

Lesbian rule: a mason's rule made of lead, which could be bent to fit the curves of a molding (Aristotle, *Eth. Nic.* v. x. 7); hence, *fig.*, a principle of judgment that is pliant and accommodating. — *Oxford English Dictionary*

In college and in the years just after, I frequented a lesbian bar called Hepburn's. Named obviously after Katharine, the bar was decorated with production-still enlargements of Hepburn's face. Teeny pads of lavender paper, with a discreet *Hepburn's* across the top, sat in old-fashioned glasses alongside miniature pencils, ready for the exchange of phone numbers and note-taking. (On reflection it appears that I did more of the latter than the former.) On one of those pads, about ten years ago, I wrote "Sylvia Scarlett. Why lesbian?"

Most of the photographs in that bar featured Hepburn in her famous cross-dressing role in the 1935 film *Sylvia Scarlett*, directed by the gay and extraordinary George Cukor. With hair slicked back and shirt collar framing her young patrician face, Hepburn's image as a dashing boy clearly excited a lesbian reading, set *lesbian* somehow reverberating. Hepburn's — the bar — borrowed the image and also those excitations, that indeterminate allure, for its own. In some ways, it made perfect sense: the bar was in Philadelphia, a city identified with Hepburn not only through a later George Cukor film in which she starred, *The Philadelphia Story* (1940), but also through Hepburn's time spent near Philadelphia at Bryn Mawr College, as I was. Like other Cukor films and indeed like other films in which women disguised themselves as boys or men, *Sylvia Scarlett* offered a beautiful orchestration of inversion, a playful romp along the lines of gender and sexual difference, with the bonus attractions of chiseled stars and high production values. *Sylvia Scarlett*, like the bar itself, nestles into what Judith Mayne reminds us is a liminal space, oscillating between visibility and invisibility, wherein we find ourselves secretly knowing that to which others remain oblivious.<sup>1</sup>



Figure 1. Katharine Hepburn, dressed as a young boy for her role in *Sylvia Scarlett*, is caught by a mirror next to costar Cary Grant. Gay director George Cukor leans in. Courtesy of Photofest.

Call it what you will, “gaydar,” recognition, or identification remains one of the most elusive, and therefore provocative, procedures of modern queer life. Founded on vision, but suggesting, through the reference to radar, something that flies beneath the visible or the screen, this procedure nonetheless falters before the demands of visual evidence. There is, in other words, no final ground upon which one can determine why that photograph of Katharine Hepburn signifies lesbian, why a cross-dressing Hollywood fantasy such as *Sylvia Scarlett*, or more famously in lesbian theory, Garbo’s *Queen Christina*, edges into a collective consciousness as a “lesbian” narrative.<sup>2</sup> While an image or a film may rely on historical cues or, defying the heavy hands of film censors, hint at what some might call a lesbian subtext, there remains no ultimate certainty with which one can pronounce the content of that image or film lesbian. Instead, something in a context allows viewers to produce a ground for their readings, to make an image or narrative work as “lesbian” even, sometimes, against the will of those who created it. The lesbian bar called Hepburn’s, in fact, took a name that quite literally belongs to someone else and someone quite singular, borrowing her image and setting into motion a set of vibrations. About this I then had one question that pressed ultimately into priority: what did Katharine Hepburn *herself* think of the fact that a bunch of Philadelphia lesbians had made her proper name into a sustaining configuration of lesbian life, all based on a wacky film role a half-century earlier? Had she some insight, from within the belly of the beast that is moviemaking, into her own image, persona, allure? How did she understand her own name as a commodity, now pirated by a lesbian bar?

I asked her. In a carefully worded but altogether too long letter, I asked her whether she was interested in the mobility of that role, these processes of detachment and appropriation in the name and cause of lesbian visibility and community. Her response, characteristically Hepburn, is the impetus for this book. I quote it in full and thank her for the kindness of a reply:

Dear Amy Villarejo,

I’m sorry—I can’t answer those questions—I’m really too busy to understand why anyone would want them answered—Good Luck—

A double dismissal: not only is *she* too busy to answer my questions, but she’s too busy to understand why *anyone* (read, in her right mind) would want them answered! The central terms of the argument of *Lesbian Rule* take precisely this “anyone” as my interlocutor. I hope to begin to con-



Figure 2. Boyish Katharine Hepburn, in a promotional still for *Sylvia Scarlett*. Courtesy of Photofest.

vince such an “anyone” by the end of this book that the first question we should ask about visibility, about making lesbians appear, is this: at what cost?

### Lesbian Rule

This book takes *lesbian* as a modifier, not as a noun but as an adjective, examining three conceivably lesbian modifications of a noun’s province: lesbian people, lesbian places, and lesbian things. I like that dimension of rote involved in the grammatical breakdown of a noun, the commonplace and commonsensical repetition of people, place, and thing modified with a lesbian inflection or provenance; for that reason, my emphasis is less on other categories that would be equally descriptive of the book’s focus: lesbian texts, for example, or lesbian scenes, or lesbian commodi-

ties. The book is, throughout, centrally concerned with the politics of lesbian appearance; it takes as its predominant objects of analysis non-fiction, rather than narrative, films. As a study of the politics of lesbian appearance, it sits at the intersection of queer theory, feminist theory, cinema studies, and cultural studies, but it likely straddles these domains uncomfortably, insofar as each brings its own history, questions, and paradigms.

As the epigraph indicates, the phrase *lesbian rule* appears in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* to describe, by figuration, an ethical principle, a principle of pliancy in judgment. Between the thing itself, the mason's rule, and the figurative meaning, elasticity in judgment, there is a material connection: the malleable nature of lead, which can be bent. By contrast, the noun *lesbian* is currently used to reference two states of being between which there is no material connection, except, of course, that being who is the referent of the term. The word attempts to manage two meanings: both the ontological state of simply being a lesbian, whatever that might come to mean, and an ethicopolitical state wherein lesbian designates something like a progressive, emancipatory, or liberatory politics. It cannot manage them both entirely successfully. When lesbian becomes (an) image, it fares even less well at containing the slip-pages between meanings.

Even when two words exist to designate the ontological domain and the related ethicopolitical one, such as *woman* and *feminist*, there are no firm grounds for deriving the latter from the former. In two examples from different idioms with significantly consonant aims, both Denise Riley and Judith Butler have urged us to reconsider the priority of ontology, opening *woman* to an expressive, expansive, and permanently unbounded collectivity and thereby understanding *feminist* as an itinerary determined genealogically rather than programmatically.<sup>3</sup> In the wake of their work, scholars have come to think that there is no confident way of predicting *how* gender will be consolidated in the service of regulatory mechanisms in any given place or moment. What is certain is that it *will*, and, further, that it will do so vociferously to uphold the force of compulsory heterosexuality. Enmeshed in the social relations produced and reproduced through capitalist exploitation, themselves racialized and split according to the international division of labor, gender is a lived experience understood only by cleaving it from a larger matrix. Severing gender from that matrix allows for the possibility of understanding its particularity, and yet the context—what a poststructuralist might call the text

in the general sense—makes the abstraction possible. To understand the relationship between *woman* and *feminist*, therefore, is to grapple with the contradictory and uneven, material and psychic, deployment of gender binarism in the service of heteronormativity, and in the perpetuation of distinct social relations.

Despite the imbrication of the name *woman* with the ethicopolitical projects—for there are many—of feminism, feminist theory relies on the rigorous separation of these two categories, even if that separation suspends or displaces the ontological question of what a woman is. For one of the central and necessary preoccupations of feminist inquiry is, of course, the disjunction between woman and feminist: why are all women *not* feminists? Why do some women not endorse the very political program that would seek to redress or undo their own repression? The measure of that distance between woman and feminist propels, for example, Marxist feminist inquiry into material, historical, and ideological explanations for the disjunction, and psychoanalytic feminist inquiry into the mechanisms of desire and power that would explain the reproduction of subordination to a patriarchal law. The noncoincidence of the category and the political program similarly acts as the motor for the radical deconstruction, decentering, historicization, or suspension of both terms, *woman* and *feminist*.

Notwithstanding the very real question—set in motion by Monique Wittig—of whether lesbians are women, and the further question of what might or ought to be the relationship between the study of gender and the study of sexuality, I here am isolating a relationship of analogy: how are we to mark, much less measure, a disjunction between ontology and politics in the case of *lesbian*, in the absence of a separate word for each position? When or why do we need to do so? The bulk of this book is devoted to the argument that when lesbian appears, her appearance functions as a substitute or as a cover for the very distinction I think we need collectively to make between who or what we *are* (into what we are inserted) and what we want to *become* (how we may change that which we confront). Far from functioning simply as a liberating symbol, a positive image, or an object of desire, I argue that lesbian appearance simultaneously conceals the very relationship between sexual difference and social relations that would allow us to generate a politics of that difference. The demand to make lesbians visible, whether as ammunition for anti-homophobic campaigns or as figures for identification, renders lesbian

static, makes lesbian into (an) image, and forestalls any examination of lesbian within context.

*Lesbian Rule*, therefore, seeks to restore that context. I seek to understand what happens in the production and circulation of lesbian—not to claim that lesbian encodes some other master narrative but to open lesbian to a dense and uneven complex of perception and expression, labor and production, consumption and reception, bodily and sexual practices, habits of mind and reading, class differentiations and racialized positions, industrial effects, national locations, movement and stasis, and hence organizations of time and space. In order to show how such an opening takes place, and in order to explain what kinds of texts best facilitate such an opening, I turn to several initial definitional, contextual, and methodological issues raised by such a study: first, the significance of the terms I have chosen for my title—lesbian, cultural criticism, value, and desire—then two larger paradoxes on which the study of lesbian here turns.

#### Terminology: Lesbian, Value, Desire

If the term *lesbian* is in its final hours, slowly to be overtaken by the term *queer*, let this book then stand as an elegy to it. But I suspect for several reasons that its days, even perhaps its years, are not yet numbered. First, it has crept into national culture and commodity culture. Lesbian murderers, lesbian chic, lesbian books, lesbian videos, lesbian cruises, lesbian s/m, lesbian erotica, lesbian comedians, lesbian athletes, lesbian photographs, and lesbian jewelry: all of these sustain existences beyond the confines of subcultural definition and most certainly beyond the restricted borders of academic scrutiny. They are available, and they circulate, as Lisa Duggan has shown beautifully by way of example in her historical investigation of the lesbian love-murder story.<sup>4</sup> While *lesbian* is sometimes subsumed by the term *queer* or coupled with the term *gay*, within the logic of commodity culture it functions more powerfully to describe a niche market and therefore enjoys a quasi-autonomous status.<sup>5</sup> This status is, in fact, enjoined by the specific practices of cinema. To pay attention to commodity culture is certainly not to accept its terms uncritically, but when even Martha Stewart knows that “space is a commodity” (as she told me in a recent e-mail from Martha Stewart Omni-media), it becomes all the more imperative to know the terms and the

logics of one's objects of study, not to assume that they are naive or altogether removed from the critical languages of the academy.

Second, and more theoretically significant, *lesbian* stands as reminder of the dense and richly complicated site that sexuality is and has been. To the extent that sexuality has a history, *lesbian* as a name for a particular pathology certainly partakes of that nineteenth-century "banal" invention that Michel Foucault began to elaborate and that is at the center of much of queer theory.<sup>6</sup> *Lesbian* names a set of inheritances from more recent moments, as well, including the legacies of the lesbian-feminist movements, with which I came of age, of the past quarter century. In the name of *lesbian* inherited from those movements, a vibrant sphere of cultural and artistic production flourishes despite the extent to which that sphere has morphed from its original incarnations. What used to be called "women's music," for example, thrives now under the banner of the singer-songwriter. At the same time, lesbianism remains subject to violent erasure and abjection by cultures driven by homophobia and misogyny, including nominally progressive and queer ones. In this regard, I echo Biddy Martin's concern that plain old-fashioned misogyny and queer vanguardism alike can share an implicit disdain for femininity "played straight," whereby "something called femininity becomes the tacit ground in relation to which other positions become figural and mobile."<sup>7</sup> Against the force of its erasure, I want to mark *lesbian's* resonance, history, and richness.

The third reason to retain the term *lesbian* is to subject it to the kind of rigorous treatment it deserves, pushing at the extent to which we can work its specificity and limits from within. I am taken, toward these ends, by Peggy Phelan's provocative reading of *Silverlake Life*, wherein she is after what may be a "specific form of lesbian interpellation, a way of addressing both implicitly and explicitly those who don't appear in the visual field of the cultural imaginary."<sup>8</sup> While Phelan's angle of inquiry into cinema through psychoanalysis differs from my own (as I discuss briefly below regarding the term *desire*), and while her performative intimacy inhabits an idiom distinct from my own perhaps more sober style, I am drawn to explore what might be undertaken in the name of the exclusion she notices and to probe the exceptions to that exclusion, those lesbians who only appear as rigorously as possible within the name *lesbian*.

Phelan's essay, like all the best writing on culture, does not take gay life as an object for reflection without interrogating the proximate and

urgent stakes of such reflection. It is, in other words, engaged intellectual work, linking the self to the process of study, linking one's own political and intellectual investments to the writing-work of cultural criticism. While I happen to be of the opinion that very few authors of academic monographs successfully sustain that fragile balance between autobiography and critical argument, I do find useful those deictic gestures that disclose the production of the value of a given work. Why study *this* film, or *that* concept? Why frame the question *that* way? What is the function of *this* critical lineage? The more clearly one lays out the stakes of a given inquiry—the value of the study undertaken—the more one might avoid the twin dangers of taking the self as an adequate measure of the readership and, more perilously, of the topic at hand. Sometimes, too, it makes a potential political difference to use the terms *we* or *our*, rather than lurk consistently behind the ostensible objectivity of *one*. When I want to foreground an idea of belonging, then, I use *we*, although I recognize that such prescriptive collectivities might immediately arouse readerly suspicion.

As many cultural critics confront the stakes of their own work, I have not resolved the tension between the modernist hope for engaged criticism and poststructuralist protocols of reading. To live within this tension is to place emphasis on the *transformations* of key terms and ideas as they move, to uncover lineages but also to leave open the destinations. The concept of value partakes of a modernist lineage through Marxism, a tie I want to retain. Seeking to avoid mechanistic understandings of modernity and postmodernism, I emphasize instead transformations in the culture industry, its strategies for consolidating hegemony, post-war shifts in the contours of the family involving new sites of social control, and changes in the very modes of thinking about representation and its limits. In the face of these shifts, it nonetheless remains important, to my mind, to summon the language of a Marxist lineage against idealism, against linear rather than dialectical thinking, against anti-intellectualism, and against the twin foes of liberalism and conservatism. In addition to a long line of writers and thinkers including Marx and Engels, Antonio Gramsci, and Raymond Williams, Marxism invokes a history of struggle that I don't want to forfeit by distancing myself from it for reasons of its actual failure in the collapse of the Soviet Union and Eastern European Communism, or its latent or even fully obvious theoretical and historical stumbling blocks. If Marxism can be embraced without the baggage of unquestioned fidelity, the bashing or poststruc-

turalism or the pious invocation of realpolitik, I seek to embrace it, and not simply when I examine documentaries about China and Cuba.<sup>9</sup>

All of these qualifiers, notwithstanding proliferating debates regarding neo- and post-Marxism, signal the perils of retaining a paradigm, program, or model out of fidelity, but the conceptual and political power of Marxism and the abstraction that is “value” remain for me undiminished. For Marx, of course, value is that “contentless and simple” abstraction that makes possible his analysis of the system, beginning with an analysis of the commodity form. Through “value,” Marx finds his way to use and to exchange, and to the fundamental ruse of capitalist exploitation: the extraction of surplus value through the exchange of wages for labor power. While *value* is not the sole privileged term or master term of all of the analyses in the present book, it does inform this study of the politics of lesbian appearance in several ways.

First, value is everywhere operative, if almost everywhere concealed. Cinema, an industrial art of the highest order, requires the labor of a massive number of individuals whose contributions hide beneath the singular authorial, directorial signature and whose labors are, moreover, naturalized through the conventions of the narrative cinema. One of the preconditions of stardom, for example that of Katharine Hepburn, is that the labors of makeup artists and hairstylists, acting coaches and speech therapists, appear to be organic features of the star’s glamorous persona. The organization and division of labor necessary to the production of commercial cinema are staggering barriers to the analysis of cinema as anything other than text, and few critics surmount them. Production files, union regulations, intellectual property laws, merchandising agreements, much less the labyrinthine circuits of distribution and exhibition—all of these can yield knowledge about the specific form of commodity-production that is the commercial cinema, and scholars who do take on the challenges of contextual analysis are slowly chipping away at the limits of textual and formal analysis, given the youth of the discipline of film studies. And while a few scholars tackle the production of lesbians in narrative cinema, popular cultural historians writing for a wider readership have mined the rich terrain of gossip and innuendo central to Hollywood in search of the backstories of lesbian lives, as Diana McLellan has done, for example, in her saucy book, *The Girls: Sappho Goes to Hollywood*.<sup>10</sup> On both scholarly and more popular registers, historians of cinematic lesbians confront complicated questions inherent to the commercial narrative cinema.

Rather than take as my object the dominant cinema shorthanded as Hollywood, I am here predominantly interested in documentary, or nonfiction, film, and specifically lesbian documentary of the past forty-odd years.<sup>11</sup> Not only are documentary film's channels of production, distribution, and exhibition more available to exploration than those of the commercial narrative cinema, but its *raison d'être* is not, ultimately, profit. Historically, then, the films I examine are more tied to the European art cinema, the feminist counter-cinema of the past quarter century, and the recent queer cinema than to commercial narrative cinema; the institutions thereby associated with these films tend to be dinosaurs of alternative public cultures such as the museum, the film festival, the not-for-profit distributor, the women's bookstore, and the Unitarian church basement. Underfunded and under attack, these institutions should not, however, be seen as severed from the apparatuses of the film industry. Like these institutions, lesbian documentary serves distinct social and rhetorical purposes within the context of dominant cinema: to express lesbian's autonomous forms, to record lesbian's history, to promote lesbian's visibility.<sup>12</sup>

Visibility most of all, for it seems that it is on the terrain of the visible that gender binarism is most strictly enforced. At the same time, one tends to rely most heavily on visual cues to extrapolate sexual difference from gender presentation, so that one can read Hepburn or Garbo in trousers as lesbian. Although many have long marked the tyrannical companionship between gender and sexuality, gay and lesbian and queer peoples have not fought hard politically to delink gender codes and sexual orientation, although queer and transgender politics have incipient potential and the right to insist upon such a cleavage. Rather, it has been crucial to gay and lesbian history to solidify a certain guarantee: that the visual evidence of cross-dressing in the past, say, means that there were gays and lesbians "just like us" then, or enough like "us" to ensure that we, too, will survive.<sup>13</sup> In gay humor, in art, in rituals, and in everyday lives, there is a certain common-sense knowingness about appearance. While documentary cinema depends upon this common sense, it also has the potential to challenge it.

Narrative cinema also does much to conceal the intersubjective nature of the right to look—the fact that one is always looking from somewhere and that one has received some prior authorization to look. This constellation is social and individual, scripted by the determinations of collective life and the vagaries of conscious and unconscious structures.



Figure 3. Garbo in drag, with costar John Gilbert in *Queen Christina*. Courtesy of Photofest.

Made invisible by the darkness of the theater, or rendered part of a mass by the trajectory of the commodity, the spectator and the consumer, respectively, become instead empty generalized subject-positions or placeholders for what one might want to term “actual viewers.” Rather than attempt from the opposite direction to begin with the actual viewer, as an ethnographer might, I turn to documentary cinema in the spirit of Roland Barthes’ observation that the image and the actual are, in fact, co-constituted: if not one and the same, then the one an “emanation” of the other. For it is photography’s essence, claims Barthes in *Camera Lucida*, that the referent of the photograph adheres to it.<sup>14</sup> To call something a documentary is to make an appeal, however mediated and contingent, to a pre-filmic referent, the real, not necessarily in terms opposed entirely to fiction but instead in terms that displace that facile opposition. As Linda Williams puts it:

Truth is “not guaranteed” and cannot be transparently reflected by a mirror with a memory, yet some kinds of partial and contingent truths are nevertheless the always receding goal of the documentary



Figure 4. The queen of queer Hollywood: Greta Garbo in *Queen Christina*. Courtesy of Photofest.

tradition. Instead of careening between idealistic faith in documentary truth and cynical recourse to fiction, we do better to define documentary not as an essence of truth but as a set of truths. The advantage, and the difficulty, of the definition is that it holds to the concept of the real—indeed, of a “real” at all—even in the face of tendencies to assimilate documentary entirely into the rules and norms of fiction.<sup>15</sup>

As Barthes notes similarly with regard to the shock photo, the horror derives not from the representation of the calamity but instead from “the fact that *we are looking at it* from inside our freedom.”<sup>16</sup> Like the genre of the shock photo, documentary cinema confronts the paradox whereby the filmmaker runs the risk of overconstructing the scene before its spectators, substituting himself for the spectator, as Barthes says, in the formation of his subject, dispossessing him thereby of his judgment. And like the genre of the shock photo, documentary cinema derives much of its power precisely from the intersubjective encounter it structures and seeks not to overcode. In many ways, I think, documentary work has less in common with popular narrative cinema and more in common with the gazes one permits or denies oneself in daily encounters with

people and their bodies: at extremes of size or ornamentation, at the differently figured or at the indeterminately gendered. Looking at the other from inside one's normativeness or from the outside as solidarity: either gesture relies upon the authorization to look *and* to narrate, to assume something about the other based upon what one knows of oneself. This is inevitable, perhaps even mundane, but rarely explored, as this book seeks to do, in terms of what cinema itself makes possible of such actions and knowledge.

*Value*, then, also involves the value of desire: the deployment from *within* a point of view of the cinematic lesbian *toward* some goal of social inclusion, justice, political representation, or historical project. Partaking of a felicitous slide between two senses of the word representation (the sense of portrait and the sense of proxy), the common sense of visibility is that it does both: by appearing, so it would go, we belong. To promote portraits of lesbian lives is to promote representational presence in public culture and therefore heightened public authority. And yet, I argue, to present lesbian as image is to arrest the dynamism such a signifier can trigger, as well as to require some conception of politics, or the social, on behalf of which lesbian is thought to intervene as image. What visibility misses, in other words, is mobility: not mechanistic assimilation to the status quo but complex systems of judgment, intervention, the exchange of services and bodies, uncritical as well as critical adherence to tradition, stylizations of self and surroundings and the like that constitute being lesbian and appearing as lesbian. Surely it is true that the production of cultural intelligibility and legitimacy requires the making-visible of political subjects, and just as surely it is true that visibility does not function as the theoretical subject's predication. Competing determinations structure the visible *and* invisible traces of descent deposited in subjects, and sexuality or lesbian identity may or may not be the signs under which one finds oneself emerging as social actor or consigned to abjection. As I suggested above, and it bears repeating, I am after the *slide* between the two senses of representation in this book, and I am stunned by the mobility I see at work in the lesbian cinema.

Documentary film provides the most congenial ground for investigating the politics of lesbian appearance simply because its apparatus is more available to contextual analysis and its representation codes yield their rhetorical stakes more clearly. Documentary cinema also, however, makes the most straightforward claims about the value of desire: lesbian needn't be derived from a reading "against the grain" of the film or by

“decoding” a film’s subtext, and the critic needn’t legitimate or defend such knotted reading practices. Lesbian is right there, staring at you, haranguing you, imploring you, or telling you stories. The politics are, as a professor once said to a student eager to “read” politics in recent British film, *in the films*. As I will however suggest in analysis of documentary films, what distinguishes exciting lesbian work on cinema is its ecumenical treatment of form. Most of the academic books on lesbian reading or spectatorship (such as those by Judith Mayne and Patricia White) move necessarily and comfortably from Hollywood to the European art cinema to experimental film in order to develop flexible paradigms for the analysis of lesbian appearance. While my studies of documentary films pay close attention to the conventions of that form, draw upon critical work in documentary cinema, and examine the particular circumstances of documentary production, distribution, and exhibition, my readings nonetheless are located within the traffic in other forms not even cinematic and otherwise. If value sets things moving, one needs to be critically agile rather than restricted to sometimes constraining disciplinary divisions. (My sense of the value of examining documentary alongside, for example, experimental film comes most palpably from teaching European and Soviet cinema of the twenties and thirties, where the terms fail to capture the connections between Eisenstein and Vigo, or Ruttman and Ivens, or Leger and Delluc.) Documentary cinema has also been most agile in its own treatment of lesbian lives, as well as lesbian desire.

Sex, sexuality, the erotic, the amorous, affect, emotion, desire: all of these are or could be condensed in the term *lesbian*, and while it would be foolish, if not churlish, to insist on their separation from one another or from *lesbian*, it would be equally mistaken to allow them to function as they often do as equivalent terms. As Butler argues, if sex (the designation of male/female) is an effect rather than the ground of gender, gender is not itself a substantive noun but an effect constrained by a grammar of regulated modification: gender is the effect of repetition within constraint, performatively produced. The regulatory apparatus follows a binary logic (masculine/feminine) that would also appear to produce sexuality along binary poles (heterosexuality/homosexuality), but both gender and sexuality appear as binary *because* they are produced within constraint. Following Butler’s *Gender Trouble* and readings of it, I take gender to designate an apparatus of production, the means by which sex is established as a neutral, prediscursive, or natural ground for cultural

inscription. Sexuality can be seen as an apparatus of the production of naturalized identity: one's "own" sexuality. Through the machine processing of mobile desire into fixed, binary positions, sexuality also conceals the extent to which one achieves such a subject-position through subjection to the very law of regulation. If gender and sexuality, then, can be seen as grammatical effects rather than as substantive nouns—and I do take it as my starting point that this is a convincing theoretical frame—it becomes even more difficult to situate them in relation to those domains of feeling and experience that seem grounded in bodies and desires such as emotion and affect, sex, and the erotic. I understand Butler's work and much of what has followed *Gender Trouble* to elaborate these fragile and necessary connections.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, it seems important, given the mutual interdependence and reference of these domains indexed by the term *lesbian*, to signal whenever possible how and why one privileges one sense of it above or below another. In my own critical inventory, the term *lesbian* remains permanently open and insubstantial, modifying rather than designating. Affect, emotion, and desire, on the other hand, function rather differently. Affect used in the general sense, as opposed to isolating specific affects such as shame, opposes itself to reason by designating a disposition or feeling that eludes reason's grasp. In this sense, affect becomes a useful way of designating that which is in excess of a rational deliberative scheme and can function as a synonym for desire, insofar as that term involves the feeling of longing, inchoate and propulsive. If emotion domesticates affect, it also carries with it a responsive, intersubjective sense that any single affect does not: shame might be an effect of the process of queer subjection, identity construction, while anger is an emotional response to acts of hatred directed toward queers. Both affect and emotion find systematization in hegemonic discourses such as romantic love. Both affect and emotion are coded clearly in dominant narrative cinema, which system is, of course, a fine vehicle but not a seamless one for hegemonic values. The close-up, as Deleuze has noted, produces faciality as the surface for affectivity's disclosure and exploration, while melodrama is a privileged idiom for transcoding social conflict into emotional binarism.<sup>18</sup> In documentary cinema, the role of the close-up remains crucial in disclosing affect. Narration, in the general sense of a film's mode of organizing its story as well as in the more narrow sense of a spoken guide, helps us locate a film's emotional tones. While the syntax differs from the conventions of narrative cinema, documentary is no

less agile in its invocation and manipulation of feeling than its narrative counterpart.

*Desire* is, finally, that term which returns me to psychoanalysis. My treatment of Freud and Lacan is neither systematic nor comprehensive, but that warning should not be taken to mean that these figures are nowhere important. It is, I think, impossible *not* to follow psychoanalysis into, say, the gaze, the fetish, and forms of prohibition more generally. I am, moreover, particularly galvanized by that rare work that puts psychoanalytic theory and clinical practice into conversation with one another, and with work that sees psychoanalytic theory as explosive, generative, expansive.<sup>19</sup> In the context of examining the relationship between psychoanalysis and race, Hortense Spillers condenses a list of eight topics psychoanalysis crucially raises, a list I find sharp and suggestive.

(1) self-division; (2) the mimetic and transitive character of desire; (3) the economies of displacement—associative and disjunctive; (4) the paradox of the life-death pull; (5) the tragic elements couched in the transfer of social powers from one generation of historical actors to another; (6) the preeminent distinctions that attach to the “Twin Towers” of human social being—“Mama” and “Papa” . . . ; (7) the “paradox of the negative,” or the sign’s power to designate by negation; and (8) the special relationship that adheres between exile and writing.<sup>20</sup>

What prompts me, above all, to emphasize the term *desire* above some other possibilities is a social transcoding of the fourth term in Spillers’s list, that vexing question with which I began this discussion of the idea of lesbian rule: why is it that some women do not become feminists? That is, what leads some to act against their own interests, to long for their own destruction? One version of that question is that with which Eve Sedgwick begins her essay, “How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay,” by invoking the haunting knowledge of gay teen suicide.<sup>21</sup> She asks, why pursue a life in which one is sure to meet with shame and with hatred, with abjection and with stinging solitude? Another version: what are the dangers of assuming that lesbians desire differently? Or that there is such a thing as lesbian desire? Desire in this sense is another name for distinction: for being special, chosen, or worthy in a lineage of fierce survivors. Like many queer people, I turn to the movies for their fantasies and for escape as much as for realist portraits of survivors and kin; I turn to documentaries to confirm that I *can* know and *can* be in the face of much evidence

to the contrary. The life-death pull, as Spillers describes it, designates that propulsive force of desire, that which compels us toward the other and also toward life itself. While it can seem to have some specific content or shape—as in lesbian desire—it remains elusive, unpredictable, and capricious.

As a result of its elusiveness, one cannot speak easily or accurately about lesbian desire, even as cinema depends on representing it. *Desire*, as one name for what the term *lesbian* can suggest, nonetheless has no determinate value even as it propels us. What is the value of desire? It has no particular value, it cannot be assigned a definite value, and yet I shall argue that we nonetheless move with it. At the same time, the majority of scholarly projects undertaken under the sign of lesbian assume an emancipatory or liberatory effect, regardless of the extent to which they are able to specify in what particular way or definite mode they contribute to an emancipatory itinerary, however designated. To offer a comparison, when not saturated in the attempt to be incendiary, Paul Gilroy starts to work the cracks of a similar paradox in his book *Against Race*, in which he begins to notice, for example, the complicity between some versions of black nationalism and fascism. In his case, such recognition requires him no longer to assume in advance the emancipatory value of projects undertaken under the sign of blackness, but *at the same time* not to assume that the sign of blackness will disclose emancipatory projects in the forms we expect (i.e., desire can torque them into new formations such as gangsta rap) or in the forms we, as it were, desire (our own longings may be retrograde or historically outmoded).<sup>22</sup> He is thus caught arguing “against race” by taking it up incessantly, as I, too, will do with the sign lesbian.

The second paradox I discuss is more properly a contradiction. I lend the name *lesbian rule* to a provisional politics of the difference “lesbian” might make, even while I shall argue in subsequent chapters that *lesbian* is best understood as a “catachresis,” a metaphor without an adequate referent. With an always inadequate referent, *lesbian* by definition disappears, or will in advance be an evanescent ethical subject of politics. My definitional stance, as it is elaborated especially in the first two chapters, precludes the task of the following chapters: tracing lesbian visibility as an object that can be known.<sup>23</sup>

The first paradox, that the value of desire cannot be calculated, and the second contradiction, the impossible derivation of a politics from a catachrestical name, structure the readings that follow. I try to make

the sense of being caught productive by tracing context carefully; the alternative is to finesse the contradiction in order to make it disappear temporarily. Here is a familiar example using a “based-on-a-true-story” documentary nexus that illustrates in a mini-reading the cost of lesbian visibility, even while we cannot *not* work with or embrace its possibilities: the story of Brandon Teena.

### Brandon Teena: An Example

The film *Boys Don't Cry* (Peirce 1999) is not the only text to tackle the Brandon Teena story, a story that goes something like this: “Brandon Teena was born Teena Brandon in Lincoln, Nebraska. When she decides that she is really a male, she changes her name and, at age twenty, moves to nearby Falls City. As Brandon, he begins dating several girls who find him thoughtful and charming, but when word gets out that he is a she, Brandon is brutally raped and, a week later, on New Year's Eve, is murdered.” That synopsis comes from the publicity materials from the 1998 feature-length documentary *The Brandon Teena Story*, made with \$350,000 by Susan Muska and Gréta Ólafsdóttir. Made before *The Brandon Teena Story*, Alisa Lebow's short, low-budget/no-budget documentary on transgender activist and author Leslie Feinberg, *Outlaw*, mourns the death of Brandon Teena alongside that of the infamous Greenwich Village drag queen and Stonewaller, Marcia Johnston. These texts all belong, in important ways, to the queer cinema; remarkably, all of the filmmakers are out lesbians, and they participate in a politicized queer media culture in New York City. In other words, one could rightly imagine that these films resemble one another more in tone and in their stakes than they resemble the daytime television talk shows that have addressed the Brandon Teena murder, or the nineteen-page *New Yorker* story in 1997 on the Brandon Teena case, or Shu Lea Chang's interactive installation on Brandon Teena at the Guggenheim Museum.

To ask a very limited question of these films, then—how do these projects, in ways associated both with lesbian and queer nominations, think about the place or the scene of Brandon Teena's story, the American heartland? The *New York Times*, in Stephen Holden's review of the *Brandon Teena Story*, refers to the case “that encapsulates the deep-seated fears about gender and sexuality harbored by millions of Americans, especially those living in the heartland.”<sup>24</sup> One might chalk up such a displacement—from sophisticated city folk to heartland bigots, from the

blue-for-Gore to red-for-Bush on those election maps—to *Times* parochialism. But here are the filmmakers themselves: “[The people involved in the Brandon Teena case] are coming from an area that is not cutting-edge, postmodern. We’re an informed audience as far as transgender and gender issues, but most people in America are not.”<sup>25</sup>

Such rhetoric amplifies the distinction between us and them. It marks the place of the film’s enunciation as theoretically sophisticated by appropriating the buzzwords of the academic humanities to shore up authority. By contrast, the American people are understood to be naive and uninformed, against spectators’ assumptions that it may be the job of the documentary to educate them. It is not. The visual language of the film confirms rather than disturbs the division between insider and outsider, the knowing and the clueless. The filmmakers’ car window constantly frames the bleak Nebraska landscape and enforces their point of view, while the various interviewees fidget nervously in the filmmakers’ presence. The reverse shots of the two urban women filmmakers further underscore their difference in appearance from the awkward Midwestern participants in the life-world of Brandon Teena. Finally, when a group of activists from the political group Transsexual Menace appear at the local courthouse, the cleavage between the urban outsiders and the incredulous townies becomes unmanageable, bursting from the film’s seams and dampening whatever pedagogical force the documentary might have sought in its earlier moments, or whatever education Transsexual Menace may actually have effected in its activities. In whose name does the film thus condescend? In the name of what emancipatory project does it paint the radicals against the dummies?

*Boys Don’t Cry* departs from the condescension many have noticed in the *Brandon Teena Story* in several ways: in its derealization of the landscape, in its nocturnal prowling, in Peirce’s control over character in her careful script and stunning direction of Hilary Swank in the role of Brandon Teena, and, most importantly, in the proximity *Boys Don’t Cry* takes to Brandon’s obvious glee at passing and at courtship. The film also aligns itself with his terror in their failure, through conventions that the narrative—as opposed to documentary—form allows. And yet a reading of the film cannot help but notice how *Boys Don’t Cry* represents the very gesture it condemns: requiring Brandon to speak the pathology of transgender, to confess to a “sexual identity crisis,” even as the film knowingly stages the confession as an act of heteronormative discipline.

The sequence in which Brandon must proffer his confession contrib-

utes to a contradictory view of Brandon. On the one hand, the film makes Brandon in the image of a lesbian aesthetic, an alluring butch figured through rhetoric familiar to lesbian history and *mise-en-scène*. On the other hand, Peirce acknowledges through the narrative and dialogue that Brandon is not drawn to an urban scene, postmodern or otherwise; Brandon does not want to go to New York or to Los Angeles in order to become part of a sophisticated subculture in regard to gender and sexuality; Brandon instead wants to be a boy who is adored by girls in Falls City, Nebraska. It is not simply that Brandon's confession to the sheriff that he is suffering a "sexual identity crisis" is coerced, is a performative instance in which Brandon is made to inhabit the very discourse that will pathologize her/him as "a girl who likes to run around pretending she's a boy," in the stinging and dismissive words of the law. To notice this is only half the point. For the spectator is meant to make sense of this moment from within the knowledge that she has read Foucault, or, at the very least, the spectator is presumed to have some access to the coercive dimensions of Brandon's confession, not from outside but from, as it were, the inside/out. This place of enunciation, this vantage point of theoretical sophistication and knowingness, is the ethical epicenter of the Brandon Teena story as it has been told in this set of films: it is "true" insofar as recorded on tapes of Brandon's interview after the rape, and these tapes figure powerfully in Muska and Ólafsdóttir's film. They figured powerfully in the subsequent indictment of the sheriffs for their harassment of Brandon and failure to protect him adequately from his eventual murderers.

If one were to inhabit the judging truth of this place of confession, one would be confident that "those people" just didn't understand transgender, rather than permitting the possibility that the common sense of gay, lesbian, or queer understanding also needs to be put into play. If one were instead to put the value of desire up for grabs, one might notice that the Brandon Teena story in all of its manifestations is less about identity than about forgery: the passing of bad gender, the enactment of a kind of karaoke masculinity, the pursuit of an elusive or reversed signature. One might probe the ways in which the Brandon Teena story, as disseminated in the films I have mentioned, circulates a domesticated and normative version of queerness itself that nonetheless provokes an authenticating effect, at the expense, I would argue, of the very constituency whose interests it seeks and claims to represent. *Boys Don't Cry* made its way to HBO, and queer people are paying for it in both senses, a

complicated loop that provokes further questions about the film's status as a commodity, a thing.

### A Roadmap to *Lesbian Rule*

What kind of text, then, is the Brandon Teena story? It includes very different types of films, books, articles, and art; it expands and changes shape according to information and interest. *Lesbian Rule* proceeds by trying to focus on these types of expansive texts, enunciative contexts, and discursive locations simultaneously, and from within the tensions (paradox, contradiction) I described above. The division of the chapters of the book is in some measure merely a mimicry of the common sense or rote recitations of the noun in order to dislodge the noun's authority: let me look not at The Lesbian, but at lesbian people, lesbian places, lesbian things. In so modifying the generic noun, *lesbian* opens to a range of objects.

The first two chapters, "Lesbian Rule" and "*Droits de regards/Right of Inspection*," situate my project theoretically through close readings of several texts. Because this book bears the traces of several large arenas of thought, I have not attempted a standard review of the available literature; it is simply too massive and disjunctive. Instead, in "Lesbian Rule" I focus very tightly on a few ideas that have staying power over the course of the book's explorations: affective value as elaborated in an essay by Gayatri Spivak and other mediations between the psychic and the social, such as that which come in the idea of the fetish and in affectivity more generally. I treat several studies that might appear to bear a similarity to the present undertaking (the work of William Pietz, Teresa de Lauretis, and Elizabeth Grosz), demonstrating how it is that I read and begin a conversation. The central task of the first chapter is, above all, to name some of the stakes of lesbian appearance through different languages of abstraction.

It is that strategy I develop further in the second chapter, where I turn from ideas in words to ideas in images: the cover photograph from Butler's book, *Gender Trouble*, and a photographic project and essay by Marie-Françoise Plissart and Jacques Derrida. Through this pairing of image and text, I hone in on these pressing questions: how do we read images as lesbian? What and who makes a lesbian image? Are photographs "in" language, "in" specific languages? What is the act of translation between image and language? In addressing these questions, I want to take the

images seriously, to treat them with care and rigor, and to develop—in the sense of the photographic process—a language of my own that does not merely describe but responds to them. The impetus for this kind of close contextual reading comes from noticing how frequently films, videos, television programs, and photographs function illustratively in theoretical or critical arguments that themselves refuse to see them *as* films, videos, television programs, or photographs. Insofar as lesbian increasingly appears as image, I contend that it is an urgent task to probe the dimensions and effects of that appearance as precisely and strictly as possible. If one can see lesbian people as and in images, and if such image-making may take us out of the realm of talking about lesbian people as such, then it is imperative to see that operation as complicatedly pleasurable, tyrannical, reductive, phantasmic, and conventional, to name a few possibilities. The first two chapters try to enlarge the list.

The next two chapters, “Archiving the Diaspora” and “Absolut Queer,” turn more explicitly to places or to scenes of lesbian appearance: to China and to Cuba, respectively. Deploying the model for contextual analysis I develop in the first two chapters, I seek in “Archiving the Diaspora” to discover a lesbian impression in Ulrike Ottinger’s documentary, *Exile Shanghai*, on the exiled Jews who resided in Shanghai during the Second World War. That is, taking a documentary film by a lesbian filmmaker that appears to have nothing whatsoever to do with lesbians, I ask of it to what extent Ottinger’s lesbianism matters, whether and how it might be seen to contribute to her understandings of exile, of cross-cultural encounter, of place. Item number eight on Spillers’s list of productive dimensions of psychoanalysis acquires significance in this chapter, since exile becomes for Ottinger an idealized place of lesbian enunciation. If, as I have suggested, the value of desire is dynamic and mobile, it also moves through the circuits of a changing set of social relations, among them the effects of de-industrialization, globalization, or planetarization, and the international division of labor upon which they depend. Among them also are challenges to the logic of the market and capitalist democracy in China and in Cuba, whatever one might think about how these two experiments have fared. In one sense, then, I try to find in Ottinger’s film on the Shanghai exiles a direct confrontation with and meditation on value understood as the ground for social organization. Her film thus can be read as an essay on fetishism *and* on affective value-coding through a lesbian impression. In another sense, Ottinger—a German Jewish lesbian—provides another way into a lesbian sense of place insofar as her

film beckons toward histories of the Holocaust, of scenes and archives of persecution and survival. I am interested in how gay men and lesbians enjoy that archive as targets of Nazi genocide but also as frequently unacknowledged victims in the memory and study of the Shoah. I contend that queer witness and queer diaspora function obliquely as a lesbian impression in *Exile Shanghai*.

The fourth chapter, "Absolut Queer," is similarly preoccupied with exile, not with its romanticization as a privileged trope or point of view for the displacements effected by late capitalism but instead as a lived experience that produces the bulk of our understanding of Cuba. In the chapter's title, readers may recognize the form of a series of print advertisements for Absolut Vodka. I use its reference as a way to mark (1) an obvious pun in the association of Fidel Castro's rule with absolute authority, (2) the extent to which our knowledge of Cuba comes frequently through the circuits of American capitalist culture, and (3) the fact that many gay and lesbian film festivals, where queer people might have their few encounters with works on or about Cuba, are subsidized by corporate sponsors such as Absolut. The circuits in which independent documentaries travel are, in other words, not pure but contradictory routes for public cultures. By analyzing a group of films that collectively offer a prehistory for Julian Schnabel's film, *Before Night Falls* (2000), about the gay Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas, I try to follow the perverse logic whereby discussions of Cuba's persecution of gay men and lesbians seem to form the ground for anti-Revolutionary and more general denunciations of the Cuban struggle from the place of exile in the United States. Ramifications of place have seldom been more critical or central in this time of displacement, exile, extraterritoriality, banishment, and territorial dispute. But place also offers me a way to think about knowledge production itself, about what one knows of Cuba from exposure to it through queer film and film festivals, and about what one can know from documentary more generally. Finally, the Cuban documentaries prompt me to think about the ethical knots in the relationship between power and knowledge: "One could dream about what would be the lesson of someone who didn't have the keys to his own knowledge, who didn't arrogate it to himself. He would give place to the place, leaving the keys with the other to unlock the words from their enclosure."<sup>26</sup>

From place, I turn in the fifth chapter and the conclusion to commodities, or things, specifically to lesbian pulp novels and to lesbian videos. While the study of things has become more prominent and ex-

citing in the university, through the work of Bill Brown, for example, it remains nonetheless difficult to ask after the sexuality of things. To brand a commodity with a destination—videos “meant” for lesbians—is a usual enough practice, although one should remember that a commodity may not reach its intended destination, nor might it end its journey there. Althusser’s model of interpellation acknowledges the former but not the latter possibilities for subject-formation. In a more colloquial sense, however, I live with stuff and am interested in stuff, where value hangs out and especially how it mutates when the determination of value involves affective dimensions, including and beyond what Danae Clark has described as “commodity lesbianism.”<sup>27</sup> Displacements involve the time of things, the travel of commodities beyond their usual circuits of exchange and into surprising and new relationships; the popularity of *Antiques Roadshow* perhaps attests to the mutations of which capitalism is capable in times of scarcity and fear. And I find no single word or idea pliant enough to manage these mutations and schemes of value-determination: camp, kitsch, schlock, nostalgia, thrift, shopping, recycling, misuse, and absolutely earnest pleasure and recognition are all in play with lesbian things. In the fifth chapter, then, I begin with the documentary film *Forbidden Love* and leap from it to the work of lesbian pulp novels that the film itself uses as a springboard for memory and as a framing device. I argue that the pulp paperback’s cover—the site of enough anxiety in the 1950s to prompt a senate investigation into the possibilities for their regulation—conceals the movement of affective value, both in terms of lesbian readers’ investment in the realist dimensions of the worlds the novels explore, but also in terms of what the paperback cover purports to manage but cannot: the illicit contents of the book itself. The representational ruse of the cover ultimately provides a figure for how lesbian appearance might be seen to function in a wider sense: simultaneously revealing and concealing, rendering apparently visible but also covering over the workings of value that make that appearance possible.

From the pulps I move, finally, to that other commodity staple of representation: the videotape, or, on the cusp of the video’s outmodedness, the DVD. Like the paperback, the videotape mediates isolated consumption with community-formation. One can read or watch at home alone, and through such atomized consumption, one is stitched to others like atoms, learning about one another through displaced documents of community. The conclusion relishes a few videotape documentaries in order

to acknowledge the increasing complexity of media circuits and queer communities in the age in which the world picture is emerging on the plasma screens of the home theater. The gesture is meant as an opening rather than as a final word; I hope the reader will rent a few tapes or DVDs and engage them.