement, see Zwerman, 149.

<sup>73</sup> Chris Bull, "The Magic of Martina," Advocate 593 (December 31, 1991), 40.

her protracted waffling was not always easily forgotten or forgiven by some who resented her stubborn refusal to declare her lesbian identity during the period when she was so often in the public eye. When the Advocate, the flagship of the U.S. gay/lesbian press, published its first Martina cover story in 1993, several readers took the opportunity to excoriate her in letters to the editor. For example, one correspondent took her to task for denying her lesbianism during the interview with Walters (at least, that was the letter writer's interpretation). Another scoffed at her for playing lousy tennis at the 1993 U.S. Open and for complaining about Nelson's gold-digging behavior. Yet another condemned her as a "has-been in more ways than one" and used the conflict with Nelson as grounds for a political denunciation of everything Navratilova represents — "Blindly defending the antics of a lesbian icon like Navratilova who uses people and discards them sets all of us back and sends a message of approval for her celebrity selfishness."<sup>74</sup>

The editors of the magazine also seemed to have doubts about holding Navratilova up as a representative of the movement. Their ambivalence was signaled by their choice of a cover photo depicting her as an avenging Fury, grimacing at her unseen opponent with a look of meanness and aggressive determination that was extremely unflattering — as if to rebut all the glam images of Navratilova used in other publications.<sup>75</sup> Although the expected reaction to her willingness to stop mincing words would be a welcoming embrace by her "community," she was instead greeted in these quarters with suspicion (and, maybe, envy), coupled with the inevitable recognition of her stature as a major sports star.

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<sup>74</sup> Barbara Germano, "Letters," Advocate 642 (November 16, 1993), 12.

<sup>75</sup> Advocate 639 (October 5, 1993). Cf. a subsequent Advocate cover, with an utterly placid Martina gazing at the camera, Advocate 696 (December 12, 1995).

In a reversal of what might be the expected order of things, the mainstream press proved much kinder. For instance, Newsweek's tennis reporter gushed, "Navratilova has turned into far more than merely one of us. She is mentor, conscience, role model, our own World Icon." He added a comment on her abandonment of feminine pretense — "yet another radical Martina makeover." In another apparent about face, however, he does not use her preference for more butch garb as an opportunity to disparage her: "But if this is accentuating some lifestyle manifesto — Hey, this is me. I don't care — Navratilova has got it all wrong. It's we who don't care any more. Acceptance is history; her public shows up now with honor and respect abounding." He even repeats a quip she made in response to the persistent questioning of her sexuality: "Reporter: 'Are you still a lesbian?' Martina: 'Are you still the alternative?'"<sup>76</sup> At an earlier time, this kind of playful banter would have produced a minor scandal; now it was amusing.

What may have offended Advocate readers was that Navratilova's claim to fame wasn't based on a particular identity, a relatively rigid construct, but instead relied on protean strategies that risked being deemed grotesque. After she retired from playing the high stakes games of professional tennis, she retained her willingness to flaunt her remarkable musculature in public, as in the promotional image used to advertise the Rainbow credit card, a so-called affinity card designed to attract lesbian and gay customers, where she posed in an updated, transgendered version of Lewis Hine's famous photograph Steamfitter.<sup>77</sup> The man pictured in Hine's is a young, white, working-class hunk,

<sup>76</sup> Curry Kirkpatrick, "The Passion of a Champion," Newsweek 126:20 (November 14, 1994), 58.

<sup>77</sup> Stuart Elliott describes the genesis of the Rainbow Card and its initial marketing campaign in his column on advertising in the New York Times, October 6, 1995, sec. D. Elliott quotes a curious remark by one of the chief

circa 1920, who applies his strength to adjust a bolt on an enormous gear mechanism that fills the frame — an idealized modernist, humanist image of industry's promise for human betterment. The Rainbow ad features an almost identical mechanical device and Navratilova in an almost identical pose. As quotation, however, the photo proposes an appropriation and displacement of its classic referent, while it also wryly acknowledges the myth Navratilova so diligently cultivated as she battled her way to the top of her sport. But the image is more than slightly goofy; it is also somewhat sinister, with Navratilova dwarfed by antiquated machinery reminiscent of scenery from Metropolis. This dystopian suggestion may be why the advertisers quickly ditched the picture in favor of more benign pictures of the Lege without such arty touches or complex historical references.

### **Social mobility**

It would be easy to conclude that Navratilova's status as the world's most famous lesbian in the 1990s demanded that she fit the mannish mold.<sup>78</sup> That, heterosexual gender ideology instructs us, is the only way a lesbian can be recognized — seen and appreciated. Case closed: Lesbian celebrity is a categorical example of triumphant masculinity. Although its female variant may appear inspiring and maybe tantalizing for the lesbian minority, this involves a simple reversal of the same old binary terms and therefore offers nothing new or really different. But this verdict may be too hasty when we consider

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executive of Do Tell, the company that created the card and lined up its sponsors, who explains the choice of Navratilova as the spokesperson: "She came out when many of us were in the closet and few were willing to join her and say, 'I'm gay, too.'"

<sup>78</sup> This is the thesis of one book on the topic of contemporary lesbian celebrity to date, Louise Allen, The Lesbian Idol: Martina. kd. and the Consumption of Lesbian Masculinity (London: Cassell, 1997).

Navratilova's image problems and how she solved them by cultivating an image that was not particularly masculine, but not at all feminine either. For starters, the idea that physical strength and agility, or competitiveness for that matter, are essential masculine characteristics is absurd, although these are the traits most frequently associated with Navratilova's reputation. Indeed, gender has little to do with the persona she produced through various applications of technological expertise: physical and mental discipline, career management, and public relations. Although she spent so much time trying to solve her image problem by mastering the signifiers of femininity, she gave up this project once her stardom was guaranteed.

Again, Navratilova's star image conforms to a feature of the cyborg-subject in late capitalist, advanced industrial society that Haraway describes: "a creature in a post-gender world." Now, post-gender could be interpreted as a questionable political epithet. However, Haraway argues emphatically that it is entirely political. Since the unnatural cyborg "skips the step of original unity," as she puts it, it prefigures the possibility of undermining and overturning fantasies of mastering nature and the awful consequences of the self-other dichotomies that underwrite systems of domination.<sup>79</sup> But how cyborgs might be incorporated into lesbian and gay politics is not immediately clear.<sup>80</sup>

This is where Navratilova's brand of lesbian celebrity comes in, which is quite different from measuring her political effectiveness in terms of her viability as a role model — a questionable concept, given that we could hardly begin to describe what role she would be modeling — or a standard-bearer for the

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<sup>79</sup> Haraway, 150.

<sup>80</sup> Cathy Griggers considers the problem but offers no decisive conclusions in "Lesbian Bodies in the Age of (Post) Mechanical Reproduction," in The Lesbian Postmodern, ed. Laura Doan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994): 118-133.

problematic ideal of visibility. She has certainly been visible, but what she represents — her image — entails much more than appearances on television screens and magazine pages with the word lesbian mentioned in a caption or bit of commentary. Nor is her political activism the issue. She may speak at hundreds of rallies or at none, but the import of her celebrity would remain unaltered. Her most radical political effect was produced by her experiments using technologies of self-transformation that ignored gender to become a celebrity as a result. Since the heterosexual definition of gender has been a cornerstone of modern celebrity, and arguably more powerful since movie stars set the standard, Navratilova's challenge to compulsory gender exposed its false claims of objectivity and inevitability.

A final comment is necessary. Navratilova did not invent lesbian celebrity, nor was the persona she exemplified an individual accomplishment, even if her personal resolve to create an image that suited her are taken into account. Just like Jordan Myles in her detective novels, Navratilova is the singular hero of this story, but the genre has its conventions to which the story faithfully adheres and which circumscribe the hero's actions. One of the formulaic components of celebrity is the uniqueness of the star, and celebrity is often cited as support for the notion of individual charisma. But Navratilova would never have been a celebrity without an entire ensemble of social institutions and cultural practices. The most obvious is the field of professional sports and her own particular branch, women's tennis. In a more general sense, institutionalized spectacle — elaborate entertainments playing to huge audiences — must also be counted as a precondition for any contemporary athlete's rise to prominence. Of course, media institutions are also crucial, since without the press and broadcast industries professional sport would never have become a platform for international fame and astronomical earnings, as it did in the late twentieth

century. Perhaps most significant in Navratilova's case, however, was the array of physical and mental conditioning techniques and expert technologies that govern what we now think of as a healthy body, or even better, a successful body, and enabled her to become a superhero. In short, her celebrity combined and mobilized these various social spheres, and in the process contributed to their reproduction.

At the same time, the image problems that accompanied her incorporation into these cultural domains were not produced by individual idiosyncrasies but can be traced in every instance to her uneasy encounters with another set of social institutions and ritualized cultural practices — primarily those involving definitions of gender and sexuality. She didn't epitomize any feminine or heterosexual ideals. And she was neither a closeted lesbian nor one who risked condemnation by proclaiming her lesbian identity. She embodied the possibility of a new kind of person: a powerful, unwomanly but not "mannish" lesbian. In 1990, with all the pieces in place, Navratilova presented a new celebrity image, a lesbian celebrity. Others followed soon after, in other entertainment sectors — music, television, fashion, theater — confirming Ian Hacking's observations concerning the production of new form of subjectivity: "When new descriptions become available, when they come into circulation, or even when they become the sorts of things that it is all right to say, to think, then there are new things to choose to do. When new intentions become open to me, I live in a new world of opportunities."<sup>81</sup> Celebrity emerges as a cultural site

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<sup>81</sup> Ian Hacking, Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 236. As the book's title indicates, Hacking is writing here about people with multiple personalities, although elsewhere he considers the historical production of homosexual people in similar terms. See, e.g., his essay "Making Up People," in Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality, and the Self in Western Thought, ed. Thomas C. Heller, Morton Sosna, and David E. Wellbery (Sanford: Stanford University Press, 1986): 222-236.

**where such new descriptions take shape — not the elusive hope of attaining the riches and admiration lavished upon stars, but more prosaic although also more radical conceptions of personhood where gender and sexuality no longer establish limits or impose rules.**

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