

RECLAIMING THE “LOST SEX”

The Lesbian in Cold War Culture

In 1962, Jess Stearn, an associate editor of *Newsweek*, received an invitation from the Daughters of Bilitis, a lesbian civil-rights organization founded in 1955, to participate in its upcoming national convention in Los Angeles.¹ Stearn had authored a bestselling book about male homosexuality, *The Sixth Man: A Startling Investigation of the Spread of Homosexuality in America*, and the Daughters of Bilitis, alarmed by the book’s sensationalistic approach, hoped that by participating in the convention the journalist would gain a more objective view of homosexuality. The invitation described the Daughters of Bilitis as an organization of lesbians who had made “the adjustment to the social system” and who in learning “self-acceptance” wanted to provide “assistance” to other women who faced similar problems.² The invitation also assured Stearn that the organization did not adhere “to any particular point of view” (15) but sought to strengthen “the bond between the homosexual and society” by engaging in outreach to sociologists, psychologists, and other experts on lesbianism. Stearn suspected that lesbianism was “just as rampant as male homosexuality, only far more secretive” (9), and he had been toying with the idea of writing a book on the topic as a follow-up to *The Sixth Man*. While researching *The Sixth Man*, he consulted several experts who believed that the social upheavals caused by two world wars, combined with women’s increasing demands for social and economic equality, had given lesbianism “a strong forward thrust” (14). The invitation from the Daughters of Bilitis confirmed his suspicion that lesbianism was on the rise in American society, and he embarked on an investigation of the lesbian subculture, visiting bars and restaurants in New York and Los Angeles that catered to lesbians, interviewing lesbian couples, as well as “bachelor girls,” or femmes who preferred to remain single because of their unhappy domestic experiences with butches, and consulting psychologists,

sociologists, and criminologists who studied the causes of lesbianism. *The Grapevine: A Report on the Secret World of the Lesbian*, the bestselling book, published in 1965, that resulted from Stearn's investigation, supposedly provided an even more "startling" view of American society than *The Sixth Man*. Stearn described *The Grapevine* as his "most unique assignment in twenty-five years of reporting the unique" (15).

As its title suggests, Stearn intended *The Grapevine* to shock, titillate, and alarm readers unfamiliar with the lesbian subculture. The journalist claimed that before he began his investigation, like many Americans he thought of lesbians in terms of the stereotype of the butch, a "harshly hostile figure with a short masculine haircut, coarse skin, nasty vocabulary, and rough male clothing" (10). But he quickly discovered that "some of the loveliest women in the world were lesbians, and were, ironically, appealing sex symbols on stage and screen to millions of unsuspecting males who didn't even begin to realize they were worshipping at a false shrine" (10). Indeed, most lesbians were indistinguishable from other women, which enabled them to mingle "congenially in conventional society" (19). Stearn also discovered that a woman's marital status did not necessarily indicate her sexual identity and claimed that many lesbians married: "As the passive partner in matrimony, they can easily disguise their indifference. And staying home all day, they can make friends among other housewives without stirring suspicion" (19). Lesbians supposedly could preserve the secrecy of their identities more easily than gay men could because "nobody thought anything of two women kissing, embracing, or dancing together" (10). As a result, husbands could not always tell whether their wives' affection for other women masked a lesbian identity. Underscoring the threat lesbianism supposedly posed to the institutions of heterosexuality, Stearn insisted that because they had the ability to disguise their aberrant sexuality, lesbians participated in a "vast, sprawling grapevine, with a secret code of [its] own" (12). Indeed, lesbians had an "almost radar-like communication with each other, and seemed able to spot, not only other lesbians on sight, but potential lesbians as well" (315). Moreover, because of their ability to pass as "normally sexed" (10) women, lesbians could supposedly carry on the "bittersweet work" (14) of converting other women to lesbianism without arousing suspicion. Emphasizing the porous boundary between female homosexual desire and lesbian identity, Stearn quoted one of his informants, who told him that lesbianism was "often only an extension of women's natural affection" (12) for other women.

Undermining his objectivity as a journalist, Stearn glossed over the patriarchal social and economic arrangements that lesbians had to negotiate as women and that underlay the aspects of their world that most alarmed him, its secrecy and invisibility. Stearn claimed that the lesbian had “a greater instinct for self-preservation than the male homosexual, and will often zealously protect her job and professional status” (18). Such a claim overlooked the difficulty that even white middle-class women had in achieving economic independence. Moreover, although he acknowledged that lesbians needed to disguise their identities, Stearn derided informants who complained about the homophobia of American society as immature and “maladjusted.” He asserted that like the male homosexual, “the lesbian was often a heavy drinker, insecure emotionally, and quick to blame society for her insecurity” (13). He also complained that despite their racial, class, and religious differences, lesbians shared a “morbid preoccupation with their own homosexuality” (311) and that he could not recall meeting “a single lesbian who thought of the male as the superior sex” (317). In providing this view of the lesbian’s “secret world,” Stearn overlooked evidence that pointed to an alternative construction of lesbian identity, one that did not recycle homophobic stereotypes. He acknowledged that he had met many “well-adjusted” (12) lesbians who had maintained long-term relationships with other women, his own measure of emotional and sexual maturity. But he continued to incorporate a psychoanalytic discourse that attributed lesbian desire to an arrested sexual development.³ Contradicting his own evidence, Stearn asserted that lesbians shunned the “emotional demands of making a home” (316), and he quoted several experts who insisted that lesbians “generally fly from a mature relationship” (317).

The Grapevine exemplified the homophobic discourse of female homosexuality that circulated in American society during the Cold War era.⁴ This discourse fostered lesbian panic by claiming that the lesbian posed an “invisible” threat to the nation; because she could pass as “normal,” the lesbian could participate in the nation’s social and economic institutions without arousing suspicion. Stearn’s publisher promoted *The Grapevine* by promising that the book would provide an answer to one of the most urgent questions that Americans allegedly faced: “How can you recognize homosexuality?”⁵ By learning how to identify the lesbian, Americans could prevent her from spreading her “unnatural” sexuality throughout society. An effect of this construction was to link the lesbian to the communist “conspiracy” that purportedly threatened Ameri-

can democracy. The belief in the need to expose the lesbian so she could no longer seduce impressionable and emotionally vulnerable women unaware of her abnormal sexuality uncannily recalled the hysteria produced by the McCarthy witch hunts, which reflected the fear that communists had infiltrated the nation's political and social institutions, and were secretly conspiring to overthrow them by recruiting naïve and unsuspecting Americans to their cause.⁶ Thus in 1946 George Kennan, one of the architects of the Cold War, warned that “world communism is like a malignant parasite which feeds only on diseased tissue.”⁷ In echoing this language, Cold War homophobia positioned lesbians as un-American. Like the communist, the lesbian allegedly threatened the American way of life.

Cold War Femme examines this discourse and its relation to the construction of normative femininity in postwar American society. Recent scholarship has shown that Cold War homophobia accelerated the consolidation of the hetero-homosexual binary by underwriting a psychoanalytic model of sexual desire that privileged object choice over gender identity.⁸ One result of the Cold War construction of the homosexual was the disarticulation of gender and sexual nonconformity, with gender presentation increasingly functioning as an unstable signifier of sexual identity. Although this scholarship has clarified the role of Cold War homophobia in the reorganization of sexuality, it has focused almost exclusively on gay men and tended to assume that its conclusions apply equally to lesbians.⁹ *Cold War Femme* seeks to rectify this imbalance by showing how Cold War homophobia transformed the category of the lesbian. As Stearn's book indicates, in the Cold War era the femme displaced the butch as the lesbian whose perverse sexuality posed the greatest threat to American society. Unlike the femme, the butch was easily identified by her cross-gender identification, which prevented her from participating in mainstream American society and from recruiting other women to the “secret world” of lesbianism as easily as the femme could. In this respect, the Cold War discourse of homosexuality marked a significant shift in the homophobic deployment of the category of the lesbian in American society. Earlier in the century, medical professionals had treated the feminine woman who made a lesbian object choice as less “abnormal” than the masculine woman who did so and argued that she had the capacity to realign her desire with the institutions of heterosexuality.¹⁰ By contrast, the Cold War discourse of female homosexuality stabilized the femme's

relation to lesbian identity and represented her as a threat to the institutions of heterosexuality.

To elaborate this argument, I examine the representation of lesbianism in Cold War Hollywood cinema. Although competition from television and other forms of mass media had led to a steady decline in audience attendance, Hollywood cinema remained one of the most powerful ideological apparatuses in American society for reproducing normative gender and sexual identities.¹¹ Indeed, it played a central role in the circulation of the Cold War construction of the lesbian by providing audiences with narratives of perverse female desire that incorporated the new model of sexuality.¹² But Hollywood was not a monolithic institution, and one of my goals in focusing on its representation of lesbian identity is to elucidate the tensions and contradictions in the homophobic deployment of the category of the lesbian.¹³ Movies continued to draw on an older model of sexuality that linked gender and sexual nonconformity, even as they underwrote the Cold War construction of the lesbian. The Production Code, which regulated Hollywood's treatment of male and female sexuality, stated that "sex perversion or any inference to it is forbidden."¹⁴ How could movies mark the femme as a lesbian without violating this prohibition? Since its introduction in 1934, Hollywood had circumvented the Code by deploying a set of visual and narrative strategies that indirectly identified characters as lesbians.¹⁵ These strategies relied on the association of lesbianism with an inverted gender identity, an association rendered outmoded by the new system of sexual classification. Although the femme's threat to American society reflected her invisibility, Hollywood continued to rely on these strategies, even as it developed new ones for rendering her sexual nonconformity visible to audiences. As a result, the older model of sexuality never wholly disappeared but continued to shape popular conceptions of perverse female desire. One consequence of the circulation of two conflicting discourses of lesbianism in Hollywood movies was that female femininity emerged as a powerfully ambiguous signifier of sexual identity.

THE COLD WAR CRISIS OF THE HOUSEWIFE

In 1955, Adlai Stevenson, the governor of Illinois and the former Democratic presidential nominee, notoriously urged the graduating class of Smith College to help the nation resolve "our crisis in the humble role of

housewife.”¹⁶ Stevenson realized that many college-educated women felt frustrated as wives and mothers. Domestic life seemed far removed from “the great issues and stirring debates for which their education has given them understanding and relish” (31). Thus they experienced a “sense of contraction, of closing horizons and lost opportunities” (31) when they married. His goal in addressing the graduating class of the elite women’s college was to convince them that the role of housewife was crucial to the survival of American democracy, which the emergence of mass society supposedly threatened. Echoing the concerns of the sociologists William Whyte, C. Wright Mills, and David Riesman, who associated mass society with totalitarianism and the reification of experience, Stevenson reminded his audience that “to create a free society is at all times a precarious and audacious experiment” (30) and warned that mass society had reduced man “once again to subordinate status, limiting his range of choice, abrogating his responsibility and returning him to his primitive status of anonymity in the social group” (30).¹⁷ In this respect, American society threatened to become like its political other, the Soviet Union. For Stevenson, women had the capacity, as wives and mothers, to counteract this danger by keeping their husbands “Western” (31). He explained that one of the housewife’s primary responsibilities was to “frustrate the crushing and corrupting effects of specialization, to integrate means and ends, to develop that balanced tension of mind and spirit which can be properly called ‘integrity’” (31). In other words, domestic life was not so far removed from the “great issues” of the Cold War era as the housewife may have assumed. He assured his audience that college-educated women in particular had “a unique opportunity to influence us, man and boy, and to play a direct part in the unfolding drama of our society” (31). One of the implications of this analysis was that women needed to sacrifice their individualism so that their husbands and sons could preserve theirs. Whereas men violated their identities by assuming a “subordinate status,” women realized theirs in doing so, and once married Stevenson’s audience would have the “unique opportunity” to protect their husbands and sons from mass society’s assault on their masculinity.

Stevenson’s belief that the role of the housewife in American society was in crisis was widely shared and underlay the lesbian panic of the Cold War era. In insisting that the housewife had the capacity to reinvigorate American democracy, Stevenson echoed social scientists who worried that women with college degrees would reject marriage and motherhood as aspirations, as they could support themselves economically and had

no need to marry. Experts claimed that the importance of marriage and motherhood had declined in the face of women's social and economic gains since the 1920s. They were concerned especially about the companionate model of marriage, which had emerged in the 1920s as a strategy for preserving the institution of marriage by deemphasizing its religious, economic, and reproductive functions.¹⁸ In the companionate marriage, women supposedly did not have to sacrifice their freedom and autonomy, as the bond between husbands and wives depended on emotional and sexual intimacy rather than on procreation. In this respect, the model reflected the increasing acceptance of women as sexual subjects, even as it avoided reducing women to their roles as wives and mothers and promised them a more equal relationship with their husbands. But a growing chorus of experts claimed that in reforming the institution of marriage so that it accommodated women's increasing demands for social and economic equality, social progressives had precipitated a crisis, for women's dissatisfaction with their traditional roles had in fact intensified. For example, in their bestselling book, *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex* (1947), Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia Farnham argued that women's greater autonomy in marriage had led to a dramatic increase in cases of frigidity. For them, no woman could enjoy sexual relations unless she possessed a "willingness to accept dependence without fear or resentment, with a deep inwardness and readiness for the final goal of sexual life—impregnation."¹⁹ In this way, the authors not only reasserted women's subordination but reinstalled motherhood as the only acceptable goal of female sexual activity. In their view, women's sexual desire was inextricably tied to procreation.

The subtitle of Lundberg's and Farnham's book reflected their disapproval of contemporary American women. They argued that women's social and economic gains had worsened rather than improved their condition in society, that the feminist movement had cut women adrift. In the wake of feminism's successes, women's femaleness had emerged as "a coincidence, an unfortunate complication" (10), rather than as an essential aspect of their identities. Moreover, women were buffeted by conflicting demands and expectations. They felt pressure to pursue a career, but in doing so they sacrificed the "instinctual strivings" (11) that stemmed from their capacity to bear children. Nor could they derive satisfaction from fulfilling those "strivings." Influenced by the women's movement, society no longer valued marriage and motherhood as aspirations for women. Lundberg and Farnham did not deny that society continued to

emphasize the “supreme importance” (124) of motherhood, but they believed that it now carried few “concrete benefits” (124) for women. As a result, it was no longer central to their psychological well-being. Rather, women increasingly measured their value in terms of their ability to compete with men. According to Lundberg and Farnham, the feminist movement, despite its pathological hatred of men, had a single objective: “the achievement of maleness by the female, or the nearest approach to it” (167). But women could never derive satisfaction from emulating men or following the same route of achievement, for in doing so, they violated their femaleness. In other words, only marriage and motherhood could restore women’s self-esteem. Anticipating Stevenson’s graduation address, Lundberg and Farnham urged greater public recognition of the “powerful role and special importance of mothers as transmitting agents, good or bad, of feelings, personality and character” (356). As mothers, women bore responsibility for the psychological development of the nation’s future citizens.

Lundberg and Farnham emphasized in particular women’s relationships with their daughters. In their view, women had an obligation to provide their daughters with a “design for femininity” (228) so they could negotiate successfully the conflicts they would later experience as adults. Glossing over the enormous pressures to marry and bear children that women continued to face, the authors argued that because girls received the same education as their brothers, they too expected to eventually pursue careers that reflected their “inclination and training” (232). They also argued that girls grew up believing that they had an “inalienable right” to sexual pleasure and that, once they gained access to contraception, they could exercise this right without consequences. Nevertheless, women’s basic need for satisfaction inevitably led them “in the direction of marriage and children inside the home” (233), thus precipitating the crisis that Lundberg and Farnham believed defined modern womanhood. Women who were raised to believe that they were men’s equals could never fulfill their needs and desires through marriage and motherhood. According to Lundberg and Farnham, this aspect of modern womanhood rendered the relationship between mother and daughter especially fraught. Only the woman who found “complete satisfaction, without conflict or anxiety, in living out her role as wife and mother” (228) could provide her daughters with a model of femininity that would enable them to adjust to their identities as women. Her daughters would grow up valuing their femininity instead of experiencing it as an “unfortunate complication.”

Modern Woman's emphasis on the importance of the mother's relationship with her daughter marked a shift in the momist discourse of motherhood initiated by the publication of Philip Wylie's enormously popular book *Generation of Vipers* in 1942.²⁰ By 1955, the year Stevenson delivered his graduation address, Wylie's book had gone through twenty printings and been selected by the American Library Association as one of the most important nonfiction books of the first half of the twentieth century.²¹ Anticipating many of Lundberg's and Farnham's arguments, Wylie warned readers about women's growing freedom and autonomy, which he believed allowed them to dominate the domestic sphere. In hyperbolic prose, he complained that women were "taking over male functions and interpreting those functions in female terms," as well as inverting gender relations by donning "the breeches of Uncle Sam."²² But unlike Lundberg and Farnham, Wylie focused on women's relationships with their sons. According to him, mothers could not bear any sign of independence in their sons and smothered them with love so they would remain attached to them even in adulthood. In so doing, they cushioned their sons "against any major step in [their] progress toward maturity" (208). Wylie condemned the appellation "mom," which he argued betokened men's dependence on their mothers, as well as their identities as "neuters" (200) incapable of protecting the nation from its enemies. In other words, mothers had robbed their sons of their masculinity, thereby rendering American society vulnerable and exposed. In shifting the focus of this discourse away from the mother's relationship with her son to that with her daughter, Lundberg and Farnham suggested that the reproduction of normative femininity was equally important to the survival of the nation's democratic institutions: daughters who grew up with an appreciation of their femaleness would pass it on to their own daughters, thus resolving the crisis of American womanhood.

In *Their Mothers' Daughters*, which appeared in 1956, Edward Strecker and Vincent Lathbury, both psychologists, rendered explicit the connection between citizenship and gender and sexual conformity underlying momist discourse. Like Lundberg and Farnham, Strecker and Lathbury wanted to focus attention on the importance of the mother's relationship with her daughters. The author of *Their Mothers' Sons*, which appeared in 1947, Strecker regretted that he had not published *Their Mothers' Daughters* first, for he now believed that "without the right kind of mature mothers and daughters, there cannot be produced the right kind of mature sons."²³ But unlike Lundberg and Farnham, Strecker and

Lathbury did not disapprove of women pursuing careers, so long as their careers were in fields like nursing, education, and social work, where they could indirectly express their maternal instincts. Moreover, the authors recognized that many women had no choice but to work, either because they had never married, had divorced, or were widowed. They cited the example of one of their patients, Mrs. B, who they felt had successfully negotiated the demands of a career in a “masculine” field while preserving her femininity. When her husband died, Mrs. B took over the management of his business. Although she was “all business, pleasant enough but briskly efficient” (31) while at the factory, she was “strictly feminine” (31) while at home with her two daughters. She supposedly looked forward to the day her daughters married so that one of her sons-in-law could take over the business: “Then I can go back to being a housewife. In fact I never stopped being one. It is my vocation. The factory is my avocation” (31). In other words, unlike Wylie, Strecker and Lathbury did not question women’s equality or their ability to succeed in traditionally masculine pursuits. Mrs. B’s “briskly efficient” management of her husband’s business showed that she was just as competent as he was. But like Lundberg and Farnham, Strecker and Lathbury did not feel that women could satisfy their needs and desires by following the same route to achievement as men. Instead, they stated even more bluntly that “the main function of women is to give birth to children and ‘make’ a home in which they may be reared” (29).

Strecker’s and Lathbury’s analysis reflected the emergence of psychoanalysis as the dominant approach to the study of gender and sexuality in postwar American society.²⁴ Like Lundberg and Farnham, Strecker and Lathbury emphasized the need for mothers to instill in their daughters an appreciation of their femaleness so that they would accept their biological “mandate” to bear children. They focused on the obstacles that girls in particular had to overcome on the path to a normal, healthy adulthood. Girls frequently developed feelings of “insufficiency and inadequacy” in relation to boys. Strecker and Lathbury argued that unless girls saw their mothers as worthy of emulation, such difficulties might cause them to take the path to feminism, which the authors understood as a form of neurosis, or they might develop penis envy and never adapt to their future roles as wives and mothers. Indeed, girls were at constant risk of developing an inferiority complex in relation to boys. Ignoring the social arrangements that privileged fathers and sons over mothers and daughters, the authors attributed this risk to the *physical* differences between girls and

boys. For example, they warned that if girls played with their brothers or other boys, they might come to envy their superior strength and athletic ability (147). Mothers had a responsibility to prevent these impediments from interfering with their daughters' ability to negotiate the Oedipus complex by conveying the importance of their femaleness. Strecker and Lathbury also emphasized the mother's responsibility for her daughter's sexual development. Like Lundberg and Farnham, they believed that frigidity was on the rise, warning that many women had "never had an orgasm, or at most a very fragmentary one" (129). But unlike Lundberg and Farnham, they accepted women as sexual subjects and avoided reducing their sexuality to a maternal drive. They blamed women's increasing frigidity on mothers who regarded sexual intercourse "gloomily and referred to it as unclean and sinful" (131) and urged mothers to instill in their daughters "healthy" attitudes about sexuality.

Strecker and Lathbury reinforced the significance of motherhood by linking it directly to the preservation of American democracy: "No other nation faces as great a danger of failing to resolve the mother-child relationship as the United States. No nation has a higher stake in it than we have. The stake is democratic survival" (40). Along with Stevenson, the authors wanted to persuade women that their roles as wives and mothers would expand rather than contract their horizons, that they had the capacity to foster the values and beliefs necessary for counteracting the threat mass society posed American democracy. As mothers, women had the "unique opportunity" to rear children who would develop the emotional maturity to exercise their citizenship responsibly. "The capacity to live democratically and constructively can be acquired only in childhood" (213), the authors argued, and mothers alone could teach children "these democratic lessons and permit them to practice them in their relations with other children" (213). In this way, Strecker and Lathbury attempted to reclaim what Stevenson had called the "humble" role of the housewife in American society, with their analysis suggesting that girls had no reason to grow up with an inferiority complex. As adults, women could contribute to American society in ways no less important than those of their fathers and brothers, for they would have the responsibility of nurturing in their children the capacity for sustaining American democracy. At the same time, however, to make this contribution, they would necessarily have to accede to a normative construction of womanhood. To play the same role in their daughters' lives as their mothers had in theirs, they would have to sacrifice their ambition to succeed in the public sphere, for

such an ambition would prevent them from providing their daughters with an appropriate role model. And it followed that women who failed to instill in their daughters a desire to marry and bear children weakened the nation's ability to defeat totalitarianism. For the authors, the very survival of American democracy depended on the reproduction of normative gender and sexual identities.

LESBIANISM AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

In this context, lesbianism emerged as a perceived threat to American democracy. For many experts, lesbianism provided a troubling sign of women's growing freedom and autonomy. It showed that they no longer needed men sexually or economically. For example, in *The Grapevine* Stearn contended that the increase in lesbianism represented "only one phase of the continuing drive of women all over to share a place in the sun with the male" (308). Sociologists and psychologists saw the femme as especially threatening. Unlike the butch, she did not appear to emulate men or to reject her femaleness as a mark of her inferiority as a woman. Thus experts could not attribute her perverse sexuality to penis envy. Among the functions of the Cold War construction of the lesbian was to pathologize, and thereby contain, alternative narratives of womanhood that did not culminate in marriage and motherhood. Even women who had made a heterosexual object choice were considered "sick" and latently lesbian if they transgressed the dominant construction of femininity. Strecker and Lathbury, for example, ascribed lesbianism to "undissolved and unfulfilled mother-daughter relationships" (160). According to this logic, girls derived their femininity from a wish to be like their mothers, and they were therefore at risk of developing lesbian identities if their mothers failed to provide them with a compelling role model. Strecker and Lathbury argued that the mother "must seem to be important enough and loved by others so that there is in sight a worthwhile reward for being like her—a woman" (161). As this analysis indicates, the psychoanalytic discourse that circulated in postwar American society tended to desexualize lesbian identities. Women supposedly became lesbians not because they desired other women, but because they had rejected their femaleness in childhood and wanted to be men. Strecker and Lathbury declared lesbianism "biological and psychological treason" (158), a form of mental illness in which women turned against their own natures.

This construction of lesbianism bore a striking resemblance to

Strecker's and Lathbury's analysis of feminism, which they associated with a masculinization of female identity. In an uncharacteristically direct passage, the authors enjoined their female readers, "Do not become a feminist. Children recoil from masculinity in a mother, in dress or attitude. Or daughters may imitate it, which puts their future emotional life in jeopardy" (71). Strecker and Lathbury refused to acknowledge the patriarchal social and economic arrangements that underlay women's demands for equality. Indeed, like Lundberg and Farnham, they assumed that women had already achieved social and economic equality, which rendered feminism outmoded. They interpreted feminism as "the deep wish to compete with men, not because it may be necessary or the circumstances of life demand it, but prompted by the desire to prove the male is inferior to the female" (144). Rather than reflecting a justifiable resistance to women's subordination, feminism expressed "dissatisfaction with being a woman and some degree of hostility toward men" (144). Like the lesbian, the feminist experienced an "unfulfilled" relationship with her mother. As a girl, she developed penis envy and fantasized about becoming a boy. As an adult, she either pursued a career to prove that she could be as successful as any man and thus deserved her mother's love, or she married and, resenting her domestic responsibilities, turned into a "possessive, dominating, and devouring" (152) wife and mother. In other words, feminism represented a "biological rejection" (144) that reflected the girl's pathological identification with her father. Unlike the lesbian, however, the feminist could overcome her masculinity complex. Strecker and Lathbury cited as an example one of their female patients, a "pronounced feminist" (150), who had renounced her masculinity after undergoing psychotherapy: "Her dress, her manner and attitude toward males have become gratifyingly feminine. She is almost a woman" (150).

In associating feminism with lesbianism, Cold War homophobia participated in a protracted ideological struggle in American society over women's demands for social and political equality. Since the 1890s, the homophobic deployment of the category of the lesbian had played a central role in this struggle.²⁵ Influenced by a sexological understanding of female sexuality, social reformers increasingly warned about the pernicious impact on American society of the alternative institutions created by white middle-class professional women to sustain their independence from patriarchal social and economic arrangements, institutions such as women's colleges, settlement houses, feminist political organizations, and Boston marriages, in which two women shared an intimate domestic

relationship.²⁶ For example, Floyd Dell believed that American society treated lesbian activity as less threatening to the social order than heterosexual experiment, and in *Love in the Machine Age*, a study of the need for sexual reform, published in 1930, he complained that “homosexual ‘crushes’ are conventionally ignored, particularly in girls’ schools.”²⁷ In attacking female homosocial institutions and practices, social reformers echoed the sexologist Havelock Ellis’s work on sexual inversion, which emphasized the porous boundary between female homosocial desire and lesbian identity. Ellis identified two types of women who made a lesbian object choice: “congenital inverts,” or women whose gender and sexual nonconformity were hereditary and irreversible; and women who had inherited a predisposition or weakness for the sexual advances of other women. For such women lesbianism represented an “artificial” or acquired characteristic.²⁸ Families could supposedly prevent such women from developing lesbian identities by segregating them from female homosocial institutions, where they might fall prey to the blandishments of a congenital invert. Anticipating Dell’s analysis, Ellis argued that such institutions promoted “passionate friendships, of a more or less unconsciously sexual character,” and thus were particularly dangerous for women prone to “artificial” homosexual attachments.²⁹ Moreover, although he tended to take a progressive stance on social issues, Ellis also claimed that the feminist movement had led to a rise in female homosexuality: “Having been taught independence of men and disdain for the old theory which placed women in the moated grange of the home to sigh for a man who comes, a tendency develops for women to carry this independence still further and to find love where they find work.”³⁰

The flapper’s emergence in the 1920s as a model of modern American womanhood reinforced this backlash against what the historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has called “the female world of love and ritual.”³¹ The flapper’s identity reflected a new emphasis in American society on consumption, leisure, pleasure, and self-expression. Unlike the New Woman, the flapper tended to associate emancipation with sexual freedom, and she was drawn to the very discourses—sexology and psychoanalysis—that had pathologized the New Woman’s desire for equality.³² These discourses treated sexuality as a distinct domain of personhood and stressed the importance of sexual expression for maintaining psychological well-being. Historians have shown that the companionate model of marriage functioned as a kind of “fantasy bribe” that enticed the flapper into participating in the institutions of heterosexuality.³³ The flapper could in

fact satisfy her desire for sexual freedom in marriage. The growing acceptance of contraceptive practices by married women ensured that the flapper would not have to sacrifice her sexual autonomy but could control her fertility even if she married.³⁴ Moreover, because sexual and emotional intimacy provided the basis of the companionate marriage, she could expect to have a more equal relationship with her husband than an earlier generation of married women had had with theirs. Reinforcing these enticements, the domestic sphere, which provided the cornerstone of the consumer economy of the 1920s, emerged as a site of leisure and pleasure.³⁵ In this context, the New Woman provided an increasingly undesirable model of womanhood. She came to embody the stereotype of the sexually repressed “old maid.” Her critique of patriarchal social and economic arrangements could not compete with the flapper’s enfranchisement as a subject of sexual and consumer desire.³⁶ Indeed, in reforming the institution of marriage so it reflected the modern American woman’s needs and desires, social progressives had supposedly rendered that critique outmoded.

Katharine Bement Davis’s pioneering survey of the sex lives of 2,200 married and unmarried middle-class, college-educated women, published in 1929, registered this backlash against the New Woman.³⁷ The survey reflected the influence of Ellis’s work on sexual inversion, with Davis likewise assuming a connection between women’s romantic friendships and lesbian desire. The section of the survey devoted to women’s sexual activity with other women asked, “Have you at any time experienced intense emotional relations with any other girl or woman?”³⁸ But Davis approached female homosexuality neutrally, as one of many sexual practices in which women might engage, and she described several examples of women who regarded their lesbian relationships as “legitimate” and “healthy” without challenging or contradicting them. Nor did she associate female homosexuality with a desire for social and economic equality. The survey confirmed the impact of the homophobic deployment of the category of the lesbian on a new generation of professional women. Women who pursued careers over marriage and motherhood increasingly risked social and economic ostracism as lesbians. As a result, some of the women who took part in the survey refused to participate in the female homosocial institutions created by the New Woman for fear that in doing so they would render their desire for economic independence suspect. Davis quoted one unmarried professional woman who indirectly acknowledged the impact of the backlash against the New Woman: “The

ethics of the homosexual relationships is the most serious problem the business or professional woman has to face today” (263). Another participant in the survey indicated more directly the lesbian panic sometimes experienced by professional women: “In my city some business women are hesitating to take apartments together for fear of the interpretation that may be put upon it” (263–64).

The Cold War construction of the lesbian perpetuated this strategy for containing alternative models of American womanhood. The association between feminism and lesbianism served to discourage women from remaining single and pursuing careers. Indeed, historians have shown that even many women who in the 1950s eventually claimed lesbian identities had difficulty imagining lives that did not include marriage and motherhood.³⁹ When in *The Grapevine* Stearn titillated readers with stories of wives and mothers who led “secret lives” as lesbians, he failed to examine the pressure of social norms that urged women to marry and bear children. In the 1950s marriage and motherhood emerged as *the* rite of passage into adult womanhood. Women who chose otherwise remained incomplete, not truly female. At the same time, women’s educational opportunities expanded significantly in this period, and even white working-class girls increasingly expected to attend college.⁴⁰ Moreover, women entered the labor force in greater numbers, had greater access to consumer culture, and experienced greater sexual freedom than their mothers.⁴¹ Simultaneously, however, narrowing gender and sexual norms served to discourage women from capitalizing on these social changes. As Wini Breines has noted, white, middle-class girls in particular did not plan for their futures, even if they went to college, instead waiting until they wed and could receive the guidance of their husbands.⁴² The lack of alternative models of womanhood rendered negotiating patriarchal social and economic arrangements especially difficult for lesbians who wanted to avoid marriage and motherhood. As single, career-oriented women, such lesbians did not have access to the institutions that had sustained the New Woman’s social and economic independence, but had to create their own, which required financial and other resources, which many did not have.⁴³ Nor could lesbians enter male-dominated professions without risking exposure as lesbians.⁴⁴ Thus they had to choose from a narrow range of less lucrative careers, such as nursing, social work, and teaching, fields traditionally dominated by women, in which their professional aspirations were less likely to arouse their coworkers’ suspicions.

Where the discourse of female homosexuality that circulated in the

Cold War era differed from the homophobic deployment of the category of the lesbian earlier in the century was in linking lesbianism directly to questions of national identity. The construction of the lesbian as “un-American,” a secretive, duplicitous figure who, like the communist, threatened to subvert the nation, surfaced most fully in the antihomosexual witch hunts conducted by the federal government throughout the 1950s. Although during hearings in 1950 countless medical experts testified that the majority of homosexuals were “well-adjusted” and posed no threat as employees of the government, the Senate issued a report that identified gay and lesbian employees as security risks.⁴⁵ Such employees, the report claimed, were emotionally immature, prone to reveal government secrets, and susceptible to blackmail by enemy agents. In 1953 President Dwight Eisenhower issued Executive Order 10450, which barred homosexuals from being employed by the government.⁴⁶ The order affirmed the Senate’s dubious findings and resulted in a massive government campaign to ferret out homosexual employees. In implementing the order, the civil service encouraged employees to inform on coworkers who aroused their suspicions through, for example, their mode of dress, associates, neighborhood, emotional stability, and even any physical characteristics that seemed “abnormal.”⁴⁷ When confronted by security officers with questions about their sexuality, many employees simply resigned to avoid facing an investigation that might embarrass them or their families and permanently damage their ability to pursue their careers elsewhere.⁴⁸

This campaign had a particularly devastating impact on female employees.⁴⁹ The government provided women access to well-paying jobs with a certain amount of job security, which enabled them to avoid marriage and motherhood if they so desired. Moreover, the neutrality of the civil service insured they could for the most part look forward to advancing in their careers on the basis of merit. The large numbers of women working for the government had long created anxiety among conservatives, who denounced the nation’s capital as a “femmocracy,” and so-called g-girls, or female employees, provided constant fodder for tabloid journalists.⁵⁰ For example, in *Washington Confidential*, a sensationalistic exposé of political and moral corruption in the nation’s capital, published in 1951, Jack Lait and Lee Mortimer warned that working for the government perverted women by masculinizing them: “They are a hard, efficient lot, doing men’s work, thinking like men and sometimes driven to the place of men—in the proscribed zones of desperate flings at

love and sex. Lesbianism is scandalously rampant, frequently an acquired dislocation rather than a pathological aberration.”⁵¹ Such a warning attested to the persistence of the sexological understanding of the “artificial” lesbian desire that female homosocial settings supposedly incited in otherwise “normal” women.

To protect their careers, lesbian government workers moderated their behavior to avoid arousing the suspicions of coworkers. They refused to socialize with other lesbians in public, unless men were present, attended social functions with gay male friends as their “dates,” and carefully chose their wardrobes and makeup to project a feminine persona.⁵² But gender and sexual conformity provided such workers with little or no protection. As a violation of normative femininity, their very desire to succeed in their careers rendered them suspect. Male employees who resented reporting to a female boss or who disliked the evaluation they had received from her could trigger an investigation into her sexuality. The civil service had a “zero tolerance” policy with respect to male and female homosexuality, and even if a female government worker were married, a single lesbian encounter in college provided sufficient grounds for her dismissal.⁵³ As David K. Johnson has pointed out, the enforcement of this policy worked to solidify the hetero-homosexual binary.⁵⁴ According to the rapidly expanding national-security state, a person was either homosexual or heterosexual, regardless of his or her gender presentation.

Despite the emergence of object choice as an overriding principle of social and sexual difference, the older model of lesbianism did not wholly disappear, but continued to bring pressure to bear on the new model.⁵⁵ The civil service continued to privilege gender presentation when investigating female employees for lesbianism. For example, in 1958, when two male security officers interviewed Madeline Tress, a Commerce Department economist who was suspected of lesbianism, they noted her “feminine apparel” but also remarked in their report that she was missing two buttons from the front of her dress.⁵⁶ For them, the missing buttons—which suggested that she lacked a properly feminine regard for her appearance—confirmed her coworkers’ claims that she was “mannish” and suffered from “personality problems.”

The older model also continued to shape mass cultural constructions of lesbian identity. For example, in *The Grapevine* Stearn opened a discussion of Hollywood “sex symbols” with the sensationalistic claim: “Some of the most glamorous women in Hollywood—and on Broadway—whose femininity is a household word, are frankly lesbians in their

private lives” (98). He then suggested that despite their feminine exteriors, these women secretly wanted to be men. They disguised their aberrant sexuality by marrying men “whose femininity complements their own masculine streak” (100); such men would not seek to subordinate them or control their sexuality. Stearn further challenged the women’s authenticity as sex symbols by claiming, “While they look languorous and seductive on screen, in private life they are singularly crisp and businesslike, and can drive a bargain like any man. Thinking like men, but looking like women, they have an advantage that has enabled them to flourish in the jungle that is Hollywood” (98). Stearn thus constructed the women as a kind of intermediate sex, neither male nor female, a construction that recalled the sexological understanding of lesbian identity. Underneath the women’s feminine exteriors supposedly lay an inverted gender identity. Thus even as Cold War homophobia validated the new model of sexuality, it continued to incorporate the older model, which associated lesbianism with masculinity. The Cold War discourse of female homosexuality reduced the femme’s femininity to a kind of disguise that allowed her to participate in American society while escaping detection. In this way, the discourse neutralized the threat posed by the femme as a woman who made a lesbian object choice but did not appear to reject her femaleness. Despite her gender presentation, the femme supposedly emulated men as much as the butch did.

LESBIANISM AND HOLLYWOOD CINEMA

Cold War Femme focuses on the impact of the Cold War construction of the lesbian on the representation of female sexuality in Hollywood cinema. Hollywood films contributed to the homophobic deployment of the category of the lesbian by constructing narratives of female sexuality that pathologized women’s desire for freedom and independence, and thereby reinforced the difficulty that women had imagining alternative modes of happiness and fulfillment. Even movies such as *Pillow Talk* (Michael Gordon, 1959) and *Marnie* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1964), which interrogated the construction of female subjectivity in relation to patriarchal social and economic arrangements, reinstalled marriage and motherhood as the “happy ending” of female sexual development. Such movies were instrumental in decreasing the circulation of alternative constructions of womanhood in postwar American society. At the same time, however, some movies, such as Nicholas Ray’s *Johnny Guitar* (1953) and

William Wyler's *The Children's Hour* (1962), contested the Cold War construction of the lesbian, underscoring the devastating social and economic consequences the accusation of lesbianism could have in the 1950s and 1960s. But even as they challenged the narrow model of female identity, such films tended to position viewers as subjects of Cold War sexual epistemology. Even movies made after the 1961 revision of the Production Code, which allowed filmmakers to treat lesbianism with "care, discretion, and restraint," did not always clarify the heroine's desire—an ambiguity that helped reinforce the Cold War fear that the lesbian could escape detection.⁵⁷ In examining these tensions and contradictions in its treatment of lesbian desire, I elucidate Hollywood cinema's complicated role in the consolidation of the new system of sexual classification. For even movies that validated the dominant model of womanhood tended to open up the possibility of alternative constructions of female desire.

In part 1, "Screening the Femme," I seek to clarify Hollywood cinema's relation to the reorganization of sexuality by examining in each chapter a different aspect of the Cold War construction of the lesbian. In chapter 1 I investigate Hollywood's strategies for representing the femme through analysis of Joseph Mankiewicz's Academy Award-winning movie, *All about Eve* (1950), in which Ann Baxter plays Eve Harrington, a duplicitous actress who undermines the career of her benefactor, the flamboyant Broadway star Margo Channing (Bette Davis), after gaining her trust. Like the Hollywood sex symbols according to Stearns, Eve uses her femininity to conceal a ruthless ambition, which the film codes as masculine. In other words, *All about Eve* marks Eve as a lesbian by drawing on the older model of sexuality, which associated lesbianism with masculinity. Eve's femininity emerges as a performance that enables her to gain access to Margo's world, which she then proceeds to disrupt by turning the Broadway star's friends against her. In this respect, Mankiewicz's film validated the lesbian panic of the Cold War era. To situate the film in relation to that panic, I trace the shifting construction of the feminine woman who made a lesbian object choice in the discourse of sexology. In so doing I clarify the role of Cold War homophobia in redefining the femme.

In chapter 2 I examine the unintelligibility of the category of the lesbian by discussing Wyler's 1962 screen adaptation of Lillian Hellman's play, *The Children's Hour*, in which Audrey Hepburn and Shirley MacLaine play Karen Wright and Martha Dobie, two teachers falsely accused of lesbianism by one of their students. In emphasizing the lesbian's ability

to pass as “normal,” Cold War homophobia attributed to her identity an epistemological uncertainty. If the lesbian could pass, how could Americans correctly identify her? Even as Wyler’s movie provided a powerful critique of Cold War lesbian panic, it reproduced the conundrum. Wyler had collaborated with Hellman on an earlier adaptation, in 1936—the woman’s picture *These Three*—and he remained frustrated at having been forced to censor the play’s lesbian theme. Following the 1961 revision of the Production Code, he decided to make a more faithful version, but he worried that Hellman’s treatment of lesbianism would no longer resonate with audiences, and he attempted to update it by rendering Karen’s feelings for Martha sexually ambiguous. Ironically, in so doing he undercut the movie’s critique of the homophobic deployment of the category of the lesbian. The movie ends without clarifying Karen’s sexuality, which remains a puzzle the audience must solve. To elucidate the movie’s contradictory relationship to the Cold War construction of the lesbian, I examine the two earlier versions of *The Children’s Hour*: the play, which originally opened on Broadway in 1934; and *These Three*, which heterosexualized the play’s plot. I show that both versions inadvertently reinforced the backlash against female homosocial institutions and practices in the 1930s.

In chapter 3 I explore the persistence of the sexological construction of lesbian identity by analyzing Hitchcock’s representation of perverse female desire in *Marnie*, in which Tippi Hedren plays a thief who compulsively robs her employers after she has gained their trust. The movie’s interrogation of Marnie’s aberrant sexuality intersects with the Cold War construction of the lesbian, with Marnie using her femininity to disguise her problematic relation to the law. But the movie also renders Marnie’s lesbianism “artificial” by attributing it to a traumatic childhood experience. Thus her husband, Mark (Sean Connery), can supposedly reclaim her for the institutions of heterosexuality by reorienting her desire. At the same time, however, the movie opens up the possibility of an alternative construction of the heroine’s desire by casting doubt on her realignment with the law in the final scene. To situate this treatment of female homosexuality in relation to the Cold War construction of the lesbian, I also look at an earlier film made by Hitchcock, *Rebecca* (1940), which like *Marnie* interrogates the construction of female subjectivity in relation to patriarchal social and economic arrangements. After a whirlwind romance and marriage, the movie’s nameless heroine, played by Joan Fontaine, returns with her husband, Maxim de Winter (Laurence Olivier),

to his family's estate, which seems haunted by his beautiful and sexually alluring former wife, Rebecca, who supposedly drowned at sea. There the heroine encounters a terrifying version of the female world of love and ritual that reflects a homophobic construction of women's romantic friendships consistent with the backlash, in the 1930s, against female homosociality.

In part 2, "Female Stardom and Cold War Culture," I explore how the circulation of two conflicting models of lesbian desire affected the production of female stars in the Cold War era. In chapter 4 I focus on the remaking of Joan Crawford's screen image such that it came to affirm postwar gender and sexual norms, a process that began with her Academy Award-winning performance in *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945), in which she portrays an ambitious, hardworking mother who opens a successful chain of restaurants. From the moment she emerged as a star, in the early 1930s, Crawford had been marketed as a fiercely ambitious actress, a kind of female Horatio Alger who had picked herself up by the bootstraps, and her role as Mildred Pierce exploited this aspect of her screen image. But it also reflected a shift in the construction of normative femininity. Whereas Crawford's ambition had been promoted by MGM as an asset that appealed to Depression-era female audiences, it became problematic in the 1940s and 1950s, and underlay a masculinization of her image, which was reflected in her role as an irresponsible mother in *Mildred Pierce*. Crawford's public image thus existed in a complicated relationship to Cold War gender and sexual norms. By creating a camp effect, Crawford's performance style at once challenged and underwrote the heteronormative construction of womanhood. I develop this argument by examining *Johnny Guitar* (1953), Nicholas Ray's idiosyncratic western, in which Crawford plays Vienna, a gunslinging, cross-dressing saloon keeper persecuted for her gender and sexual nonconformity. By exploiting the campiness of Crawford's persona, the movie reinforced its critique of the incoherence of the Cold War construction of the lesbian.

Bette Davis's screen image underwent a similar transformation in the 1950s. At the height of her stardom, the late 1930s and 1940s, Davis starred in a cycle of enormously popular women's pictures that dislodged marriage and motherhood as the "happy ending" of female sexual development and in so doing provided female audiences with an alternative model of womanhood. In these films, which included *The Old Maid* (Edmund Goulding, 1939), *The Great Lie* (Edmund Goulding, 1941), *Now, Voyager* (Irving Rapper, 1942), and *Old Acquaintance* (Vincent Sher-

man, 1943), Davis's character more often ended up in an intimate domestic arrangement with a woman than with a man. The narrowing of gender and sexual norms in the Cold War era rendered this aspect of Davis's screen image problematic, and she made a cycle of movies about fading female stars, including *All about Eve*, *The Star* (Stuart Heisler, 1952), and *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane* (Robert Aldrich, 1964), that attempted to remake her screen image such that it validated Cold War gender and sexual norms. These movies punished her by representing her sexually ambiguous performance of femininity as pathological and grotesque, thereby attempting to demonstrate that her appeal as a star had become outmoded. In chapter 5 I elaborate this analysis by discussing *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane*, a horror movie that provided a gothic version of the type of woman's film that had originally established Davis as one of Hollywood's most successful female stars.

Finally, in chapter 6 I turn to the career of Doris Day, one of the most popular female stars of the 1950s and 1960s, showing that Day's wholesome screen image enabled her to appropriate masculinity without undermining her appearance of gender and sexual conformity. Although, starting with *Pillow Talk*, Day increasingly played independent, career-oriented women, her persona, unlike those of Davis and Crawford, resisted construction as lesbian. I begin by examining her performance of masculinity in the musical *Calamity Jane* (David Butler, 1953), in which she plays the title character, a cross-dressing gunfighter, a comic version of Crawford's role in *Johnny Guitar*, released the same year. The role solidified Day's masculinity, which continued to shape her image even after her transformation into a sex symbol in the 1960s. I go on to explore Day's role in *Pillow Talk*, a romantic comedy in which she plays Jan Morrow, a self-assured interior designer who shares a party line with a playboy bachelor, Brad Allen, played by Rock Hudson. In glamorizing her image, the movie marked a departure for Day, who usually played the "girl next door," and she went on to star, in the 1960s, in a series of enormously popular romantic comedies that consolidated her new image. Despite this shift in her image, however, Day's masculinity continued to surface in the type of character she played: a woman who pursues a career and insists on maintaining her sexual autonomy. As a result, her image had a complex relationship to the dominant construction of female sexuality in the Cold War era, at once underwriting and contesting it. Her masculinity constantly threatened to destabilize her image by rendering it sexually ambiguous.