THE GENDER AND MEDIA READER

Edited by

MARY CELESTE KEARNEY

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

First published 2012
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Simultaneously published in the UK
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
The gender and media reader / editor Mary Celeste Kearney.
p. cm.
1. Mass media and se. 2. Sex role in mass media. Mass media and culture.
I. Kearney, Mary Celeste, 1962–
P96.S45G44 2011
305.3—dc22
2010044187

ISBN13: 978–0–415–99345–6 (hbk)
ISBN 13: 978–0–415–99346–3 (pbk)

Typeset in Arnasis by Swales & Willis Ltd, Exeter, Devon

CONTEN

22.
MAKING HER (IN)VISIBLE

Cultural Representations of Lesbianism and the Lesbian Body in the 1990s

Ann M. Ciasullo

> We regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right.
>
> (Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 140)

In September 1999, *The Jerry Springer Show* ran an episode entitled "I'm Having an Affair—With Another Woman!" After a series of confessions between the featured wife and husband (the main revelation: they were sharing the same mistress), the "other woman" appeared on stage. In her tight black dress, she strutted over to the wife, straddled her, and started making out with her. The audience members roared with approval. Bypassing both the tradition to which these "luscious lesbians" belong[1] and the question of whether these women actually *were* lesbians, I want to ask some questions about this incident: Should we be hopeful because the audience didn't yell "dyke!" or scream words of damnation at the women? Does the audience's response suggest that lesbianism is becoming more acceptable in mainstream society? Surveying the many other cultural venues in which lesbianism has made its presence felt, it would appear that lesbianism *is* becoming more acceptable. Indeed, lesbians seem to be everywhere—in mainstream magazines ranging from *People* to *Cosmopolitan*, in movies like *Chasing Amy* and *Set It Off*, on television shows like *Friends*, *Mad about You*, and, of course, *Ellen*—saturating the cultural imagination. In the words of Ann Northrop, a leader of the Lesbian Avengers, "Lesbians are the Hula-Hoop of the nineties."[2]

Northrop's metaphor points to the way that lesbians are, in many ways, the 1990s' version of a novelty, a fad, something to be consumed and played with. But of course, the "novelty" status accorded to lesbians belies their long and difficult struggle for positive representation by the mainstream media; thus the present signification attached to their trendiness—popularly known as "lesbian chic"—is much more complex than the cultural experience of most fads. We must consider how the emergence of "the lesbian" is constructed, characterized, and framed by the media that are presenting it to middle America. What kind of lesbian has "come out" in the past decade? More precisely, what kind of lesbian has been *allowed* to appear on mainstream cultural landscapes? How is she (re)presented, or more specifically, how is she embodied—how is her body portrayed, described, contained or not? Drawing from a range of sources—television and film, popular magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek*, women's magazines such as *Glamour* and *Vogue*, and current lesbian theory—I wish to analyze the phenomenon of this emerging lesbian (body). I will show how mainstream media produce and reproduce particular lesbian bodies while effacing other, equally legitimate—and perhaps even more conventionally "lesbian"—bodies. The body or image that is made invisible is the "butch," a figure that I consider better able than a "femme" body to challenge mainstream cultural fantasies about lesbianism.[3]

My argument is twofold: first, most recent mainstream representations of lesbianism are normalized—heterosexualized or "straightened out"—via the femme body. The mainstream lesbian body is at once sexualized and desexualized: on the one hand,

she is made into an object of desire for straight audiences through her heterosexualization, a process achieved by representing the lesbian as embodying a hegemonic femininity and thus, for mainstream audiences, as looking "just like" conventionally attractive straight women; on the other hand, because the representation of desire between two women is usually suppressed in these images, she is de-homosexualized. Furthermore, this heterosexualization is enabled by the alignment of her femininity with specific racial and socioeconomic attributes: on mainstream cultural landscapes, the femme body is nearly always a white, upper-middle class body. Second, and equally important, those lesbians who are not femme (and, by extension, who are not white and middle or upper class) are—with perhaps one notable exception which I will discuss below—virtually invisible in media representations, and when they do appear, they are often pathologized. This might seem an odd argument; after all, as Arlene Stein, author of *Sisters, Sexperts, Queers: Beyond the Lesbian Nation*, points out, "It's the butch lesbian who's been synonymous with lesbianism in the public imagination."[4] Here it is important to underscore the distinction between the butch's presence in the cultural *imagination* and her lack of presence on cultural *landscapes*. As I will argue later in this article, this same butch who is so closely aligned with the *idea* of lesbianism is curiously absent from cultural *representation*; in mainstream images and discourses of lesbianism in the 1990s, there are few butches to be found. By surveying the various and proliferating discourses about lesbianism in popular culture, I will consider the ways in which the lesbian body is marked and made "tasteful" for the viewing public—made, in essence, palatable for mainstream consumers to consume.

"Butch," "Femme," and the Substance of Style, or Why the Categories Still Matter

Before turning directly to my discussion, I want to address some objections that might arise over my choice of terms. Aren't "butch" and "femme," and the binary to which they are usually assigned, too simplistic and too overdetermined? Hasn't postmodernism had a profound effect on style, and isn't it reductive to think about lesbian representation only in terms of "butch" and "femme"? Certainly it could be argued that a clear-cut distinction between the "two types" of lesbians is no longer cogent. There is no doubt that lesbian communities have expanded notions of butch and femme and that the butch-femme rigidity that was so common in the 1950s and 1960s has, to a large extent, disappeared.[5] As Michele Fisher, in an humorous article entitled "Butch Nouveau," notes: "In the old days you were either butch or femme or you got made fun of. Not so in today's version of the culture: Now the butch-femme spectrum is very crowded. You've still got your stone butches and ultra or old-school femmes, but then you've also got your soft butches, tomboy femmes, stone femmes, butches of center, femmes of center, and many more."[6] Fisher's assessment of the ways that lesbian culture has changed is, for the most part, accurate; one need only attend any Gay Pride Parade or visit any lesbian bar to see the ways that styles have proliferated. Butch and femme, in their conventional sense, exist alongside dozens of other styles. As Jeanie Kasindorf proclaims of lesbian culture, "In the nineties, it seems, there is room for every style."[7]

Or so the story goes. But I would argue that the idea that we can "be whatever we want to be," the postmodern sensibility that imbues many discussions of lesbian style, is misleading, for it does not give attention to the way that cultural forces play upon the self in the self's experience of coming out, of identity formation, and of choosing "style." When I was first coming out over seven years ago, I saw anything but "room for every style." At the time I was twenty-four, and until that point I had always loved wearing dresses and skirts and makeup. Then I started dating a woman, and something odd happened: I believed that my skirt-loving tendencies and my desire to wear eyeliner had to stop. Until then, I had considered myself a relatively open-minded and intelligent person who didn't let culture dictate her beliefs. Yet when I entered into this relationship, my biggest anxiety was not whether my friends and family could accept my lesbianism, but whether I could ever "look the part." For a month I didn't wear a skirt or dress, and I spent many a night wondering if my desire to pluck my eyebrows meant I was really straight. In other words, culture *did* impinge on me: I spent a long time trying to reconcile my feminine qualities with my "new" lesbian self, a self that I believed had to eschew all things feminine.

But mainstream c
provoke my confusion
on occasion. Those
much by lesbian cultu
months, if not years, f
going to gay bars with
would be exposed at
someone would com
minute . . . you're not
enough! Now get out!"
coming-out process fo
tance by the lesbian
loved ones, and in my
hinged (in part) on h
lesbianism that pointe
felt as though my *lack*
paired with my girlfri
an "obvious" lesbian,
inauthentic.

I relate this stor
way such categories
experiences; we live ir
whether we wish to o
only ones whose subj
by such experiences.
her insightful essay, "
The Cultural Politics c
"some members of t
(and the heterosexual
fer for their nonconfo
codes for gender ident
to identify. Some me
some women are per
hard they try to confo
with my partner, Mela
more often than "m
Walker, that there is
ness." Certainly Melar
standards; if anything,
Yet her body, unmark
passes as male, result
kicked out of a dress
the clerk told us, "me
is a component of *un*
characterizes the but
style has expanded to
to choose how we loc

ween the "two types" There is no doubt that ıded notions of butch- :mme rigidity that was 1960s has, to a large e Fisher, in an humor- :au," notes: "In the old mme or you got made ı of the culture: Now very crowded. You've d ultra or old-school ot your soft butches, s, butches of center, ore."[6] Fisher's assess- ulture has changed is, need only attend any esbian bar to see the d. Butch and femme, : alongside dozens of ' proclaims of lesbian ıs, there is room for

would argue that the we want to be," the ıes many discussions for it does not give forces play upon the ming out, of identity le." When I was first), I saw anything but ıe I was twenty-four, oved wearing dresses ted dating a woman, I believed that my sire to wear eyeliner idered myself a rela- ıt person who didn't when I entered into ety was not whether ot my lesbianism, but art." For a month I spent many a night y eyebrows meant I , culture *did* impinge o reconcile my femi- ian self, a self that I feminine.

But mainstream cultural fantasies alone did not provoke my confusion over wanting to wear dresses on occasion. Those anxieties were fueled just as much by lesbian culture as by straight culture. I spent months, if not years, feeling out of place. I remember going to gay bars with my girlfriend and fearing that I would be exposed at any minute. I honestly believed someone would come up to me and say, "Wait a minute . . . you're not *really* a lesbian; you're not butch enough! Now get out!" As a feminine woman, then, the coming-out process for me was as much about acceptance by the lesbian community as by my straight loved ones, and in my mind, both forms of acceptance hinged (in part) on how well I met the "criteria" of lesbianism that pointed back to *visibility*, or *butchness*. I felt as though my *lack* of visibility—visible only when paired with my girlfriend, who is by most standards an "obvious" lesbian, a butch—made me "unreal," inauthentic.

I relate this story because it underscores the way such categories *do* still shape and influence our experiences; we live in, by, and with these categories, whether we wish to or not. And femmes are not the only ones whose subjectivity is marked and formed by such experiences. As Lisa Walker points out in her insightful essay, "How to Recognize a Lesbian: The Cultural Politics of Looking Like What You Are," "some members of the lesbian and gay community (and the heterosexual one, for that matter) will suffer for their nonconformity to the normative visible codes for gender identity no matter how they 'choose' to identify. Some men are perceived as femme and some women are perceived as butch no matter how hard they try to conform."[8] Having spent seven years with my partner, Melanie, and hearing her called "sir" more often than "ma'am," makes me believe, like Walker, that there is something we can call "butchness." Certainly Melanie is not totally butch by many standards; if anything, she is somewhat androgynous. Yet her body, unmarked as "conventionally" female, passes as male, resulting in such situations as being kicked out of a dressing room with me because, as the clerk told us, "men have to wait outside." There is a component of *un*femininity, *non*-femaleness that characterizes the butch. To claim, then, that lesbian style has expanded to the extent that we are all "free" to choose how we look—and, by extension, how we are received in the world—is, in my opinion, reductive. As Susan Bordo asserts, the postmodern notion of "abstract, unsituated, disembodied freedom . . . glorifies itself only through the effacement of the material praxis of people's lives."[9] I, too, would argue that the putative "liberation" associated with the proliferation of categories doesn't wholly ring true.

Thus I use the terms "butch" and "femme" in my discussion of mainstream culture because I believe the categories obtain in ways that we are often reluctant or even loathe to acknowledge. And they obtain *especially* in mainstream culture, where ideas about "lesbian style" have not diversified or proliferated at the rate that they have in lesbian culture, and where women's appearances in general are measured against a narrow arid demanding standard of beauty. I am not saying that there is an essential butch or femme to be found, but I am saying that some women, whether by willful self-presentation and stylization or by simply "wearing what's comfortable" or what makes them feel good, will appear more butch than others, and some women will appear more femme than others. Thus we should ask, Where exactly is the butch in mainstream culture, where is the femme, and what is the significance of their relative absence or presence?

"Lesbian Chic": The Inauguration of Lesbian Visibility

The above question cannot be answered simply or easily, and in many ways, it cannot be answered at all until we begin at the beginning: 1993, the year of "lesbian chic." *New York* magazine kicked off the craze in May of 1993, featuring chanteuse k.d. lang on its cover with the caption: "Lesbian Chic: The Bold, Brave New World of Gay Women." *Newsweek* followed suit in June, offering on its cover the image of two attractive lesbians, hugging one another and smiling broadly at the camera. Finally, in August, *Vanity Fair* presented the now-famous cover of a scantily-clad Cindy Crawford shaving a pleased k.d. lang. And inside magazines as well—women's magazines in particular—lesbians were suddenly getting space. *Ladies' Home Journal*, an unlikely venue for lesbian concerns, printed a short interview with, of all people, Martina Navratilova.[10] More in step with "lesbian chic," *Mademoiselle* featured a long article entitled "Women in

Love," announcing that "lesbians are becoming more visible as a new generation of gay women are coming out and coming of age in ways that are distinctly their own."[11] (It also featured a "glossary" of lesbian terms, just in case readers couldn't follow the article.) And *Vogue* said "Goodbye to the Last Taboo," pointing out: "Not long ago, you couldn't say the word *lesbian* on television. Now everybody's gay-girl crazy. Alexis Jetter charts the trend and asks, Is this the new visibility, or the old voyeurism?"[12]

Certainly there is something to be said for the fact that mainstream culture was representing lesbianism in a relatively positive light. Yet such representation was not met without skepticism; the question posed by *Vogue* tapped into an anxiety that many lesbians felt in response to this sudden boom in "positive" images. For years, lesbian feminist critics have been concerned with the relative invisibility of the lesbian within both academic circles and in the culture at large. Summarizing these concerns, Terry Castle, in her book, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality in Modern Culture*, poses the question: "Why is it so difficult to see the lesbian—even when she is there, quite plainly, in front of us? In part because she has been 'ghosted'—or made to seem invisible—by culture itself."[13] In the Second Wave of the feminist movement, lesbians—like women of color—were effaced by the white, middle-class, heterosexual image that many feminists sought to protect and promote. In the 1970s and 1980s, as the push for gay rights picked up momentum, lesbians were similarly eclipsed by gay men at the forefront of the movement. Furthermore, the images of lesbianism that have emerged throughout the twentieth century have not always been benign; one need only peruse Vito Russo's *The Celluloid Closet*, a survey of representations of homosexuality in film, to be reminded of exactly how pernicious such representations have been.[14] To be sure, representation promises visibility, but visibility means not only that one is *present* but that one is *being watched*. It also means that certain images get singled out as *watchable*. In the proliferation of lesbian images that we have witnessed since that watershed year, what images have been singled out? On mainstream cultural landscapes, what does the lesbian body of the 1990s look like?

The Consumable Lesbian

In April of 1997, amidst the increasingly loud media buzz surrounding her sexuality, Ellen DeGeneres appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine proclaiming, "Yep, I'm Gay." On this cover, Ellen is dressed in black (save the shiny white loafers she sports). Her pants look comfortable and not too tight; her shirt, long-sleeved and low-cut. Around her neck she wears what appears to be a small string of diamonds, and on her fingers are several rings. Her face, made up a little more than usual, smiles broadly for the camera, which looks down at her as she crouches on the floor. Jeanie Kasindorf points out that "the short-haired 'bulldyke' is still many Americans' idea of what a gay woman looks like,"[15] but *this* lesbian body—comfortable and comforting—doesn't look anything like the stereotypical lesbian body, the "mannish," makeup-less butch in boots and flannel so often associated with lesbianism. Here, Ellen is attractive (nice smile, light but appealing makeup), feminine (low-cut shirt—unusual for DeGeneres—and *diamonds*?), and inviting.

I think this cover photo illustrates a particular trend in representations not only of Ellen but also of lesbianism in general: the sanitizing of the lesbian through her feminizing (or, conversely, the use of the feminine to sanitize the popular conception of the lesbian). Certainly it could be argued that these carefully coded bodies offer a corrective to the relatively rigid image of the lesbian that has dominated for decades (the same one that dominated my mind when I came out): the angry, militant, lesbian feminist, the butch, the woman who deep down wants to be a man and thus eschews all accoutrements of femininity. And certainly there is something to be said for disrupting the narrative associating lesbianism with masculinity (David Greenberg, for example, reminds us that "stereotypes linking lesbianism with masculinity date back to the Romans").[16] At the same time, however, the femme or feminine images presented to mainstream audiences have the potential to be interpreted in a variety of ways, many of them not subversive at all. The result, in fact, could well be a reinscription of mainstream norms and ideals. Let me turn to some other images to illustrate how this reinscription might take place.

Ellen's predecessors were the two lesbians on the cover of *Newsweek* from 1993 heralding "LESBIANS."

increasingly loud media
ality, Ellen DeGeneres
ime magazine proclaim-
over, Ellen is dressed in
loafers she sports). Her
not too tight; her shirt,
ound her neck she wears
ing of diamonds, and on
ler face, made up a little
lly for the camera, which
ches on the floor. Jeanie
e short-haired 'bulldyke'
of what a gay woman
body—comfortable and
thing like the stereotypi-
n," makeup-less butch in
ociated with lesbianism.
mile, light but appealing
irt—unusual for DeGe-
nviting.
strates a particular trend
Ellen but also of lesbi-
g of the lesbian through
the use of the feminine
eption of the lesbian),
iat these carefully coded
relatively rigid image of
d for decades (the same
l when I came out): the
st, the butch, the woman
a man and thus eschews
ty. And certainly there is
pting the narrative asso-
linity (David Greenberg
"stereotypes linking les-
back to the Romans").[16]
the femme or feminine
eam audiences have the
a variety of ways, many
The result, in fact, could
nstream norms and ide-
images to illustrate how
lace.
the two lesbians on the
heralding "LESBIANS."

The women pictured are young, white, and conventionally attractive. Presumably they are partners, as one sits behind the other, hugging her girlfriend around the waist. Both women have dark, styled hair, dark eyes, and attractive faces. The "hugger" has soft, curly hair and a slightly smiling, slightly made-up (and thus feminine) face. We see her from the waist up only; she wears a long-sleeved denim shirt—not particularly feminine attire, but it is balanced by some standard markers of both femininity and affluence: pearl earrings, pearl necklace, and a shiny ring on her finger. The other woman, leaning back in her girlfriend's arms, also is conventionally attractive, although her short, pageboy haircut isn't quite as feminine as her girlfriend's hairdo. What she does have going for her, however, is her body: lean and tanned, she wears a brown, long-sleeved button-up top with a deep scoop neck. Her neck and collarbone are thus accentuated and "marked" clearly as petite, feminine, and pretty. This photo, coupled with the Ellen cover, seems to assure mainstream audiences that there is nothing "different" about lesbians, except that they might hug one another more than straight women might. Indeed, these images—images of clean-cut, well-dressed, economically secure, feminine lesbians—promise readers that Ellen and the *Newsweek* women are, simply put, all-American girls.

A clearer case in point of this packaging of the lesbian body is the representation and transformation of Melissa Etheridge. Etheridge broke into the rock and roll scene in 1988 with the release of her self-titled debut album. The image on the cover of this album is striking: decked out in leather, hair spiked up tall and rebellious, Etheridge clenches her fists and her jaw; she looks ready to explode. Although the space she occupies is small, it is clear in this image that she is all energy and that once unleashed, she will take up as much space as she likes.

This image certainly contrasts with one from a 1994 *People* magazine: accompanying an article entitled "A House in Harmony" is a photo of Etheridge and her (now ex-)partner, Julie Cypher. Pictured in their (very nice) kitchen, Melissa sits on the counter laughing while Julie stands next to her, lifting up some wine glasses with very feminine hands—fingernails nicely polished, rings on her fingers, bracelet on one wrist. Then, in 1996, the two appear on the cover of *Newsweek*, huddled close together, looking serious and announcing, "We're Having a Baby." Inside is an interview with the two women, and the photo accompanying the article is a pleasing one: the women pose by a poolside (presumably theirs), Melissa holding Julie's wrists as the two of them laugh and play. What changes are being registered in these representations? The most obvious difference is the way Etheridge's image has shifted—from a very eighties' butch in leather to a softer, more conventionally attractive nineties' lesbian. But there are other markers to note as well. Like the other lesbians on the cover of *Newsweek*, Melissa and Julie (when they were still a couple) were typically pictured close together, hugging or playing; they usually occupied a small amount of space and, unlike the first image of Etheridge, their bodies gave no indication of breaking out of that space. Although their image on the cover of *Newsweek* might be characterized as defiant—they look the viewer in the eye and hold each other without shame—the fact remains that Etheridge and Cypher are presented as conventionally attractive women, and their attractiveness has the potential to "soften" that defiance for mainstream audiences. Finally, the positions of the women's bodies in all these photos indicate some intimacy, but they do not indicate *sexuality*. Mainstream magazines like *Newsweek* might not have a problem putting Etheridge and Cypher on the cover, but they—like other media—are careful to present bodies that are sanitized yet attractive clean of any (homo)sexual residue.

Possibly the singular exception to this image is provided by another lesbian in the music industry, the highly visible—and highly unfemme—k.d. lang. If my argument is that only femme or feminine lesbians are allowed to appear on our cultural landscapes, how might we account for someone like lang, of whom Madonna was rumored to have said, "Elvis is alive—and she is beautiful!"? I can only speculate, but I think her representation depends on both her self-presentation and the way mainstream audiences interpret her presence on cultural landscapes. For example, lang insists that she is neither butch nor femme but androgynous. As she explains, "I don't feel like a woman, and I don't feel like a man; I feel like both, simultaneously."[17] And certainly lang is one of the most *playful* lesbians around, if not one of the most playful *women* in the public eye. She's not afraid to try on different styles,

as a layout in the July 1997 issue of *Vogue*—in which lang sports designer dresses—indicates. So perhaps lang can pull off the butch aspects of her self-presentation precisely because she so obviously points to the game that gender is for her. Or, finally, perhaps lang's visibility is allowed because she *is* the exception to the rule—like RuPaul, the representative "other." For however butch k.d. lang may appear to be, her popularity has certainly not produced a mainstream cultural landscape crowded with imitators.

Aside from lang, then, there is a certain homogeneity to the lesbian bodies we see in mainstream media. Take the much talked-about 1995 lesbian wedding on *Friends*, for example. The sophisticated brides "had their hair in ringlets and wore dresses out of a Merchant Ivory film"[18]; in other words, they looked *nothing* like the stereotypical lesbian. On the one hand, this representation might have been effective at dispelling some preconceptions that the public holds regarding lesbians, convincing audiences that even "straight-looking" women could be gay and that even lesbians could have such impeccable taste in clothing. Such disruption is important. At the same time, doesn't this "corrective" seem *too* correct? As an article in *Entertainment Weekly* suggests, "[television] writers may have gotten a bit too conscientious in avoiding stereotypes. Out comic Lea DeLaria, who had a cameo in the lesbian wedding on *Friends*, complains, 'They needed at least 30 or 40 more fat dykes in tuxedos. All those thin, perfectly coiffed girls in Laura Ashley prints—what kind of a lesbian wedding is that? And no one played softball afterwards?'"[19] Although DeLaria is being humorous about this instance of lesbian representation, she nonetheless raises an important point: the "thin, perfectly coiffed girls" might well be lesbians, but where were the other ones, the "dykes," to use her words? In representing lesbianism and lesbian bodies, then, television, like print media, relies upon images that seem to erase the butch lesbian.

From the *Friends* brides—who did, indeed, look more like fashion models than anything else—to the lesbian couple on *Mad about You*, to the earlier femme duo of Sandra Bernhard and Morgan Fairchild on *Roseanne*, these lesbian bodies are consumable, just like the presumably straight female bodies in women's fashion magazines. They join images from recent movies as well. One of the better-received lesbian "crossover" films (an independent film that is relatively successful with mainstream audiences) is the 1996 *Bound*. The movie poster itself offers a tantalizing image of lesbianism—Jennifer Tilly as Violet, the film's femme in her seductive dress, tellingly glances toward Gina Gershon, who is looking tough with her muscle T-shirt and her tattooed arm. Gershon plays the butch, Corky, and she does an impressive (and undeniably sexy) job of it. But this image, and those in the movie itself, frame Gershon's butchness: she is marked as butch (and, by extension, working class—a connection that I explore later in the article) through her black shirt and tattoo, and through her proclivity for painting and plumbing, but she is simultaneously marked as feminine with her pouty, Julia Roberts lips, wispy hair hanging in her eyes, and her reputation as an actress—this is, after all, one of the women who bared it all in *Showgirls* (although in that film, too, there was a lesbian subplot in which Gershon's polymorphously perverse character was rejected by Elizabeth Berkley's straight-only femme.)[20] And notably, it is Gershon's conventionally attractive, feminine body that we see fully nude in *Bound*, not Tilly's. As a recent issue of *Girlfriends* magazine asks, "Is this the butchest woman in Hollywood?"

Similarly, we might question why one of the other recent "lesbian" films—independent filmmaker Kevin Smith's *Chasing Amy* (1997)—was such a crossover success. The plot is as follows: boy meets girl, boy discovers girl is a lesbian but pursues her anyway, boy convinces girl to give it a try with him, boy and girl find true love with one another, experience conflict, and ultimately break up. This movie was critically acclaimed for its honest portrayal of how love surpasses all boundaries, and perhaps mainstream audiences were moved by the film's message: "It's not who you love. It's how" (or so the movie poster tells us). Or perhaps it was the "lure" of the lesbian, a lure that straight audiences might experience vicariously through the main character of the film, Holden (played by Ben Affleck). Whatever the draw, certainly it didn't hurt that the film's feature lesbian, Alyssa (or, as David Ansen, movie critic for *Newsweek*, puts it, "the bright, wild, sexy Alyssa"),[21] was played by Joey Lauren Adams, a petite, traditionally attractive blond with a childlike voice. It's easy to see why Holden falls for Alyssa: he initially thinks she's straight, and even

endent film that is rela-
tream audiences) is the
er itself offers a tantaliz-
nnifer Tilly as Violet, the
e dress, tellingly glances
s looking tough with her
oed arm. Gershon plays
loes an impressive (and
ut this image, and those
rshon's butchness: she is
ension, working class—a
er in the article) through
ıd through her proclivity
ut she is simultaneously
pouty, Julia Roberts lips,
es, and her reputation as
one of the women who
hough in that film, too,
n which Gershon's poly-
er was rejected by Eliza-
emme.)[20] And notably, it
ttractive, feminine body
id, not Tilly's. As a recent
asks, "Is this the butchest

on why one of the other
endent filmmaker Kevin
—was such a crossover
ws: boy meets girl, boy
ut pursues her anyway,
a try with him, boy and
nother, experience con-
p. This movie was criti-
st portrayal of how love
ıd perhaps mainstream
he film's message: "It's
(or so the movie poster
e "lure" of the lesbian, a
night experience vicari-
ıcter of the film, Holden
ıtever the draw, certainly
ature lesbian, Alyssa (or,
c for *Newsweek*, puts it,
"),[21] was played by Joey
itionally attractive blond
/ to see why Holden falls
she's straight, and even

when he discovers that she's not, he nurses this belief. That is, Alyssa fulfills an *I know, but* function in the film: *I know she's a lesbian, but she can't be a lesbian,* says Holden. So, too, it is altogether possible that femme Alyssa prompted mainstream audiences to employ the *I know, but* equation: I know this character's a lesbian, but—but she's so attractive, she can't be a lesbian. But she decides to be with Holden, so maybe she's not a lesbian. But she's not a lesbian in real life, she used to date the director, Kevin Smith, who thanks his "poopie" in the closing credits. And therein lies the rub: in mainstream cultural representations of lesbianism, there is always a *but,* always the possibility—or is it the promise?—that she who is lesbian (e.g., Anne Heche) can "unbecome" lesbian (e.g., Anne Heche).

Discursive Bodies

In the May 1993 issue of *New York,* Jeanie Kasindorf's article on "lesbian chic" describes life at an upscale lesbian bar called Henrietta Hudson in New York City:

> Outside the front stands the bouncer, a short young woman with a shaved head and a broad, square body. She's covered in loose black cotton pants, and looks like an out-of-shape kung fu instructor. . . . [Inside] sits a young woman straight from a Brooks Brothers catalogue—wearing a conservative plaid jacket and matching knee-length pleated skirt, a white blouse with a Peter Pan collar, and a strand of pearls. She chats with her lover while they sip white wine and rub each other's backs. Across from them, at the bar, sits a group of young women in jeans and black leather, all with cropped hair. . . . The Brooks Brothers woman and her lover leave, and are replaced by two 26-year-old women with the same scrubbed, girl-next-door good looks. The two are celebrating their engagement and show off matching diamond rings. . . . In the other alcove is a sexy young tawny-skinned woman in her early twenties. She has thick, dark, curly hair flowing into her eyes and down her back; she wears a skintight top over tight jeans. She is talking to her pretty blond lover, also in tight jeans, with a black leather jacket. . . . These are the faces of a new generation of women—women who have transformed the lesbian image.[22]

I quote this long passage because I want to draw attention to the way that lesbians—and lesbian bodies—are normalized, made consumable, even in print. Lesbians here fall into one of two main categories: incredibly (and conventionally) attractive, and thus described quite thoroughly (and voyeuristically), or not conventionally attractive, and thus briefly mentioned and dismissed. Take, for example, the bouncer "with a shaved head and a broad, square body" who "looks like an out-of-shape kung fu instructor." This initial figure is one of the few images of the butch body described in this excerpt, and it is presented as unappealing, if not humorous. However, following her is a luscious array of lesbians: a woman wearing pearls, the two young "scrubbed, girl-next-door good looks" women, and the "sexy young tawny-skinned" woman who, with her luxurious hair and tight, revealing clothing, is described almost excessively. The juxtaposition of the bouncer and the rest of the women both draws attention to the ways in which the bouncer is *not* attractive and, by the end of the passage, effectively erases her; she is all but forgotten in this sea of gorgeous women. Aside from the bouncer, the only other women who interrupt what seems to be a narrative tailored to evoke straight (male) desire as well as lesbian desire are the young women with cropped hair, dressed in jeans and leather. They are not dwelled upon obsessively; nor are there any adjectives assessing their beauty. In *this* landscape of lesbianism, then, the images of femme lesbians may challenge the traditional reader's sense of what a lesbian looks like; but these same images are potentially desirable to straight audiences. Such language evokes the discourse of *Sports Illustrated*'s swimsuit issue more than anything else. As Sherrie Inness notes: "By emphasizing that lesbians are beautiful, well dressed, and born to shop, . . . writers build up an image of lesbians as being 'just like us'—or, in other words, 'homosexual = heterosexual.'"[23]

Scanning a variety of magazines, it seems that the "homosexual = heterosexual" equation is now a common one. An article in *Seventeen* on lesbian teens describes one young woman, Amy, as a girl who's "gone out with guys before—she's even lost her

virginity"—and another, Tonya, as a young woman "who looks a little bit like Kelly Taylor on *90210*."[24] A *Maclean's* article on lesbian film-maker Patricia Rozema proclaims that she "looks more like a movie star than a moviemaker."[25] *Premiere* magazine characterizes Rozema's movie, *When Night Is Falling*, as "an unabashed lipstick-lesbian fest, with women who look like goddesses rolling around in crushed velvet."[26] *People* magazine, describing Melissa Etheridge and Julie Cypher, notes that while "Etheridge dresses down, eschewing even lipstick," Cypher sports "a nouveau-shag hairdo and dangling silver necklaces, embod[ying] California chic."[27]

Even *Redbook* has discovered the appeal of the femme lesbian, as evidenced in a recently published article entitled, "Why She *Had* to Leave the Husband She Adored." It tells the story of Lisa Anderson, a thirty-two-year-old white woman who, after five years of marriage, realized she was gay. Lisa now frequents what the magazine calls a "women's bar," where one can see "women of every physical description—from stunning cover-girl look-alikes wearing red lipstick and stiletto heels to plain-faced flannel-shirted types who could almost pass for men." Notably, the author assures us that Lisa is *not* one of those women who "could almost pass for men." In fact, according to the article, Lisa's "style" of lesbianism is representative of *most* lesbians: "[L]ike Anderson, who's wearing a sexy sweater and black pants, the majority [of lesbians] look like any ordinary woman you'd see at the mall on Saturday." To further assure the readers that Anderson is not one of "those" lesbians, the author relates a story about a hostile exchange between Anderson and a butch lesbian: "[Anderson] was amused when a very butch-looking lesbian accused her of not being 'gay enough' because she eschews a masculine, spiked-hair-and-leather look." This anecdote might ostensibly function as an illustration of how lesbian communities can be just as oppressive as straight communities when it comes to style, but in another way—to the mostly straight, middle-class readers of *Redbook*—it vilifies the butch lesbian as "oppressor," as the "bad" lesbian. Nevertheless, the story concludes with two hopeful messages for the readers: first, the author tells us, Anderson may be a lesbian *now*, but in the future—who knows: "Not that Anderson is ruling out the possibility of ever again being with a man physically." Second, Anderson promises that she won't procreate: "What won't be an option, she says, is having children. She knows there are plenty of same-sex couples raising kids, but she doesn't want to be among them. 'Kids are cruel, and I'd be afraid of the abuse my kid would take in a 'two moms' scenario."[28] This article might mark a step forward for *Redbook*, but just how big a step is it?

We might ask the same question about the visibility of Guinevere Turner, an actress best known in lesbian and independent film circles as the coproducer and one of the stars of the hit *Go Fish*, who is in many ways a lesbian media darling.[29] An article in *Premiere* magazine on lesbian filmmakers features an entire-page photograph of Turner (the other filmmakers only got about a quarter of the page each) and describes her as "the glamorous writer-star of 1994's lesbian-themed succès d'estime *Go Fish*" and a "bombshell in grunge." "With her Pre-Raphaelite beauty and the saucy look in her eye," the article gushes, "Turner was the *Go Fish* girl who really whetted Hollywood's appetite."[30] A 1997 *Newsweek* article entitled "Hollywood Lesbians: It's a 'Girl World'" calls Turner "gorgeous,"[31] while another in *Entertainment Weekly* introduces her as "beautiful cowriter-star Guinevere Turner."[32] And a recent issue of *Glamour* even gave Turner a guest column (in which she discusses lesbian commitment ceremonies). The essay is decently written, but it is accompanied—of course!—by a picture of Turner, dressed stylishly and smiling prettily for the camera. Above all, however, it is noted that Turner is adamant about admitting her lesbianism up front; in fact, she "feels honesty [about her lesbianism] hasn't hurt her mainstream chances. . . . It helps, says Turner, if a gay actress is good-looking in a traditional way. 'The world isn't ready for lesbian androgyny.'"[33] But the world is ready, it appears, for Turner's lesbianism. The discursive production of *this* lesbian body—as well as the others above-functions in the same way as the pictorial production does: it presents a lesbian body that is conventionally desirable, a body marked by glamour, beauty, and above all, *sameness* to mainstream images of heterosexual bodies.

Whiteness, Femininity, and the Lesbian Body

Alexis Jetter astutely observes that lesbians represented in the mainstream media "have a few key things

derson promises that she
: be an option, she says, is
here are plenty of same-
: she doesn't want to be
, and I'd be afraid of the
ı 'two moms' scenario."[28]
:ep forward for *Redbook*

ıestion about the visibility
ess best known in lesbian
: as the coproducer and
Fish, who is in many ways
article in *Premiere* maga-
features an entire-page
ther filmmakers only got
ach) and describes her as
f 1994's lesbian-themed
a "bombshell in grunge."
uty and the saucy look in
urner was the *Go Fish* girl
od's appetite."[30] A 1997
ollywood Lesbians: It's a
rgeous,"[31] while another
duces her as "beautiful
er."[32] And a recent issue
a guest column (in which
tment ceremonies). The
: it is accompanied—of
ıer, dressed stylishly and
a. Above all, however, it
ant about admitting her
ıe "feels honesty [about
· mainstream chances. . .
· actress is good-looking
ld isn't ready for lesbian
is ready, it appears, for
ursive production of *this*
thers above-functions in
oroduction does: it pres-
ıventionally desirable, a
uty, and above all, *same-*
ıeterosexual bodies.

ıd the Lesbian Body

es that lesbians repre-
ia "have a few key things

in common: They're white. They're middle class. And they seem more interested in makeup and clothes than in feminism. In short, they're femmes, or what the straight world prefers to call lipstick lesbians."[34] Indeed, one cannot help but notice that the images populating the cultural landscape are images of a *white* femme body. There are, in fact, only two recent mainstream representations of women of color: Whoopi Goldberg's lesbian nurturer, Jane, in *Boys on the Side* (1994), and Queen Latifah's butch lesbian, Geo, in *Set It Off* (1996). What is most striking about these representations is that they *don't* seem to conform to the mainstream narrative of lesbianism to which I have been pointing. After all, here are two nonwhite lesbian characters, neither of which could be called a femme. In this sense, it could be argued that Jane and Cleo stand as counterexamples, offering disruption to what I have been depicting as a homogeneous narrative of the feminine lesbian. But again, I think it is necessary to ask just how much of a disruption Jane and Cleo (and Goldberg and Latifah) really pose. The fact that they don't fit into the overall picture of the "lipstick lesbian" demands further consideration.

Whoopi Goldberg's *Boys on the Side* character, Jane, is an R&B singer who decides to leave her home in New York City and head out west. On her travels she is accompanied by two other women, the "whiter-than-white bread upper-middle-class straight woman"[35] Robin, played by Mary Louise Parker, and the fun-loving, straight, "white-trash" Holly, played by Drew Barrymore. Jane predictably falls for Robin, and although the love is unrequited, Jane nurses Robin through her illness and untimely death from AIDS. An inoffensive, if not innocuous, plot, and Goldberg's Jane seems to be a positive representation of lesbianism: she is tough, funny, and caring.

But still, there is something suspect about the character of Jane, something that highlights the conflation of femme-ness and whiteness in the images examined earlier. For example, although it is significant that Goldberg's character, unlike the many lesbians populating mainstream landscapes, is not conventionally feminine, it is also evident that Jane is set up as a contrast to the other two women in the film: the uptight, prissy Robin and the free-spirited, cute Holly (both of whom hook up with men over the course of the film). Goldberg's Jane is presumably neither the object of (straight) sexual desire for mainstream audiences (that's Drew Barrymore's role) nor a *satisfied* desiring subject within the film; as Raymond Murray puts it, "Whoopi Goldberg stars as a lesbian who just can't seem to get laid (or even receive a passionate kiss). . . . [P]oor Whoopi goes loveless and untouched."[36] Compared with the earlier (white) femme images of the *Newsweek* lesbians or the *Friends* brides, images that appear clean of homosexual residue but that still function within a heterosexual economy of desire, Jane simply doesn't fit. And isn't it noteworthy that one of the few exceptions to the "lipstick lesbian" rule is a Black woman?[37]

But what about Cleo, the butch lesbian played by Queen Latifah in the film *Set It Off*? After all, if Goldberg's Jane is troubling because she is an asexual mammy figure (playing nurse to an upper-class white woman), surely Latifah's Cleo, a lesbian who is both sexual *and* butch, can be read as a positive addition to the imagery that surrounds us. But here, too, I would question the meaning of this image in relation to the dozens of white femme bodies that populate the mainstream landscape. Considering the overwhelming homogeneity of these images, it seems apparent that mainstream representations of the lesbian body are "made" femme not simply by embodying femininity but also by embodying *white* femininity. Given this configuration of lesbianism, then, it comes as no surprise that one of the few butch lesbians to appear on this landscape is *Black*. And unlike Gina Gershon's Corky, the butch masculinity of Queen Latifah's Cleo is not tempered with any markers of femininity. Furthermore, although Cleo is a sexual lesbian, her sexuality differs from that of the white lesbian images I have examined thus far: presumably, the object of sexual desire for mainstream audiences is not Latifah's Cleo but instead is Jada Pinkett's Stony, Vivica Fox's Frankie, or, most obviously, Cleo's sexy femme lover.[38] Rather than standing out as an exception to the mainstream image of the white (hetero) sexualized femme lesbian, then, Cleo stands as her *foil*: the Black (homo)sexualized butch lesbian. (And, predictably, Cleo lives in the L.A. projects and leads a working-class existence cleaning offices—hence her desire to rob several banks.) The characters of Jane and Cleo, then, are born from the same mainstream edict: the femme body is necessarily a white body, so a Black

lesbian cannot be a femme. What she can be, however, is an amalgam of mythologies about Black women.

Finally, it is crucial to consider these images of Black lesbianism in relation to the larger context to which they belong—that is, to remember once again that in a world of images, the boundaries between the "reel" and the "real" are not stable; that, as in the case of Gina Gershon, there is a slippage between the characters that the actresses play and the actresses themselves, between their on-screen and off-screen lives. Mainstream audiences might not have a problem seeing Whoopi Goldberg as lesbian Jane not only because Jane plays into the mythology of the Black woman as the sexless mammy but also because Goldberg's "real-life" persona is a heterosexual woman. In other words, even though Goldberg plays lesbian Celie in *The Color Purple* or lesbian Jane on screen, audiences know that the "real" Whoopi Goldberg is definitely not a lesbian—from Ted Danson to Frank Langella, she is a woman who loves men.

Is Queen Latifah, too, a woman who loves men? Despite ongoing rumors that she is a lesbian, Latifah's not telling, one way or the other. Or *is* she, albeit indirectly? Take, for example, a recent issue of *Essence*, where Latifah appears both on the cover and inside the magazine dressed in sexy, feminine lingerie. Can these images be read as the emergence of a Black femme lesbian among the many white femmes inhabiting cultural landscapes? According to the article, no. The opening paragraph notifies the readers: "Those of you ready to skim ahead looking for answers to the sexuality question need not bother."[39] Similarly, in a 1998 interview in *The Source: The Magazine of Hip-Hop Music, Culture and Politics* (advertised on the cover as "QUEEN LATIFAH EXHALES: THE TRUTH ABOUT HER HOLLYWOOD LIFE . . . AND THOSE DAMN GAY RUMORS"), Latifah insists: "I don't have any problems with my sexuality, whatever you wanna think I am. I'll never answer the question. I'd rather have you die wanting to know." Although this statement and the statement introducing the *Essence* article might seem like admirable attempts to throw into question society's tendency to label according to sexual preferences, her later comments about the infamous "kiss" in *Set It Off* indicate an increasing anxiety on her part, a desire to align herself with the heterosexual: "That scene in *Set It Off* where I kissed that girl? I've never watched it. I mean Dana [Latifah's real name] is not comfortable watching Dana doing stuff like that. What I do from my point of view is one thing, but seeing it is another thing. So I've never actually watched that scene, every time it comes I know it and I turn my head . . . . I tried to get out of it . . . . I didn't think it was that necessary, my mother didn't think it was that necessary, but this guy's directing the movie and he's got the last call."[40] Latifah may have "kissed that girl" *on* screen, but *off* screen, she makes it clear that someone else dictated the expression of lesbian desire.

Why the Femme?

I have spent some time now pointing to the various ways that lesbian bodies are coded in mainstream culture—coded materially, spatially, discursively, and racially. What I hope to have pointed to is the *excess* of such coding. What, then, are these representations effecting in culture at large? The answer to this question is by no means simple; certainly any image can have different and varying effects on different people. By way of response, however, I want to point out some other cultural ideas that belong to the mainstream imagination, using them to suggest why the femme is so overrepresented. Our starting point is with the obvious: within mainstream culture, the femme is not really considered a lesbian. A hundred years ago, Havelock Ellis declared that "the principle character of sexually inverted woman is a certain degree of masculinity"; femme or feminine lesbians he deemed "pseudohomosexuals."[41] Diane Hamer elaborates on this preconception: "Always, it has been the butch woman who is constructed as the authentic lesbian; rarely is the femme seen as such. Traditionally, the femme has been constructed as essentially feminine and heterosexual; her lesbianism at most a passing phase, resulting from seduction by a predatory butch or a temporary retreat from men after some damaging experience."[42] The femme, in other words, is representable not only because she is desirable but also because she is perceived as "inauthentic."

We might also note that the feminine (or feminized) lesbian bodies we see are usually shown alone (e.g., Ellen's *Time* cover), coupled with another conventionally feminine lesbian (e.g., Melissa and Julie,

the *Friends* brides)
man (e.g., *Chasing*
stream representati
bian with a butch
configurations of
to undo the "lesbi
the subject for mai
explicating Teresa
bian desire, points
writing that "as a fe
be invisible."[43] Wit
femme's lesbianisn
never appears in
another more imp
ing" lesbians are th
culture? Mainstrea
hand and taking ba
positive representa
it chooses as "rep
butch that would
mainstream audie
bian, or, as Rosann
ence."[44] Thus, in t
culture (re)present
standing invisibility

The Invisible Bu Body

I go back, now, to
but present one t
the cultural landsc
representation, wh
evidence, it's clear
rarely seen. Why?
the butch, unlike t
relative invisibility
with her perceived
points out that but
ping girl, the one
mainstream hatred
. . . She is 'mannis
same time she is
has to be ugly—in
rie Inness, nicely
"Butches fail to fu
is attractive and s

nean Dana [Latifah's real
tching Dana doing stuff
oint of view is one thing,
g. So I've never actually
ne it comes I know it and
get out of it . . . . I didn't
ny mother didn't think it
guy's directing the movie
Latifah may have "kissed
creen, she makes it clear
he expression of lesbian

/ pointing to the various
e coded in mainstream
patially, discursively, and
e pointed to is the *excess*
are these representations
The answer to this ques-
certainly any image can
fects on different people.
; I want to point out some
long to the mainstream
suggest why the femme
starting point is with the
culture, the femme is
an. A hundred years ago,
"the principle character
is a certain degree of
nine lesbians he deemed
ane Hamer elaborates
ays, it has been the butch
as the authentic lesbian;
s such. Traditionally, the
d as essentially feminine
anism at most a passing
ion by a predatory butch
men after some damag-
ne, in other words, is rep-
she is desirable but also
"inauthentic."
it the feminine (or femi-
are usually shown alone
upled with another con-
(e.g., Melissa and Julie,

the *Friends* brides), or—tellingly, perhaps?—with a man (e.g., *Chasing Amy*). Virtually none of the mainstream representations pairs a femme or feminine lesbian with a butch or masculine lesbian. Perhaps the configurations of single and coupled femmes work to undo the "lesbian" signifier and to de-lesbianize the subject for mainstream audiences. Biddy Martin, explicating Teresa de Lauretis's arguments about lesbian desire, points out this quandary for the femme, writing that "as a femme alone, her lesbianism would be invisible."[43] Without the signifier of the butch, the femme's lesbianism disappears, or, more accurately, never appears in the first place. Is this, perhaps, another more important reason why "femme-looking" lesbians are the most represented in mainstream culture? Mainstream culture is thus giving with one hand and taking back with another: it makes room for positive representations of lesbianism, but the lesbian it chooses as "representative," decoupled from the butch that would more clearly signify lesbianism for mainstream audiences, in effect becomes a nonlesbian, or, as Rosanne Kennedy puts it, an "absent presence."[44] Thus, in the same moment that mainstream culture (re)presents the lesbian, challenging her long-standing invisibility, it reinscribes that very invisibility.

The Invisible Butch, or the Unrepresentable Body

I go back, now, to the question that's been a silent but present one throughout most of this article. On the cultural landscape of lesbianism, in the realm of representation, where is the butch? Given the above evidence, it's clear that she remains on the margins, rarely seen. Why? Perhaps most obviously because the butch, unlike the femme, is *not* consumable; her relative invisibility on the cultural landscape has to do with her perceived (un)attractiveness. Sue O'Sullivan points out that butch is "the caricature lesbian whipping girl, the one who serves as the repository of mainstream hatred and fear of feminism's 'excesses'. . . . She is 'mannish' but not at all stylish and at the same time she is definitely a woman. Therefore she has to be ugly—in other words, butch."[45] Or, as Sherrie Inness, nicely encapsulating this point, maintains: "Butches fail to fulfill heterosexual ideas about what is attractive and sexually appealing in women."[46] In other words, the butch, a woman marked more by conventional masculine characteristics than feminine ones, is considered "ugly." And given the configurations of our mainstream cultural landscape, there is little room for those judged unattractive. In fact, such supposed unattractiveness is an affront to an image-based culture; as O'Sullivan contends, "the so-called loony, ugly (read not stereotypically feminine) lesbian, increasingly designated as an arbiter of political correctness, remains a figure for derision and hatred."[47]

But perhaps such "derision and hatred" toward the butch, and her invisibility on the mainstream cultural landscape, is not so simply explained. Another characteristic attributed to the butch that conceivably marks her as unrepresentable is her socioeconomic status. In *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America*, Lillian Faderman points out that from the 1920s through 1960s, the butch-femme pair was usually associated with the working class.[48] Indeed, one need only read Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* to get an idea of the type of blue-collar jobs the "stone butches" of the 1950s and 1960s held, working primarily on docks and in factories.[49] I would assert that this connection between the butch and her working-class status further contributes to her mainstream undesirability. Look for a moment at the following description of butch-femme relations, as described in a 1993 article in *New York* magazine:

> "It was very different when I came out in Texas," says Jean Sidebottom, the editor and publisher of *Sappho's Isle*, the tri-state lesbian newspaper. "That bull-dyke world was very much the scene I came out into. The first lesbian bar I ever walked into, in Houston, was owned by a woman called Papa Bear. She was mildly obese, with short-cropped, masculine, stone-butch hair. She smoked cigars and wore T-shirts and blue-jeans—she had a key chain on her belt loop and a knife in her boot. Her girlfriend was a stripper. There was a certain sleaziness associated with it that I somehow could never accept. *It gave you a feeling of being less than a real person.*"[50]
>
> (Emphasis mine.)

The lesbian Sidebottom describes is a butch, coded so with her "short-cropped, masculine, stone-butch

hair" and her clothes—jeans, boots, T-shirt. There are no markers of "normality" on Papa Bear; she is not only masculine, she is also masculine and *undesirable* ("mildly obese"). On James Dean, T-shirts, blue jeans, and the accessories might be sexy. On Papa Bear, these attributes contribute to a caricature of the bull dyke and her hypermasculinity, a caricature that seems to be presented as simultaneously humorous and loathsome. Couple this with the fact that the butch's girlfriend is a stripper, and the entire image—and, by extension, the entire *body* of the butch—is deemed sleazy. Finally, the last line of the quote—"it gave you a feeling of being less than a real person"—leaves me wondering: what is "it?" What *specifically* leaves Sidebottom feeling so unlike a "real person"? One reading, of course, might be that she felt uncomfortable trying to fit into butch-femme codes of the 1950s and 1960s. However, given the description that precedes this statement, I want to point to another reading: the connection between "being less than a real person" and being a butch (or, more specifically here, a bull dyke). For even if it was the whole scene that made Sidebottom feel uncomfortable, in this passage it is Papa Bear who represents the source of not only discomfort but also "sleaziness." The butch here is presented as working class, masculine, and, above all, distasteful. Given these characteristics, *this* lesbian, clearly, is *not* palatable in any way. And the ways in which class marks the butch—considerably different from the ways class marks the upwardly mobile femmes or feminine lesbians discussed earlier—only contributes to her unrepresentability.

A more recent example of this unrepresentability occurs in the *Newsweek* article by Corie Brown, "Hollywood Lesbians: It's a 'Girl World,'" in which the author details how "Gay women in showbiz are coming out and succeeding as never before." To support the claim that Hollywood is now a "Girl World," Brown cites the testimony of numerous Hollywood players—independent producers, agents, activists, actresses—all of whom attest to the changing attitudes and mores in Tinseltown. Yet, as Brown notes, the members of the "Girl World" do not all run in the same circles: "There are really two thriving but separate lesbian worlds in Hollywood: the lipstick lesbians in the executive offices and the tool-belt crowd that competes in the macho world of gaffers, grips, and carpenters on movie and television sets." Brown then gives a voice to one of the members of the "macho world": "'I'm in a field that is the last stand of the macho man,' says Amazon, as this 27-year-old grip calls herself. 'I'm a lesbian woman. I'm intimidating.'"[51] Given the media's trend for ignoring the butch, it is notable that the working-class lesbians—the "tool-belt crowd," as Brown calls them—are mentioned at all. So is one other thing: the fact that accompanying this article are four large pictures of Hollywood lesbians: Guin Turner, Chastity Bono, Amanda Bearse, and Nina Jacobson, a production executive. To which world do they belong?

In considering this question of where the butch resides on mainstream cultural landscapes, I want to begin by teasing out some of the implications of the first argument I presented above: that the butch's perceived unattractiveness renders her invisible in an image-based culture. We should note that there is a converse of this equation: at the same time that culture might render the butch invisible because she is supposedly unpleasing to the eye, this very same quality makes her highly *visible*, or noticeable, in the real world. Mainstream media employ the femme body, I have argued, because the femme can be "de-lesbianized"; she is at once marked a lesbian and not a lesbian. The butch body, on the other hand, cannot be "de-lesbianized"; because her body is already and always marked as lesbian, she is *more* visible than the femme—and thus, if represented, more "lesbian" than the femme.

There is one other point that I think important to note: in the terms of mainstream, phallocentric culture, the butch body is not a "useful" body. At the core of her unrepresentability is her masculinity, "the chief identifying trait of the butch." And, as Sherrie Inness explains: "by claiming masculine identifiers for her own use, the butch sets herself apart from the 'average' heterosexual woman by failing to present herself as traditionally feminine in order to appeal to the male gaze."[52] This point is best made by turning to the concepts of desire and identification in order to examine the ways in which the butch body accommodates neither desire nor identification for mainstream audiences. As I have pointed out earlier, the body of a femme lesbian—say, the lesbians on the cover of *Newsweek*—is one that is consumable: straight women can look for the markers on these women's bodies that

Brown then gives a voice
e "macho world": "'I'm in
of the macho man,' says
grip calls herself. 'I'm a
ing.'"[51] Given the media's
t is notable that the work-
l-belt crowd," as Brown
t all. So is one other thing:
this article are four large
ns: Guin Turner, Chastity
Nina Jacobson, a produc-
ld do they belong?
tion of where the butch
ural landscapes, I want
e of the implications of
d above: that the butch's
renders her invisible in
should note that there
n: at the same time that
ch invisible because she
the eye, this very same
ble, or noticeable, in the
dia employ the femme
the femme can be "de-
arked a lesbian and not
n the other hand, cannot
her body is already and
e is *more* visible than the
ited, more "lesbian" than

t that I think important
ainstream, phallocentric
t a "useful" body. At the
y is her masculinity, "the
butch." And, as Sherrie
ng masculine identifiers
s herself apart from the
n by failing to present
ne in order to appeal to
best made by turning to
dentification in order to
e butch body accommo-
ification for mainstream
out earlier, the body of
sbians on the cover of
umable: straight women
ese women's bodies that

"match" their own, thus identifying with the women's *bodies*, their *images*. Straight men can "imagine" away the couple's lesbianism and thus desire them. But the butch body is incapable of meeting these criteria: more likely than not, straight women will not *identify* with the butch—she looks too much like a man and thus they might *desire* her (a different story altogether). By contrast, more likely than not, straight men will not *desire* the butch, for, as Inness points out, the butch does not present herself as the object of the male gaze—and in defying such representation, she is both a challenge and a threat to straight men. But there is one other possibility: these men might *identify* with the butch lesbian in her masculinity—and what does it mean for a straight man to identify with a butch lesbian?

The butch is unrepresentable, then, because of her masculinity; as Judith Roof asserts, "Admitting the possibility that a woman can be a man, that the traits attributed to masculinity are not exclusively masculine, and perceiving lesbians as masculine reveals the threat to masculine supremacy and to a heterosexual system lesbians potentially pose."[53] The butch has the capacity to disrupt the notion that masculinity is an inherently male attribute: the butch can be as good a man as any man is. But herein lies the quandary for her: she is at once present in mainstream imagination, the lesbian who appears in the straight mind's eye when lesbianism is mentioned, and the lesbian who is so reviled that she is unrepresentable. As the unrepresented signifier of lesbianism, the butch, even in her relative invisibility, inhabits an increasingly precarious place in mainstream culture: for if the femme body is now the *de facto* lesbian body in mainstream representation, at what point will this representation replace the signifier? In other words, at what point will the "real"—that is, the represented (femme) image—replace the "imaginary" (butch) one? And if such a displacement does occur—if the femme, by virtue of her widespread presence on cultural landscapes, becomes the "new" imaginary signifier of lesbianism—where does that leave the butch? Inness thus rightly compares the butch with Ellison's Invisible Man, contending that "the butch is simultaneously the most visible and least visible member of society. She is visible because she stands out as an 'abnormal' woman who does not adhere to society's dictates about 'correct' femininity. She is invisible for exactly the same reason. Twisted by attempts to fit her into sanctioned conceptual categories, she becomes a distorted figure, the Other, the nonperson."[54] In the cultural landscape of lesbianism, then, the body of the butch remains outside the frame—present, to be sure, but not in the picture.

Conclusion

In its initial stages, this project began as an exploration of cultural representations of the butch body in the mainstream media. It ended, as you can see, as something quite different, because in my search for mainstream representations of the butch, I found almost none. This proves my point all the more: the butch is too dangerous, too loaded a figure to be represented. What I did discover is what I have presented here: the fact that there is, indeed, an increased amount of lesbian representation but a representation marked by a striking homogeneity, a certain safeness. What we are left with, then, is a landscape of lesbianism that is at once incredibly full and altogether empty. Although the 1990s may be perceived as a decade in love with lesbianism, we would do well to consider the ways that this love, channeled through commodification and consumerism, through identification and desire, helps to determine not only who gets seen but what it means to be seen after all.

Notes

I would like to express my gratitude to Virginia Blum for her help and encouragement in writing this article, as well as for her invaluable suggestions for revision. I would also like to thank Susan Bordo, Julie Cary, David Magill, Mary Hall, Valerie Johnson, and especially Melanie Anderson for reading subsequent drafts of this article. Finally, I am grateful to the reviewers of *Feminist Studies* for raising important questions about my article and thus for helping me to develop and refine my work.

1. I use the term "luscious lesbians" to refer to a kind of lesbian representation that is directed at and meant primarily for a straight male audience—one that typically appears in straight porn films. As Michael Segell, in "Two Girls for Every Boy," explains: "All men—straight ones, anyway—are aroused by the idea of two women having sex with one another. . . . Male fascination with female

coupling is so universal, in fact, that some researchers consider the erotic response to it a reliable indicator of heterosexuality." See Michael Segell, "Two Girls for Every Boy," *Esquire*, January 1997, 31.

2. Ann Northrop, quoted in Alexis Jetter, "Goodbye to the Last Taboo," *Vogue*, July 1993, 86.
3. I want to clarify my point here: I do not believe that the femme is completely incapable of challenging hegemonic discourses about lesbianism; in many ways, she can shatter stereotypes and pose a threat to heterosexual mainstream audiences. For discussions of the subversive potential of the femme, see Judith Roof, *A Lure of Knowledge: Lesbian Sexuality and Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 244–54; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 122–24; Joan Nestle, "Flamboyance and Fortitude: An Introduction," in *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader*, ed. Joan Nestle (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1992), 13–20; and Biddy Martin, "Sexualities without Genders and Other Queer Utopias," in *Femininity Played Straight: The Significance of Being Lesbian* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 71–94. Although I find these arguments quite compelling (particularly as they take issue with the invisibility of the femme within lesbian feminist theoretical circles), at the same time I question whether the femme in *popular culture*—in movies, on television, in magazines—loses her potential for disruption and subversion.
4. Arlene Stein, quoted in Jetter, 92.
5. For further discussion of butch-femme relationships in the 1950s and 1960s, see Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 159–87.
6. Michelle Fisher, "Butch Nouveau," *Utne Reader*, July/August 1996, 27.
7. Jeanie Kasindorf, "Lesbian Chic: The Bold, Brave New World of Gay Women," *New York*, 10 May 1993, 34.
8. Lisa Walker, "How to Recognize a Lesbian: The Cultural Politics of Looking Like What You Are," *Signs* 18 (summer 1993): 878–79.
9. Susan Bordo, "'Material Girl': The Effacements of Postmodern Culture," in *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 275.
10. The image accompanying this interview is of a rather feminine-looking Martina: she is wearing what appears to be a bejeweled gown (the photo shows her from the waist up only) and gold hoop earrings, and her shoulder-length hair is attractively styled. Given the readership of the magazine, the reasons for this feminization of Martina are obvious. I am not suggesting, however, that this photo negates the role that Martina plays as an out lesbian. As Diane Hamer points out in her essay, "Netting the Press: Playing with Martina" (in *The Good, the Bad, and the Gorgeous: Popular Culture's Romance with Lesbianism*, ed. Diane Hamer and Belinda Budge [London: Pandora, 1994], 57–77), Navratilova was *the* representative lesbian of the 1980s, an unfriendly and judgmental decade. And although Navratilova continues to be quite visible as a political activist, I would assert that her presence on the landscapes of popular culture is rather limited.
11. Elise Harris, "Women in Love," *Mademoiselle*, March 1993, 180.
12. Jetter, 86.
13. Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 4.
14. Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1987).
15. Kasindorf, 33–34.
16. David Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 373.
17. Charles Gandee, "Cross-Dressing for Success," *Vogue*, July 1997, 148.
18. Guinevere Turner, "'I, Melanie, Take You, Mary . . .,'" *Glamour*, February 1997, 90.
19. A. J. Jacobs, "Out?" *Entertainment Weekly*, 4 Oct. 1996, 22.
20. As Richard Dyer, in his book, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (London: British Film Institute, 1986), points out, "Star images are always extensive, multimedia, intertextual" (3).
21. David Ansen, "Boy Meets Lesbian," *Newsweek*, 7 Apr. 1997, 73.
22. Kasindorf, 33.
23. Sherrie Inness, *The Lesbian Menace: Ideology, Identity, and the Representation of Lesbian Life* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 67.
24. Sadie Van Gelder, "It's Who I Am," *Seventeen*, November 1996, 142.
25. Brian D. Johnson, "Sex and the Sacred Girl," *Maclean's*, 5 May 1995, 93.
26. Rachel Abramowitz, "Girl Gets Girl," *Premiere*, February 1996, 84.
27. Peter Castro and John Griffiths, "A House in Harmony," *People*, 5 Sept. 1994, 58.
28. Ronnie Polaneczky, "Why She *Had* to Leave the Husband She Adored," *Redbook*, July 1997, 86, 106.
29. Even though *Go Fish* is one of the better-known lesbian movies of the 1990s, I do not think that it could be called either a mainstream film or a mainstream representation of lesbianism, and thus I do not offer a reading of the movie itself. Although the film does present several characters who could be considered butch (Ely and

Daria, for examp
tisement of the f
appeal for those
would argue, is th
promise yet anotl

30. Abramowitz, 81,
31. Corie Brown, "H
Newsweek, 14 Ap
32. Allison Gaines, "
ment Weekly, 28 N
33. Brown, 69.
34. Jetter, 88. I want
third point, that r
ested in makeup
sure, the visible
bian, divorced fr
resentations of
image of the 197
her with the 199
way to achieve tl
the lesbian and h
"fashion" and its
bian feminism is
is beyond the sc
there are severa
issue; see, for e
Perry, "Skirting th
Feminist Review 3
"Girls Who Kiss
Bad, and the Gor
ity Lesbianism,"
ed. Henry Abelo
Halperin (New
especially Arlene
Go? Style Wars a
ture: Gay, Lesbia
ed. Corey K. Cre
Duke University

35. Raymond Murra
of Gay and Lesb
1996), 337.
36. Ibid.
37. In *Segregated S*

Daria, for example), it is marketed through the advertisement of the film's femme starlet, Guin Turner. The appeal for those people browsing at the video store, I would argue, is the picture on the box, one that seems to promise yet another story of "luscious lesbians."

30. Abramowitz, 81, 95.
31. Corie Brown, "Hollywood Lesbians: It's a 'Girl World,'" *Newsweek*, 14 Apr. 1997, 69.
32. Allison Gaines, "'Chasing' Down the Rumors," *Entertainment Weekly*, 28 Nov. 1997, 87.
33. Brown, 69.
34. Jetter, 88. I want to pause here to concur with Jetter's third point, that mainstream lesbians "seem more interested in makeup and clothes than in feminism." To be sure, the visible lesbian is typically a depoliticized lesbian, divorced from her feminist roots. If current representations of the lesbian are trying to shatter the image of the 1970s' "ugly militant lesbian" by replacing her with the 1990s' "lipstick lesbian," there's no better way to achieve this goal than to sever the ties between the lesbian and her politics. The question of "style" or "fashion" and its effects on the political efficacy of lesbian feminism is one of ongoing concern. Although it is beyond the scope of my article to enter this debate, there are several excellent essays which address this issue; see, for example, Inge Blackman and Kathryn Perry, "Skirting the Issue: Lesbian Fashion for the 1990s," *Feminist Review* 34 (spring 1990): 67–78; Sue O'Sullivan, "Girls Who Kiss Girls and Who Cares?" in *The Good, the Bad, and the Gorgeous*, 78–94; 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; and especially Arlene Stein, "All Dressed Up but No Place to Go? Style Wars and the New Lesbianism," in *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Essays on Popular Culture*, ed. Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 476–83.
35. Raymond Murray, *Images in the Dark: An Encyclopedia of Gay and Lesbian Film and Video* (New York: Plume, 1996), 337.
36. Ibid.
37. In *Segregated Sisterhood: Racism and the Politics of American Feminism* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), Nancie Caraway points out: "Black women historically have been powerless to displace the patriarchy's monopolization of the negative imagery which has cast them variously as depraved sexual temptresses, castrating matriarchs, breeders, or sexless, deferential mammies" (78)—in other words, as excluded from the realm of "true" womanhood, of *femininity*. For further reading on the mythologies of Black womanhood, see bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981), and *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992); and Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
38. It is significant that Cleo's femme lover is a Black woman with blonde hair—blondeness that may well function to "whiten" her. For an incisive reading of the connection between "blonde ambition" and whiteness, see bell hooks's "Madonna: Plantation Mistress or Soul Sister?" in *Black Looks*, 157–64.
39. Joan Morgan, "The Queen of Screen: Latifah Goes to the Movies," *Essence*, January 1998, 70.
40. Amy Linden, "From Here to Royalty," *The Source: The Magazine of Hip-Hop Music, Culture, and Politics*, August 1998, 157, 158.
41. Havelock Ellis, quoted in Greenberg, 382.
42. Hamer, 70–71.
43. Martin, 86.
44. Rosanne Kennedy, "The Gorgeous Lesbian in LA Law: The Present Absence?" in *The Good, the Bad, and the Gorgeous*, 141.
45. O'Sullivan, 85.
46. Inness, 200.
47. O'Sullivan, 79.
48. Faderman, 179–81.
49. Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Firebrand Books, 1993).
50. Kasindorf, 34.
51. Brown, 68, 69.
52. Inness, 203, 188.
53. Roof, 248.
54. Inness, 204.