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# FIND THE DYKE IN THIS PICTURE: LESBIAN SIGNIFICATION AND THE POLITICS OF VISIBILITY

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## Abstract

In this thesis, I explore the various, clever processes by which lesbian meaning is made, understood, experienced, felt, suggested, encoded, played with, played upon, recognized, celebrated, eroticized, and deployed – keeping in mind that these processes are rarely salient, clear, or uncomplicatedly revealed. Indeed, they are usually to be found in that sticky place of the ghost, teetering somewhere between visible and invisible, signifier and signified, presence and absence, fantasy and reality, or metaphor and referent. Querying the "phantom side" of lesbian, I make an argument for the insufficiency of a lesbian visibility politics that strives to make only lesbian subjects visible while ignoring or effacing the obtusely significant ways by which lesbian meaning becomes visible through memory, fantasy, desire, and affective strategies of representation and enunciation.



**Keywords**

lesbian, visibility, signification, representation, Fierce Pussy, structures of feeling, *The Apparitional Lesbian*, Terry Castle, fantasy, fashion, butch-femme

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## Table of Contents

## List of Figures

# Introduction

## Find the Dyke in This Picture

When I was ten years old, my sister and I were obsessed with a Canadian made-for-TV children's movie called *The Challengers*. *The Challengers* is a story about a tomboyish girl named Mackey. Mackey is about ten or eleven, her father has just died and she and her mother have moved from the city to a small town. Missing her father and hating her new home, Mackey mopes about until one day she catches sight of a hard-talking group of delinquent boys riding bikes and wearing matching cut-off denim vests with "The Challengers" emblazoned on the back. After being snubbed with the "no girls allowed" line, Mackey becomes Mack, tucking her hair into a hat, lowering her voice and inventing a life for herself as Mackey's boy-cousin from the city. The Challengers accept Mack and let him play keyboards in the band and do all the cool boy stuff they do together. Of course, chaos ensues as Mackey/Mack must lead her two gender-disparate lives without getting caught in the act.

A few years ago, my sister and I were both home from university, watching TV together one night and talking about our lives – bonding over stories about school, parties, girlfriends. That particular night, holed up in our parents' TV room with junk food and warm blankets, my sister and I rediscovered an old shared obsession: *The Challengers* being replayed on TV. Nearly fifteen years, two different coming out sagas, and a whole lot of learning about queer lives, culture, and intelligibility separated my sister and me from the shared obsession we had fostered for this film when we were young. As *The Challengers* opens, we learn that Mackey is no stranger to cross-dressing:

in the first scene, dressed as a boy in dark sunglasses, a hat, and leather jacket, Mackey is singing "Sunglasses at Night" on a stage as a feminine girl her age drifts around her, occasionally getting caught in Mackey's serious, brooding stare. When her mother bursts into the rehearsal to give Mackey the grave news about her father's death, the music cuts out, the hat comes off (revealing her long hair, her girlishness) and the show is over.

My sister and I just looked at each other. "Did you see that?"

I was never much of a tomboy. I was a rail-thin child, then a flat-chested, boyish-hipped teenager, but feminine, more or less, with long straight hair and a quietly girlish face, though I never showed my legs in skirts or stomped around in anything but my Doc Martens. My femininity was something I had uncomplicatedly as a becoming-woman, but never something I thought about much. As a burgeoning feminist I believed that to give in to it too much would constitute a kind of betrayal, but as a kid whirling through adolescence in a small town I also knew that to give in to it too little would mark me suspect as a lesbian. But I was fine, happy and unconcerned with the middle ground feminine gender I had awkwardly eked out – even as I was pretty sure I *was* a lesbian, keeping myself entertained with lesbian fantasies and back-of-my-mind plans about the lesbian life I would begin as soon as I graduated high school and left that small town. While I had many unrequited crushes on both girls and boys, the lesbian seductions that spurned those plans were most of all aesthetic. In my clandestine, late-night consumption of (more grown-up) lesbian films, my awkward sixteen-year-old self saw something in Ally Sheedy's swagger in *High Art* that I knew I wanted in my life, even if I wasn't sure how. My sister came out in high school, but my lesbian desire was a secret I held carefully while I was a teenager. I did not understand it as a suppressed or closeted secret

but rather as a personal promise to myself of exciting erotic possibility and independence that awaited me in a future that was all my own.

*Did you see that?* What did we see? Jodie Medd asserts that, "like someone who confesses to encountering a ghost, only to insist they must have been seeing 'something else,' it is the initial ghostly possibility that takes hold of the imagination" (213). It is not necessary to read Mackey as a baby dyke, nor even to cite *The Challengers* as a/the source of my sister's and my queer identities, to appreciate the palpable lesbianness of *The Challengers*. The film is ultimately a feel-good story about accepting yourself and others and, while she eventually gives up her boy-alter-ego, unlike the protagonists in most films about tomboys, Mackey remains a tomboyish girl who is eventually accepted as such by the boys. Patricia White, in discussing classical Hollywood cinema in particular, proposes "something else" to be a "useful working definition" of the way lesbian appears – as in, images that appear as lesbian are often 'supposed to be' about *something else* (80). Despite its family drama tone and the absence of any explicitly queer subject matter, there is still something tangible, *something else* about *The Challengers* that, as Amy Villarejo puts it, "[sets] lesbian somehow reverberating;" something about the image or its context lets viewers "make [it] work as 'lesbian' even, sometimes, against the will of those who created it" (1-2).

This practice is one that I term Finding the Dyke in This Picture, poached from a 1990s visibility campaign by Fierce Pussy, a collective visual artist/activist group based in New York City from 1991 to 1994 (figure 1). Accompanied by snapshots pulled from members' family albums, the Fierce Pussy posters resignifiy these apparently

find the dyke in this picture.

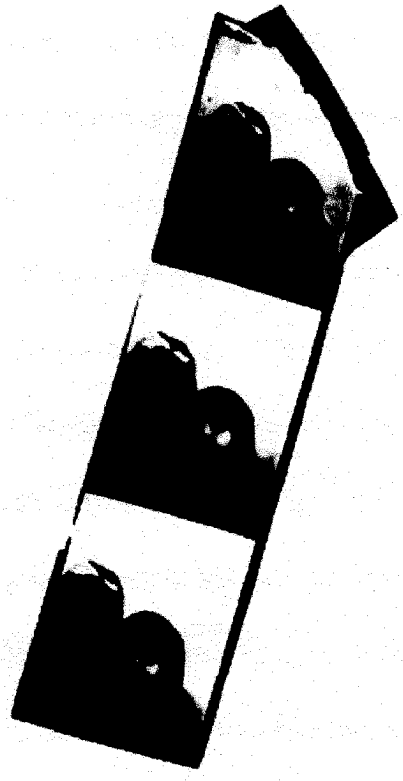

*Figure 1.* Fierce Pussy, "Find the Dyke in This Picture"

heterosexual images as potentially lesbian by identifying the ways in which lesbian already haunts their visual field. As these posters aggressively invaded the visual public sphere through their circulation in New York City in the 1990s, these images publicly troubled the heterosexuality of 'traditional' spaces, hinting at the fact that dykes are everywhere, perhaps (and probably) even in your own family album or childhood memories.[1]

At the same time, however, the Fierce Pussy images suggest the impossibility of a mimetic relationship between 'dyke' and the pictures they present. Ann Cvetkovich reads these images as testifying to "lesbianism's uncertain origins and the impossibility of rendering it visible in the childhood face or body," as well to the instability of the snapshot itself and "its presumed power to act as a document of intimate history" (299). But combined with the challenge *find the dyke in this picture*, these photos also suggest not only the rebuking of certain lesbian stereotypes that imply lesbians look only a certain way, such that you can always pick them out of the crowd; they also register the impossibility of rendering lesbian certainly visible at all.

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[1] Fierce Pussy was one of several artist-activist groups promoting queer rights and visibility in the 1990s, including Dyke Action Machine! (DAM!) and the Lesbian Avengers. Groups like Queer Nation and ACT-UP also frequently used creative visual representations as a means to increase the visibility of gay and lesbian issues and concerns in the metropolitan landscape, and the feminist art activist group Guerilla Girls employs similar strategies and tactics as a politics of subversion. In the context of this activist genealogy of public art, I have chosen to focus specifically on Fierce Pussy, and particularly on this single campaign (which was one of many) because of the questions it raises about the relationship of lesbian to the visual field, while at the same time engaging with the imperatives of visibility politics *and* resisting the impulse of celebrity that organizes many other lesbian activist tactics. (For example, one campaign by DAM! parodied advertisements for the clothing store The GAP by positing New York City lesbian figures as celebrities in white t-shirts and button-downs (see Cvetkovich).) I am seduced by the "poetic world-making," as Michael Warner puts it, effected by the challenge it issues, "Find the Dyke in this Picture" (114). For an excellent archival review of some of the specifically lesbian strategies of groups like Fierce Pussy, DAM! and the Lesbian Avengers, see Cvetkovich's "Fierce Pussies and Lesbian Avengers: Dyke Activism Meets Celebrity Culture." For a discussion of the important role public art played in ACT-UP, see Douglas Crimp and Adam Rolston's *AIDS Demo Graphics*. For a general discussion of public art and its history in/as activism, see Malcolm Miles's *Art, Space and the City : Public Art and Urban Futures*.

Even the act of naming or outing – identifying the girls in the picture who grew up to be 'real dykes' – cannot provide any final, comfortable certainty. Lesbian aggressively haunts these posters, designed provocatively and defiantly to stir up heterosexual anxiety by dropping the suggestion that lesbian exists where we least expect her in ways that we may never be able to visibly pin down and put on display.

As the title suggests, finding the dyke in this picture is what this thesis is all about.

Just before my final year of university, I fell in love with a woman. Recklessly lovestruck and made careless by desire, my whole world shook from under me that summer in a way that only a tumultuous, identity-dissolving relationship like that can effect. This is when I became a lesbian – which is to say that I started to think of myself and to refashion my identity in ways that were and are indelibly related to lesbian. I cut off most of my hair and made other urgent, naively yearning leaps towards everything I recognized as belonging to a (admittedly Ally Sheedy-esque) lesbian aesthetic or sensibility. Still hungry for that aesthetic perhaps more than anything, and certainly obsessed, I tried to come to an understanding of that which I suddenly found myself inside, and I approached it, as I approach most things that bewilder me, through research and through writing.

This particular story ends with heartbreak, loss, and depression that shook my world from under me a second time and that frantically cast doubt on everything I thought I knew about myself and about lesbian, and about any tenuous connection I had made between those two things. This is, it's true, a rather familiar coming out account,

but in this story, that doubt coincided with having to finish the undergraduate thesis I had started (in much more certain times) about just those things – lesbian identity, appearance, aesthetics, and visibility. That thesis, which was to later become this research, became the name I gave to my anxious, nervous identity. Presenting various in-progress parts of it, I always felt like an impostor, never completely certain of the identification I felt I had to stand on before I could even open my mouth, or on which others would place me as soon as I said, "this is about lesbian visibility." It was not that I was unsure whether I wanted to love and fuck women – that was everything. It was, to twist the words of Judith Butler, that I was unsure what that meant.

The *being* of the coming-out declaration, 'I am' is, Butler asserts, an empty copula. It is a locus of opacity that simply replaces the opacity of the closet and that "cannot be substituted with a set of descriptions" ("Imitation" 122). That is, one can say "I am a lesbian," but the lesbianness remains opaque: what does it mean? It is not immediately available to us simply through the declaration that announces itself as full disclosure. The opacity of lesbian is the enigma propelling so much lesbian theory from the 1970s to today. How do we define lesbian? Attempts to address this question, what Marilyn Farwell (citing Adrienne Rich) characterizes as "a war of images," reach towards the hopeful possibility of figuring lesbian out so that we might make a proper, culturally intelligible and politically viable subject of her at last (107). Lesbian has been metaphorized, imaged, and deployed as everything from women who really want to be men, to an embodiment of all women's desire and creativity, to the fragmented, postmodern subject *par excellence*. But after so many words deployed in disagreement, coming up with a working definition of lesbian has proved difficult. As Marilyn Frye

once put it, lesbian is and always has been "extraordinarily resistant to standard procedures of semantic analysis" (78). Or, in Butler's words, "it is always finally unclear what is meant by invoking the lesbian-signifier" (122).

Valerie Traub notes that the framing of the debate, with the seemingly simple question, *what is a lesbian?* is "in fact disarming, for part of the theoretical and existential problem of defining the 'lesbian' is the variability and fluidity of the category to which 'she' belongs" (115). Traub proposes that "the meanings of lesbian are temporally contingent and constantly negotiated;" she continues,

> The terms by which 'lesbian' is interpreted, and thus given cultural meaning and presence, alter in relation to the shifting fortunes of gender ideologies and conflicts, erotic techniques and disciplines, movement politics, fashion and consumer trends, media representations, and paradigms of mental illness and physical disease – to name just a very few. (115)

Traub puts her finger on the historically shifting, difficult to pin down and thus always opaque nature of lesbian meaning, but the attempts at definitional certainty have generated a fleeting definition that is expressive perhaps most of all in its cloudiness: lesbian is recognizably remarkable for her resistance to standard semantics, for the opacity of her invocations and the haunting apparitionality of her persistent appearances. A cop out, perhaps, or a compromise. Because despite all these efforts to pin her down, so many theorists – including this one – are still so interested in and intoxicated by her resistance; Carol Guess labels it a theoretical obsession (33). It is lesbian's resistance that keeps us compelled to chase her. She is coy, hard to get (at), and, as psychoanalysis tells

us, the withholding of the object is what keeps desire humming. Guess proposes a notion of lesbian that is based on the generative, rather than destructive, quality of the site of dissent and contestation that lesbian's extensive theorization constructs and performs (35). I would add that it is our desires – political, erotic, and theoretical – for lesbian that keep her moving and that bring her into language in the first place.

Of course, not everyone is satisfied with the poststructuralist imperative to put lesbian in scare-quotes. In *The Apparitional Lesbian,* Terry Castle's project of "bringing the lesbian back into focus ... in all her worldliness, comedy, and humanity," Castle frankly disagrees (2). Lesbian she protests, is not "nonsense:" "I don't find it 'always unclear what is meant by invoking the lesbian-signifier'... I believe that we live in a world in which the word *lesbian* still makes sense, and that it is possible to use the word frequently, even lyrically, and still be understood" (13-14). Castle is not wrong, but, as Traub notes, the apparent simplicity of this formulation is disarming. On the most banal level, a declaration of *I am a lesbian* may be met with all kinds of different responses, but utter confusion about what is implied would be rather rare. Lesbian does make sense; it is understood. But just *what kind* of sense and exactly *how* we and others understand its "constantly negotiated" meanings is what remains always unclear.

If lesbian is "understood," even obliquely, where are we to find her meaning if not in or through standard semantic analysis? Where is she hiding, concealed in our enunciations such that we understand her, feel her, sense her, are imaginatively touched by her sensuality – but cannot necessarily or definitively see her, point to her, image or explain her? Castle objects to Butler's and others' characterization of lesbian as "always finally unclear" as a dismissal of the lesbian meaning she experiences, as making lesbian

into "nonsense." Indeed, this is how this characterization is often taken up within queer politics, which sometimes has a tendency to throw lesbian out with the bathwater of identity-politics in favour of *queer,* which "appears more protean, more vague, more inclusive, more unpredictable, more 'hip' and exciting" (Guess 36).

I am fascinated by lesbian nonsense (and, as I show in Chapter 2, so is Castle). While I use and value *queer* as an important, even revolutionary, concept that serves an important purpose, I am still haunted by lesbian and, in the lesbian-vs.-queer debates, the framing of the question as an opposition distorts the ways in which the indications of the two words rub up against each other. The lesbian meaning-making practices I explore in this thesis rest somewhere in between Castle's formulation of lesbian as "understood" and the queer-poststructuralist account of lesbian as "always finally unclear." By repeatedly querying the invocation of the lesbian signifier, I attempt to zero in on the *something else* of lesbian, what Roland Barthes terms the "obtuse meaning" that is "outside (articulated) language, but still within interlocution" (55). I want to hang on to what is obtusely significant – even if not signified – by the lesbian signifier, reaching toward that which is unclearly and nonsensically solicited by its invocation. That which may be inarticulable but is "still within interlocution." That which, like the ghost, doesn't exist but appears nonetheless. While many queers of my generation now see lesbian to be an outdated, essentialist, or identity-bound concept, by holding on to this *something else* of lesbian meaning I make an argument for retrieving a significant notion of lesbian from being bound up and summarily discarded with a less significant concept of identity or subjectivity. Even as we acknowledge that it, like all identity categories, does not and cannot fully or coherently explain identities or confirm subjects, I think that lesbian *is* a

queer concept, that it does make meaning, and that this alone is enough to make it not only valuable, but appealing.

Without attempting to fill the copula of being lesbian with a set of descriptions or theories, in this thesis I explore the various, clever processes by which lesbian meaning is made, understood, experienced, felt, suggested, encoded, played with, played upon, recognized, celebrated, eroticized, and deployed – keeping in mind that these processes are rarely salient, clear or uncomplicatedly revealed, and are usually to be found in that sticky place of the ghost, teetering somewhere between visible and invisible, signifier and signified, presence and absence, fantasy and reality, or metaphor and referent. In practice, what this turns out to look like is a lot of games of finding the dyke in the picture, games which, in the spirit of Fierce Pussy, take pleasure in the paradox of looking, and finding, without recourse to certainty or truth. In the chapters that follow, I query several of what Sue-Ellen Case calls "strateg[ies] of appearance [that replace] claims to truth" (197). Far from arguing that lesbian cannot be seen or understood at all, I am obsessed with reaching towards what *is* seen – and how – when lesbian makes an appearance.

In order to fully appreciate and describe the way we experience lesbian, our theoretical and representational imaginings of her must open up and refract our desiring, definitional reaches, rather than consolidate them. We must begin to take seriously all those slippery, ephemeral, fugitive concepts, like memory, desire, fantasy, and affect, which give texture to our theorizations of lesbian and block the tendency for theory to evacuate its objects of their tenor and nuances. The many and various ways in which we think and feel lesbian stretch that word to its limits as something that is not 'possible' but that appears nonetheless, if only fleetingly, and if in a way that defies the logic of

representation that conflates vision with knowledge. Practicing what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls a "reparative reading" (150), I want to affirm the pleasures of lesbian appearances and the erotics of (in)visibility that are too often effaced in the official making-visible of lesbian subjects.

In the face of the general historical invisibility of lesbian bodies and concerns in public policy, education, culturally authorized familial formations, and the dominant cultural arena, contemporary Western lesbian politics since the 1980s have been characterized by a defensive assertion of lesbian presence and a demand to be seen. "Bringing the lesbian back into focus," as Castle advocates, engenders a politics of visibility in which bodies are vigorously made to appear under the sign of lesbian and that links the increased incidence of queer female cultural representations to increased political power and authority for lesbian women. This urgent need to be seen gives rise to a range of performances for coming out, "naming oneself lesbian... [as] an act of empowerment" (Zimmerman 259). Biddy Martin notes that coming out "aims to give lesbian identity a coherence and a legitimacy that can make both individual and social action possible" (148). Bonnie Zimmerman also suggests that power is located in "the ability to name, to speak, to come out of silence" (259). Artist and activist Laura Cottingham characterizes the political urgency of coming out in this way:

> Unless we insist on our lesbian selves, unless we articulate ourselves visibly as such in the present, history will no doubt continue to erase us, and the lesbian historians of the future will be left with fragments and puzzles not much better than the ones we possess of the past today. Freeing ourselves from the self-censorship imposed on us is perhaps one

> of the most vital concerns contemporary lesbians face... women who are unwilling to live heterosexualized lives, but still unable to publicly enunciate themselves as lesbians. (75)

Thus the act of coming out – the public enunciation of oneself as lesbian, intentionally making oneself visible under the sign of lesbian – takes on an extremely important role in lesbian politics.

Ellen DeGeneres's (and her TV character, Ellen Morgan's) 1997 coming out on her sitcom *Ellen* is undoubtedly *the* moment in lesbian visibility, marking a pioneering move in mainstream representations of gay men and lesbians on television and in other media. Though the series was cancelled in 1998 (followed by a nosedive in Ellen's career for several years, until recently), DeGeneres paved the way for more mainstream media to explore lesbian issues, making it 'safe' for other visible women in Hollywood to come out as well. Ellen's step out of the closet came in the wake of a flurry of media coverage, "got her an invitation to the White House, and provoked laudatory comments from [then] Vice-President Al Gore about Hollywood's new openness toward sexual orientation" (Dow 123). It also landed her on the cover of *Time* magazine, accompanied by the thoroughly and comically unambiguous headline, "Yep, I'm Gay" (figure 2).[2]

Coming out has become such an important part of gay and lesbian politics it seems – and particularly so for our culture's most visible figures, celebrities – that in 2006, *Out* magazine's annual list of Hollywood's 50 most powerful gay people included several people who were, at the time, not in fact publicly 'out' of their own accord. *Out*'s provocative and controversial cover featured two models posing with masks depicting the

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[2] For an alternative discussion of Ellen DeGeneres's relationship to visibility politics, see Eric O. Clarke's *Virtuous Vice: Homoeroticism and the Public Sphere*, pages 32-36.


*Figure 2.* The lesbian poster girl
Ellen DeGeneres comes out on the cover of *Time* magazine, April 14, 1997.

faces of Hollywood's biggest gay 'open secrets,' actress Jodie Foster and TV journalist Anderson Cooper (figure 3). In the article, titled "The Glass Closet," *Out* is, not surprisingly, not very sympathetic to those stars it characterizes as "terrified of shattered glass," who, like Foster, aren't really pretending to be straight any more, but who also have not officially stepped out of the closet in any public way: "When halfheartedness is used as a career move, there's little to cheer about, especially when truthin' could be the road to real relief" (Musto n.p.). In this judgment, the measure of political success for a gay and lesbian movement is in making that list in *Out* longer: gay and lesbian politics as Hollywood homo head-counting.

Much of the logic of visibility politics is couched in the rhetoric of 'putting on display,' a grammar that assumes something or someone prior that can be displayed – a lesbian body that is deemed to independently bear and make lesbian meaning and whose sexuality enjoys an unproblematic relationship to representation. A body that is revealed through acts of self-disclosure or that can appear under the sign of lesbian simply by being named, or outed, as such. For example, the *Time* cover expresses a certain level of self-satisfaction, as if *Time* had (finally!) solved the troubling problem of lesbian signification for its (heterosexual) readership: not only does Ellen = lesbian, but, more usefully, lesbian = Ellen. By grounding lesbian in and on the body of Ellen DeGeneres, *Time* magazine, and the lesbian visibility politics of celebrity that grows up around it, seems to fully, visually realize lesbian, (apparently) pulling it out of the ethereal shadows, pinning it down, figuring it out, and putting it on display.


*Figure 3.* Gay and lesbian politics as Hollywood homo head-counting *Out* magazine, May 2007.

Dow points out that Ellen's coming out on her TV show, and indeed in 'real life,' was not a simple process of revealing the truth, a point at which the siginifications and politics of sexuality set reverberating by that move are simply put to rest. Examining the ways in which lesbian played out on the show in the episodes between Ellen's coming out and the show's cancellation and observing that the moment Ellen 'reveals' her lesbianism is only "the beginning of a discursive construction of that sexuality – of its authenticity, of its form, and of its politics," Dow begins to complicate the logic of coming out as an act of (just) revealing something about oneself (124). Shane Phelan similarly suggests that gay and lesbian politics ought to move away from a politics that privileges coming out and towards a fuller understanding of the process of "becoming out:" "coming out is partially a process of revealing something kept hidden, but it is more than that. It is the process of fashioning a self – a lesbian or gay self – that did not exist before coming out began" ("(Be)Coming" 774). In this formulation, coming out becomes merely a first step that signals one's orientation to a signifier (yep!) and that sets off a lifelong process that has as much to do with production and composition as it does with disclosure.

This is the paradox of lesbian visibility politics: while marching under the banner of the visible, it is a politics that, as Fierce Pussy makes evident, is not even itself fully able to make the lesbian appear – though not for lack of trying. *Time* seems to think it successfully answered that imperative back in 1997, explicitly naming the lesbian by presenting Ellen DeGeneres as the lesbian poster girl. As Fierce Pussy shows, this politics of visibility at once applauds lesbians gaining more visible space within culture at the same time as it, in its attempt to achieve that, exposes the

impossibility of any appearance that would be completely as clear, as realizable, as unambiguous, or as nameable as *Time* suggests.

And yet, Fierce Pussy still effects a powerful politics, and even a politics of visibility, without attempting to fill the copula of being-lesbian, indeed without assuming that that is a necessary precursor to politics. Fierce Pussy's politics of visibility is one that foregrounds the phantom side of the lesbian-signifier by keeping the sign reverberating through the image without insisting that it ever finally appear on or as any one body. They show us that politics is not simply a matter of inserting lesbian bodies into preexisting discourses of visibility, of assuming the stability of lesbian in and on those bodies and naming them as such under the sign. Rather, as Rosemary Hennessy puts it, a politics that effects lesbian visibility "is not just a matter of widening the scope of what we see, but of starting from a different place in how we see" (78).

Once my undergraduate thesis was finally, punishingly finished, it became the coffer into which I stored away the trauma and losses of a particularly dark year so that I could move on with my life and my still curious, still obsessed explorations of lesbian – what it means, how it makes meaning, and how it makes meaning for me. Reopening the specific research questions explored here has been a bit like scratching at a barely healed wound, and the sting that lives inside this research is that to which, finally, I want to bear witness with this personal testimony – the anxiety, loss, and tenderness that cannot be separated from the subject, and from which I cannot separate or distance myself in order that I might 'objectively' approach it. As Judith Halberstam puts it,

> the personal and the theoretical are imbricated in all projects about queer belonging, queer dislocation, and queer identity. We find our way, in other words, to a theoretical understanding of the mechanisms of subjectivity through our own histories of unbelonging. We embrace our personal memories of dislocation and dysphoria through theoretical rewritings of moments of shame and embarrassment, rejection and disjuncture. ("Between" 62)

My theoretical understandings of lesbian cannot be separated from my own historical implicatedness in it up to this point, and in this way this research is permanently hinged with my own history and acts of autobiographical authorship.

In Chapter One, I use this intuition about the queer value of lesbian autobiography to analyze *The Apparitional Lesbian* more closely. In particular, I read Castle's autobiographical essay in that book, "First, Ed," which centers around a memory from Castle's childhood of encountering Ed, a masculine dyke, at the YWCA. Reading reparatively, in Sedgwick's formulation, around Castle's admonitions about the clarity of lesbian and the necessity of rushing her from apparitionality to vision, I tug at Castle's abundance of haunting/haunted images and pull out those moments when she is enraptured by the power of what I label, using Raymond Williams's concept, lesbian structures of feeling.

In Chapter Two, I am concerned with pursuing the ways in which lesbian makes appearances that are not necessarily bound up with notions of the subject, identity, or the lesbian body. Using Laplanche and Pontalis's description of fantasy as the "setting of desire," I suggest that lesbian can be understood as a fantasy or "sequence of images" in

which we may appear caught up (26). Taking the lesbian fan as an image of this (desubjectivized) *being caught up-ness*, I read a few select pieces of lesbian visual and film art that all employ the montage form – what White calls "cut-and-paste-fetishism"– and that can be characterized as acts of lesbian fandom (53). These cut-and-paste fan texts are all acts of intertextual engagement, fracturing and reconstructing 'dominant' texts that, like *The Challengers*, solicit lesbian desires without necessarily representing them. I argue that these pieces visualize genealogies of lesbian meaning-making, revealing some of the ways lesbian meaning is made through the operations of fantasy and the lesbian gaze.

In the Conclusion, "On the Pleasures of Lesbian Fashion," I consider the question of recognizing and looking like a lesbian by moving through my own lesbian closets and wardrobes as they have snaked in and out of fashion and activism, masculinity and femininity, and the erotic categories of butch and femme. The period between the completion of my undergraduate thesis and the completion of this thesis has been marked for me by an experience of coming into a specifically queer femme expression. Doing femme has helped to take away a bit of the hurt that lives inside my lesbian identity, and exploring butch-femme histories, styles, and erotic dynamics has allowed me to expand my understandings of lesbian meaning and meaning-making practices. Teasing out the different meanings of visibility that inflect our understanding of lesbian appearance and entering into discussions about 'butch hypervisibility' and 'femme invisibility,' by way of conclusion I attempt to historicize and refine the terms of this debate over looking like a lesbian at the same time as I attempt to recognize myself reflected somewhere inside it.

Between Chapter One and Chapter Two, I move from a close reading of a single text to constructing a theoretical montage, "cut-and-paste" style, out of a range of texts with similar aesthetic approaches. In the Conclusion, I return more explicitly to an autobiographical frame while continuing to roam through images and texts, finding the dyke(s) in the picture at every step of the way – dykes who sometimes turn out to be me. I argue in Chapter Two that the cut-and-paste fan text form may offer a specifically lesbian syntactical and affective strategy of representation and, in a way, throughout this thesis I am engaged with assembling my own cut-and-paste lesbian fan text. This thesis takes the shape of an imaginative montage of theory, fandom, and autobiography that together form an attempt to discern and convey the lesbian meaning to be found "in the syntax of the sequence" (Laplanche and Pontalis 26). This thesis is an array of images, texts, and scenes that, arranged as such, exhibit lesbian as a setting of desire and, more specifically, as a setting of *my* desire, and so too do I become visible in the syntax of this sequence.

This research haunts me. It is about me. It is about various stages of my identity and my history, areas that often turn out to be still tender, that still smart. And in this way, it is about lesbian.

## Chapter One

## "A Lover as Well as a Diagnostician:" Lesbian Structures of Feeling in Terry Castle's *The Apparitional Lesbian*

In the beginning of *The Apparitional Lesbian,* Terry Castle notes that Greta Garbo is one of the many ghosts haunting that book (1). In many ways, *The Apparitional Lesbian* haunts my own studies of lesbian visibility as a book to which I return again and again, each time finding something new lurking within its spectral metaphors, some new "scandalously energizing" sensuality within its margins (4). In some ways, I think, all lesbian writing – whether fiction, theory, or personal narrative – is intertextually haunted by all foregoing writing and imagining that invokes and orbits around the image or idea of seeing lesbian – "elusive, vapourous, difficult to spot" as she may be (2).

Castle attests that lesbian is the "ghost effect" of cinema, literature, and popular fantasy, (dis)appearing only as "an impossibility, a misting over, an evaporation, or 'whiting out' of possibility" (28). Not simply an apparition, the lesbian has been "ghost*ed*," "apparitionaliz*ed*," and "disappear*ed*" in the Western imagination because, Castle argues, of the threat she poses to patriarchal protocol and the psychic authority of men (4-7, my emphasis). Castle characterizes modern culture as "a kind of derealization machine: insert the lesbian and watch her disappear" (6). Lesbian is the lavender menace contained and controlled in and by her ghosted invisibility.

Castle describes her project as one of "bringing the lesbian back into focus" (2), but despite its project of focus and clarity, it is the spectral vapours casting lesbian shadows all over the history of literature and culture that turn out to be both the object of

analysis and the organizing metaphor of *The Apparitional Lesbian*. She contends that it is "in fact the very ghostliness – the seeming ineffability" that *makes* a story or image recognizably, "archetypally" lesbian in the first place:

> The kiss that doesn't happen, the kiss that *can't* happen, because one of the women involved has become a ghost (or else is direly haunted by ghosts) seems to me a crucial metaphor for the history of lesbian literary representation since the early eighteenth century. (30)

Lesbian is recognizable in discourse only as a phantasmic suggestion of appearance that haunts the mind's eye and, paradoxically, it is her spectrality that gives her away as what she is; "like someone who confesses to encountering a ghost, only to insist they must have been seeing 'something else,' it is the initial ghostly possibility that takes hold of the imagination" (Medd 213). The spectral texture of lesbian in *The Apparitional Lesbian* is insinuated in shadow play: perceptible, if not visible, but only in a moment that quickly slips through your fingers. Lesbian is that which can only ever be suggested and is never fully confirmed, for "it is always finally unclear what is meant by invoking the lesbian-signifier" (Butler, "Imitation" 122).

As I have shown, while the meaning of the lesbian-signifier and her cultural intelligibility and political viability have been extensively *thought*, what has been much less explored in lesbian and queer theory is the way lesbian is *felt* in/as experience, or as Raymond Williams puts it in his discussion of what he calls "structures of feeling," "thought as felt, and feeling as thought" (132). *The Apparitional Lesbian* haunts me in part because, through its exploits in spectrality, it conjures up powerful feelings, emotions, textures, and tones that are affectively and directly related to the structuring,

felt texture of lesbian; that is to say, I am continuously enthralled by what I want to identify as Castle's articulation (or at least reaching toward an articulation) of a lesbian structure of feeling.

In this chapter, I argue that haunting both *The Apparitional Lesbian* and the official logic of lesbian visibility politics is an affectively palpable (if not patently visible) lesbian structure of feeling that escapes articulation but that nonetheless powerfully furnishes lesbian with much of its lived, felt meaning in what Williams calls "the specificity of present being" (130). I show how Castle gestures towards this structure of feeling in several moments in the book, and I argue that a full, sympathetic reading of Castle must hold on to her wonder, enchantment, and rapture with lesbian ghosts and apparitions and her "loverlike gaiety" and "amorous empathy" when it comes to the sensuous texture of lesbian in memory and fantasy. Heather Love asserts that in matters that lie at "the edge of semantic availability" (Williams's phrase, 134), the personal must often stand in for what theory cannot say (12). Following Love, I read what I see to be a particularly apposite case of this assertion, a short autobiographical essay included in *The Apparitional Lesbian* called "First, Ed." From Ed, I move to other parts of the book in which personal experience and its range of affects can function as a theoretical index or placeholder to objectify and make visible a structure of feeling that otherwise escapes articulation.

In discussing "meanings and values as they are actually lived and felt," Williams finds the available vernacular of the social lacking and supplies the useful term "structures of feeling" (132). As a concept, structures of feeling attempts to detect and gesture towards that which escapes linguistic precision: those experiences and affects at

the edge of semantic availability, often casually resigned to the 'merely' personal, private, or subjective. The specificity of present being – that which is left "still sounding elsewhere" when all appears to be visibly and comfortably defined and resolved – cannot be contained by the fixity and explicitness of the officially social world of institutions and identities (130).

> If the social is always past, in the sense that it is always formed, we have indeed to find other terms for the undeniable experience of the present: not only the temporal present, the realization of this and this instant, but the specificity of present being, the inalienably physical, within which we may indeed discern and acknowledge institutions, formations, positions, but not always as fixed products, defining products. And if the social is the fixed and explicit – the known relationships, institutions, formations, positions – all that is present and moving, all that escapes or seems to escape from the fixed and the explicit and the known, is grasped and defined as the personal: this, here, now, alive, active, 'subjective.' (128)

Only from within the specificity of present being – from within various structures of feeling – can we discern or acknowledge institutions, formations, and positions. And, moreover, no matter how much time we may spend defining these things, they may not appear so fixed or defining at all from within the textures that make them real in present being. Structures of feeling are the source of a residual sense of dissatisfaction in fixed formations because, "present and moving," they escape the shift to that fixed and always-past sense of sociality.

Williams also attests that these textures are not contra the social but in fact themselves deeply social: the social "*in process*, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating" (134). That is, structures of feeling are concerned with all that is habitually set aside as subjective and taken to be too unstable, too unfixed, too personal for social theory; they are modes of social formation that have not yet been articulated or defined, that are felt and thought but "in an embryonic phase" (131). Pre-emergent as they may be, structures of feeling have identifiable structures: 'subjective' feelings, affects, impulses, restraints, and tones are never "mere flux" but rather "a set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension" with "emergent, connecting, and dominant characteristics," "specific hierarchies," "particular linkages, particular emphases and suppressions, and, in what are often its most recognizable forms, particular deep starting-points and conclusions" (132, 134).

Though not yet emergent enough to be definable, structures of feeling nonetheless make varied relations with the more recognizably social institutions and formations and, moreover, do not *need* to be defined before their force can be distinctively felt: structures of feeling "do not have to await definition, classification, or rationalization before they exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and on action" (131-32). They are, Williams explains, first and foremost recognizable as "changes of presence," and it is this character – the way in which they articulate a particular kind of presence – that so distinctively differentiates them from other institutional or formal modes of social formation (130, 135).

In this way, structures of feelings might in fact be a lot like ghosts and apparitions, not fully visible or articulated but appreciable enough to raise the hairs on the back of your neck. Williams suggests that structures of feeling are most recognizable and identifiable by the explicit traces they leave in art and literature as evidence or indication of their formation (133). Like a ghost that only shows up in a photograph, they are specific presences that, while felt and thought all around us as the quotidian texture of the present, are only fleetingly visible in art. Structures of feeling are the phantom side of the social.

*The Apparitional Lesbian* negotiates with both a lesbian politics of visibility – or what one might refer to as the official lesbian consciousness of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries – and a palpable lesbian structure of feeling that hangs ("like a dream") as the phantom side of that official lesbian position. The book dips into the heated debates on defining lesbian, and Castle devotes several pages of the introduction to assert that the meaning of lesbian is both accessible and stable. The book also participates in a wide-ranging project of lesbian literary 'coming out' that resulted in several books in the 1980s and 90s that ventured back through literary history to identify lesbians peopling Western writing at every turn.[2] Following this trend, Castle puts a renewed emphasis on discovering/recovering and accentuating the tangibility, reality, and materiality of lesbian bodies in the face of the historical ghosting that forbade any sort of satisfying tangibility at all. She writes in the introduction:

> [i]ndeed, if a single grand theme shapes this collection, it is that there are always 'more' lesbians to be found in the world than one expects – that lesbians are

[2] Particularly the work of Lillian Faderman; see *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendships and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* and *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth Century America.*

> indeed 'everywhere' and always have been. For too long, our thinking has been dominated by a kind of scarcity model: either there aren't any lesbians at all, or too few of them to matter. It is time, I maintain, to focus on presence instead of absence, plenitude instead of scarcity... Only thus do we call the lesbian back from the 'world of vapors' to which she has been consigned. (19)

While Castle is intent to bring about lesbian visibility – of "call[ing] the lesbian back from the 'world of vapours'" – and concentrated on participating in a specific lesbian politics that does just this, I also think that Castle would not advocate doing away with vapours entirely, or with what she later refers to as "the sensuality of the spectral" (54), or, more broadly, what one might refer to as the vapourous elements of a lesbian structure of feeling that exist on the "edge of semantic availability."

In her rhetorical style, Castle frequently begins arguments with the contraction "and yet" – indeed, it appears nearly consistently at the beginning of a sentence or (often) a paragraph every five or six pages throughout the book. After a while, this semantic structure begins to effect a sense of lesbian detective work as Castle shows over and over that a narrative or character may appear, on the surface, to be one way (heterosexual), "and yet" something in the narrative always gives away quite something else (lesbianism). And yet, Castle's "and yets" also threaten to endlessly unravel, often appearing in the text not singualarly but in chains that complicate and call into question what came before in the text and that never quite seem to conclude, always further piercing into that which resolutely escapes articulation.

Such is the case in gesturing toward a structure of feeling – on the edge of semantic availability, semantics will always get away from you. Even after lesbian is

exhaustively defined and her hostile derealization argued, there is something left "still sounding elsewhere" that makes the argument and its aggressive coming to visibility somehow unsatisfying: the persistent "and yet..." that refuses to be resolved. For example:

> And yet without unsaying, as it were, the negative power of the apparitional metaphor, I would like to complicate the somewhat relentless (and pessimistic) argument laid out here... '[S]eeing ghosts' may be a matter – not so much of derealization – but of rhapsodical embodiment: a ritual calling up, or *apophrades*, in the old mystical sense... For the spectral vernacular, it turns out, contains its own powerful and perverse magic. Used imaginatively – repossessed, so to speak – the very trope that evaporates can also solidify. In the strangest turn of all, perhaps, the lesbian body itself returns: and the feeble, elegiac waving off – the gesture of would-be exorcism – becomes instead a new and passionate beckoning. (46-47)

Castle uses this vernacular of powerful and perverse magic to make the lesbian body return by relating a story from her own life in a short essay called "First, Ed," included after the introduction in *The Apparitional Lesbian.* In this piece, she recalls the intense pleasure and wonder of her memories of Ed, a dyke she encountered in a YWCA locker room as a small child but never knew or properly met. Castle is haunted by Ed. "First, Ed" is an incredibly affecting essay, rich in description painting the sights, sounds, smells, and textures of the remembered spaces and experiences she brings to life – from the California bachelor(ette) apartment she lived in with her divorcée mother and younger

sister to the way the sweltering seductiveness of a summer in the 1960s feels to a little girl. Despite the excitement evoked by the essay, its organizing tone is one of muted drama, of remembered thrill and wonder only obscurely visible through the still, steamy vapours of an empty women's locker room. Her description of the YWCA is particularly lush:

> The place had an interesting air of desolation: various lost or ill-fitting souls lingered in the front area especially – off-duty sailors, people speaking Spanish, Neogroes, Fillipinas, mysterious solitary women... The indoor pool was deep in the netherworld of the building, seemingly underground... The water itself was cloudy, awash with dead moths and floating Band-Aids, but nonetheless, in its foggy Byzantine way, also warming-seeming and attractive. (23)

In her memory, the YWCA becomes something of a shadowy haunt for (particularly female) lost souls, populated by outcasts, enigmas, and those disadvantaged by society. But despite its desolate murkiness, she is comforted and drawn to its interesting, "foggy Byzantine" allure.

She first sees Ed here while "struggling to float on my back without inhaling water" during a swimming lesson, when Ed is standing above her in the spectator's area above the pool, waiting for the adult swim period (23-24). The two meet each other's gazes and at this strange, upside down angle the world refuses to stay right way up: "[it was] as though our positions had reversed, water and air had changed places, and I was the one looking down from above" (24). Ed wears men's clothes of a "hoodish fifties"

style – tight black pants, a shirt, tie, and dress shoes – with her short dark hair in an oiled pompadour. And she is "spectacularly good-looking:"

> I might grace my bedroom bulletin board with the toothy images of John, Paul, George and Ringo, but Ed's 'look' (as I knew even then) was far more compelling... She appeared to be in her late twenties or early thirties – definitely 'old' to me – though something about the drastic formality of her costume also gave her the look of a teenage boy, one dressed up, perhaps, for a senior prom. She spoke to no one, smoked a cigarette, and seemed, despite her great beauty, consumed by sadness. (24)

Castle's description of Ed is deliciously sensuous, sympathetic, and full of girlhood wonder deeply inflected by adult sexual appetites. In this haunt of lost souls, Ed, with her men's clothes and "teenage boy" lesbian aesthetic, stands out to her not as a freak or oddity but as something beautiful and almost ethereal.

When she encounters Ed while alone in the women's locker room, this ethereal quality is multiplied by the "thick damp air" that hangs "like a dream" (25). The dampness of the air recalls her earlier feeling that "water and air had changed places," and indeed, there is a thick, damp, dream-like quality to the whole essay – as if the clouds of steam have escaped the locker room and coated the entire scene in the specific texture of that memory-fantasy space. Paradoxically, when Ed comes in, even while the room seems clouded in vapours, "at the same time everything seemed to open up, as if I – or she and I together – had suddenly entered a clearing in a forest" (25). The moment of appearance is inflected by both seeing and unseeing. This is further true as Ed begins to undress, removing the articles that signify her manhood and revealing breasts, a triangle

of pubic hair, and womanly thighs, which she slides through the legs of a women's bathing suit. The sex appeal and stark humanity of her nakedness is at once enticing and melancholy.

> Indeed, I seem to be assisting her, leaning into her, even (slyly) inhaling her. She bends slightly at the knees, balances herself with one hand against the locker, begins to hold me around the neck – but no, this is a fantasy of the present. In that moment my feelings were of a far more polite, delicate, even sentimental nature. Astonishment gave way to, resolved into, embarrassment. When at last Ed drew on, over the dark crown of her head, a flowered Esther Williams-style bathing cap – the final clownish touch of femininity – I felt, obscurely, the pathos of her transformation: she had become somehow less than herself. But her eyes, with their mute, impassive challenge, never faltered. They seemed to say, I own you now. And I realized too, though I had no words for it at the time, how much I adored her, and what tumult lay ahead. (26)

With the "clownish" femininity of her costume, Ed seems more in drag and "less than herself" as she pads off to the pool than she did when she met the floating little girl's upside-down gaze from the spectator's booth. Ed enraptures her, possesses her, owns her, and in this moment of exposure, the "pathos of her transformation" and the sadness with which she seems to be consumed evoke a potent quality of suffering that the little girl can't quite understand but that the remembering woman can now recognize, presumably from the tumult of her own life's narrative. While holding on to the sentimentality and adoration of the girlhood encounter, the story as we receive it is filtered through the

decidedly lesbian trajectory of mystery, desire, and tumult of the life the author has led up until this point; the moment remembered has become "a fantasy of the present."

As if to punctuate this fact, the essay concludes briefly with a jarring fast-forward to the adult author recalling Ed to her girlfriend, Helen, as they lie in bed together. Helen's assertion that Ed is "just an externalization" is disavowed by the narrative, which captures a snapshot of a relationship near its end and a resentful Helen just "trying to find the fastest way through my postcoital meanderings" (27). Described here, Helen, though lacking Ed's compelling beauty, is semantically and visually connected to Ed and to Castle in a kind of aesthetic linkage that we are to recognize as part of the same set of lesbian signifiers. This brief image tells us that the girl who is Castle, in case we did not already realize, grew up to be a lesbian. It also hints at what Ed is not: she is not (just) an exernalization of Castle's own girlhood lesbian longings, and though compelling, her undressing is not *the* defining moment that 'turned Castle into a lesbian,' any more than *The Challengers* turned my sister and me queer. Her undressing is one story among many; the scene in bed with Helen is another. The story's final line effects less of an ending than a convenient pause that allows us to linger with the rapture of Ed: "a lot of things happened later... but that's a winter, not a summer story" (27). "A lot of things happened later," but everything, it seems, is less urgent in this particular essay than the invocation of the specific feelings of Ed, the texture of the encounter, and the reverberating affects of its significance.

For exactly what, if anything, materializes in that thick damp moment of exposure is never fully articulated. Laid bare are the pathos of Ed's nakedness and the unselfconscious adoration of a little girl, but the full gravity of the moment, while

emotionally palpable, is only ever obscurely visible. There is an insinuation of something that neither the little girl nor the remembering woman can quite put her finger on, and neither can I quite articulate the presence in this essay that bubbles up as its potent emotional force. What's more, though the feelings the essay evokes ineluctably (and probably purposefully) colour all the pages that come after it, as a feature of the larger text the essay remains curiously unexplained; the reader does not get any account of why it is included, what it might 'prove,' or indeed why it appears in such a privileged spot immediately after the introduction. Ed is "First," and the comma in the title suggests not first as in primary but as in preliminary, as in, *before we can get to anything else, I must tell you about Ed.* But Ed is referenced only once elsewhere in the book, in the introduction when Castle briefly describes, almost sheepishly, the frantic and haunted writing of the piece as the "spectral visitation" that generated and prompted her difficult turn to write *The Apparitional Lesbian* in the first place:

> One evening... [I found myself] jotting down the first words of the autobiographical essay that appears here under the title "First, Ed." Immediately I was struck with a panicky feeling of playing hookey; this wasn't what I was supposed to be doing at all. What was I doing trying to conjure up a long-lost lesbian (in male drag!) I used to see at a YWCA in 1964? What about my big book? My mind seemed to have gone walkabout. But the relief was also unmistakable. I could 'see' the ineffable Ed as clearly as if she stood there... I felt scandalously energized – as if, paradoxically, a great weight had lifted. Casting my old notes aside with

> strange exhilaration, I proceeded to plan out the first essays included in this volume. (4)

Heather Love, in her book *Feeling Backward*, attests that sometimes "personal encounters and the feelings they elicit stand in for theories of history and of the social" (12). In *The Apparitional Lesbian*, Ed stands in, at least provisionally, to be and show what theory cannot say. As if a placeholder, Ed momentarily embodies the lesbian structure of feeling haunting the book's argument, which Castle does seem to point to when she argues that the spectral metaphor, while derealizing and disappearing lesbian bodies, also functions "as a necessary psychological and rhetorical means for objectifying – and ultimately embracing – that which otherwise could not be acknowledged" (60). In "First, Ed" Castle first sights and gestures toward that which has, up to that point, remained unacknowledged; upside down and struggling to float in the YWCA pool she gazes into a lesbian structure of feeling objectified and made fleetingly visible on the mysterious and beautiful body of Ed. By reencountering Ed in her writing – as panic fades into relief into "scandalous energy" – she goes on to seek out lesbian structures of feeling in the literature in which she shows crowds of lesbians being continuously ghosted but also, paradoxically, imprinted with a kind of lesbian affect by way of their very ghostliness. It is that "powerful and perverse" structure of feeling that we might describe as the vapourous texture of lesbian, the "change of presence" that first alerts us to her otherwise imperceptible appearance in a text or in the room. And, despite her aim of bringing focus and visibility, it seems that it is less with that crowd than with that originally transformative structure of feeling she finds therein that Castle is, still, most enraptured.

While Ed may not reappear in the book, the sensuous and enraptured language that Castle uses to conjure her up does. For example, in her discussion of Marie Antoinnette as a "subject for cryptolesbian reverie," she seems to suggest that what makes the queen a kind of protolesbian heroine is less the suppressed rumours of her homosexuality than (what I am calling) the lesbian structure of feeling that surrounds and clings to her (139). In discussing several women writers throughout history who wrote about their obsessive, incredibly emotional fixations with Marie Antoinette (many of whom claimed that the queen appeared before them in visions), Castle dismisses the notion that these fixations are a simply part of a Freudian royalty fantasy that would make the fixation about "psychic protest or revenge" (122). Focusing on the "idiomatic, loverlike intensity" of these women's fixations and the "lyrical-romantic ardor powerfully suffused with what can only be described as homosexual pathos," she attests that "these, above all, are homoerotic fantasies, in which the queen plays the part of both seductive object of desire and visionary emblem of female-female bonding" (122). She goes on to argue that, far from a family romance, the Marie Antoinette obsession is a lesbian "cultural romance" or "collective fantasy" and a lesbian "communal topos" (125, 141).

She draws homoerotic fantasies out of these stories, however, not necessarily to attest simply and once again to the fact that lesbians are everywhere. In Marie Antoinette, as in Ed, Castle (like the women who worship the queen) finds an emergent embodiment of a lesbian structure of feeling; she argues that in the act of conjuring up her ghost, the women who became fixed on her were

> conjuring up something new into being – a poetics of possibility. It is perhaps not too much to say that in her role as idealized martyr... [Marie Antoinette functioned as] a rallying point for sentiment and collective emotional intransigence. She gave those who idolized her a way of thinking about themselves. And out of such reflection – peculiar as its manifestations may often look to us now – something of the modern lesbian identity was born. (149)

Once again, by functioning as a "rallying point for sentiment and collective emotional intransigence," this protolesbian body becomes a placeholder for the collective fantasy of a lesbian structure of feeling, which ultimately conjures a modern lesbian identity inflected inescapably by these powerful sentiments and emotions. *To conjure* implies not only to make something appear but also to effect or instigate an emotional response – as in to conjure up a childhood memory. The word's roots, however, also intimate a communal affection: from the Latin *con-* (together) and *jurarare* (to swear), it implies taking an oath, conspiring, and banding together. Castle's discussion of the transmogrification of Marie Antoinette into a figure of lesbian iconography draws attention to the way in which a lesbian structure of feeling is not simply a personal specificity subjectively felt and thought in isolation but rather something of a communal, intertextual romance that, collectively employed, generates a nourishing "poetics of possibility."

A nourishing poetics of possibility generated out of ghosts is, it would seem, a far cry from the derealization machine and patriarchal disappearing invoked in the first pages of *The Apparitional Lesbian.* In her book, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy,*

*Performativity*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick contends that, "in a world where no one needs to be delusional to find evidence of systemic oppression, to theorize out of anything *but* a paranoid critical stance has come to seem naïve, pious or complaisant" (125-26).[3] Sedgwick goes on to argue, however, that what she calls the paranoid position or optic of contemporary theory (especially queer theory) is not a necessary following to the acknowledgement of oppression and that to "be other than paranoid" does not necessarily imply a denial or refutation of the reality and enmity of oppression (127-28). She describes, contrary to the paranoid position, a reparative position:

> [n]o less acute than a paranoid position, no less realistic, no less attached to a project of survival, and neither less nor more delusional or fantasmic, the reparative reading position undertakes a different range of affects, ambitions, and risks. What we can best learn from such practices are, perhaps, the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture – even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them. (150-51)

Sedgwick provides camp as an illustrative example, but I think Castle's accounts of Marie Antoinette obsessions, and no less her lyrical account of Ed, provide another. Taking a reparative position would "do justice to a wealth of characteristic, culturally

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[3] Sedgwick suggests that "even aside from the prestige that now attaches to a hermeneutic of suspicion in critical theory as a whole, queer studies in particular has had a distinctive history of intimacy with the paranoid imperative" (126). She traces this through Freud (who, she argues, "traced every instance of paranoia to the repression of specifically same-sex desire" (126)) to queer theory of the 1980s and 90s, including her own writing. She reads Butler's *Gender Trouble* as participating in a paranoid optic through its faith in the exposure (of how gender 'works') exhibited by camp and drag. Sedgwick's essay is, however, structured as more a musing on a trend in critical theory than a taxonomy of its traces. I am here reading Castle's *The Apparitional Lesbian* as an example of this paranoid lens; other similar examples might include Tasmin Wilton's *Lesbian Studies: Setting an Agenda* and Lilian Faderman's *Surpassing the Love of Men*, though specifically lesbian paranoia may be traceable back to 1970s lesbian feminism that asserted lesbian presence in the face of erasure, palpable in Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," for example.

central practices, many of which can well be called reparative, that emerge from queer experience but become invisible or illegible under a paranoid optic" (146-47). That is, to see queer or lesbian existence only through the mechanisms of derealization and obliteration is to actually make ghosts of other, often reparative, nourishing and sustaining practices, sentiments, and semantics.

Sedgwick further argues that "the present paranoid consciousness" has not displaced reparative ways of knowing but has rather obligated a "disarticulation, disavowal, and misrecognition" of these sentiments that are, she points out, "actually being practiced, often by the same theorists and as part of the same projects" (144). In a passage I quoted earlier, Castle maintains that we must focus on the "presence instead of absence" of the lesbian body (19). One response to this call to arms is certainly to affirm the materiality and tangibility of the lesbian and to show her uncomplicated, stable existence in discourse and in the world in defiance to modern culture's lesbian derealization machine – a somewhat paranoid rejoinder that is, certainly, part of Castle's argument. I also think, however, that this statement indicates simultaneously another, broader concern to which the book continually returns – the "changes of presence" (to return to Williams's phrase) that lesbian structures of feeling evoke. It is this sense of a felt presence that is, I think, too often the disarticulated or misrecognized remains "still sounding elsewhere" in the dictums of official lesbian visibility politics.

I find Sedgwick's assertion particularly apt when it comes to lesbian visibility politics because of her discussion of the "paranoid faith in exposure" that places "an extraordinary stress" on knowledge in the form of exposure: "paranoia for all its vaunted suspicion acts as though its work would be accomplished if only it could finally, this

time, somehow get its story truly known" (138). If we can make the lesbian ghosts of history and culture visible, will heterosexist oppression cease to exist?

> Reparative motives, once they become explicit, are inadmissable in paranoid theory both because they are about pleasure ('merely aesthetic') and because they are frankly ameliorative ('merely reformist'). What makes pleasure and amelioration so mere? Only the exclusiveness of paranoia's faith in demystifying exposure: only its cruel and contemptuous assumption that the one thing lacking for global revolution, explosion of gender roles, or whatever, is people's (that is, other people's) having the painful effects of their oppression, poverty, or deludedness sufficiently exacerbated to make the pain conscious (as if otherwise it wouldn't have been) and intolerable (as if intolerable situations were famous for generating excellent solutions). (144)

While it's tricky not to read terms like "the derealization machine of modern culture" as on the paranoiac side, I also palpably sight a reparative optic in *The Apparitional Lesbian.* It maintains, as Sedgwick does here, that there is nothing "mere" about pleasure and amelioration, and that indeed, any notion of lesbianism must include a full appreciation of what Castle calls its "distinctive pleasure-world" and "sensuous and celebratory aspects" (197).

This is appreciable in Ed, in Marie Antoinette, but perhaps especially in Castle's discussion of lesbian journalist Janet Flanner and her biography, written by Brenda Wineapple. Castle is dissatisfied by Wineapple's Flanner, who lacks, she argues, "a certain complicating, uninhibited, even loverlike gaiety" and what she describes as

Flanner's "ineradicable, coruscating delight in" and "homosexually inflected response to the world" (199, 197). It is not because Wineapple tries to obscure the fact of Flanner's lesbianism – this is, unlike with many of the other figures in *The Apparitional Lesbian*, clearly and straightforwardly disclosed. Still, Castle has that "and yet" feeling that persists despite, concluding that "ghosting" can occur even when the fact of lesbianism is acknowledged. For even in acknowledgement and disclosure, what can remain deficient is what Castle here asserts as "amorous empathy" in one's subject (188).

The biographer of a lesbian subject, she contends, while she need not be a lesbian herself, "must be *a lover as well as a diagnostician*" and must "have a power of sympathetic feeling broad enough" to let, if only temporarily, "oneself become that tender, idiosyncratic woman-enchanted commentator on life" (197-98, my emphasis). Flanner says that she disdains the first-person singular because it is "like a fortissimo. It's too loud" (qtd. in Wineapple 104). Flanner never properly 'came out' in any "loud," post-Ellen DeGeneres sort of way. But, as Castle muses, "surely the fortissimo 'I' is not the only means by which the lesbian spirit may reveal itself?" pointing, once again to what I have been marking in *The Lesbian Apparition* as a lesbian structure of feeling whose presence is palpably felt even in its invisibility – but also, conversely, which may not be present even in the explicit, official making-visible of lesbian bodies (187).

In querying 'lesbian,' the theorist, Castle seems to suggest, must be "a lover as well as a diagnostician" – attuned to both the official, seemingly 'fixed' definitions of lesbian *and* to the sympathetic, affective, vapourous, and spectral lesbian structures of feeling that give those definitions meaning. The theorist has every reason be suspicious of cultural and patriarchal attempts to make her disappear, but in that suspicion she must not

lose sight of the "amorous empathy" and the communal romance that also affectively come together to give 'lesbian' its texture and meaning in the specificity of present being. As the phantom side of the social or "official" definition of lesbian (unsettled as those debates may be), once the apparitional lesbian structure of feeling in a text or in the room is felt or acknowledged, the logic and sufficiency of a paranoid politics that foregrounds her coming to visibility as its object may simply rush too quickly over the scandalous energy and compelling beauty that lesbian conjures up.

## Chapter Two

## The Dyke in the Driver's Seat: Fantasy, Fandom and Cut-and-Paste

*"Surely the fortissimo 'I' is not the only means by which the lesbian spirit may reveal itself" – Terry Castle (187)*

The fortissimo 'I' is a laboured subject in the history of lesbian theorization and politics. And yet, in her reading of Janet Flanner, Castle is able to assuredly sight Flanner's lesbianism even (indeed, especially) in the absence of the clamorously disclosed lesbian subject. This chapter explores some of the other ways in which lesbian may be revealed that do not involve or require the disclosure or appearance of the fortissimo 'I.'

While Castle does employ this fortissimo 'I' to come out to her readers (as many of her colleagues were doing at the time, and which was no minor act to be sure), I have argued that the lesbianness of *The Apparitional Lesbian* is felt most palpably in the lesbian structures of feeling that Castle both objectifies for her analysis and writes into being by recounting stories like "First, Ed." Lesbian also shines through, however, in Castle's lesbian fandom. In her chapter on opera singer Brigitte Fassbaender, Castle indulges herself in a schoolgirl-like crush on Fassbaender as a way to begin to speculate on why certain figures become objects for lesbian fandom in such a way. I am interested in exploring further the question of why some images may solicit – without necessarily representing – lesbian desire and how that desire can in turn encode images, films, and experiences to make lesbian meaning and to yield productive lesbian readings.

Certainly, familiar visual tropes and references can engage lesbian fantasy and tip off a lesbian reading in various contexts. I am less intent, however, to compile a list of signifiers coded as lesbian (which would not be short and could never be exhaustive, let alone agreed upon) than to delve into the semantic and syntactical ways in which lesbian meaning is made as such. What tricks of signification do we employ to make and communicate lesbian meaning so assuredly – even without the presence of verified lesbian subjects, and, resultantly, in ways that often fly 'under the radar' or 'over the heads' of non-lesbian spectators? I want to explore the ways in which lesbian meaning is made through the codes and modalities of its signification. It may be "always finally unclear what is meant by the invocation of the lesbian signifier" (Butler, "Imitation" 122), but it is clear that through signification *some* kind of lesbian meaning is made, and I am interested less in what is meant than in how that meaning is encoded and shared. Lesbian may not be a reliable signified but it is *significant* – indicative of something, or at least of "something else" (White 80).

To theorize this "something else," I turn to fantasy as it is described by Jean Laplanche and Bertrand Pontalis, who assert that fantasy "is not the object of desire, but its setting" (26). Within this formation, no direct representations of either the object or the subject appear; the fantasy is characterized as a "sequence of images" in which the subject "appears caught up" (26). In this way, the subject, "while always present in the fantasy, may be so in a desubjectivized form, that is to say, in the very syntax of the sequence in question" (26). In this chapter, I argue that in our acts of lesbian signifying, *lesbian* is the name we give not only to lesbian subjects but also to the setting of desire that makes those subjects appear as lesbian: the sequence of different, often contradictory

images variously coded as lesbian in which we may find ourselves caught up, and in the syntax of which we may appear, in a desubjectivized form, as lesbian subjects. Rather than filling the copula of being-lesbian with the content of lesbian fantasy, theorizing lesbian (as) fantasy in this way characterizes the 'being' of lesbian as a "being caught up" – like the lesbian fan – in a distinctively lesbian sequence of images. To explore the ways in which lesbian may appear in the absence of the fortissimo 'I,' I read a few acts of lesbian fandom, works of visual and video art that interact with popular films and texts that, in one way or another, have engaged lesbian fantasy. I analyze these "fan texts" on a syntagmatic level, taking seriously (and literally) Laplanche and Pontalis's assertion about the subject's appearance in "the syntax of the sequence." The texts I analyze in this chapter – particularly Deborah Bright's photomontage series titled *Dream Girls* and Cecilia Barriga's short film *Meeting Two Queens* – interest me for their engagement with questions of how lesbians consume, look, and read; how they order and arrange their desire for and responses to images and narratives (through fandom, for example); and how these responses construct fantasy scenarios and enunciative mechanisms through which lesbian meaning is made.

Any questions of how lesbians look or read must necessarily engage with the rich body of theory about female spectatorship. Though the bulk of this theory is done in film studies, the field constituted by a concern with or for the "female spectator" (or "spectatrix," as Janet Bergstrom and Mary Ann Doane called her in a special 1989 issue of *Camera Obscura*) is already interdisciplinary and littered with conflicting epistemological frameworks, intellectual alliances, and tensions. This interdisciplinary discourse grew up around the 1975 publication of Laura Mulvey's article, "Visual

Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," which brought together film theory, feminism and psychoanalysis in a powerful, if controversial, way. Mulvey proposed that "it is the place of the look that defines cinema," and that the place of the look is one that is defined as male based on a semiotic/psychoanalytic methodology of male scopophilic pleasure and female exhibitionism (38). "In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed," Mulvey argued, "with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness" (33). Connoted in this way by the cinema, woman is "the bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning" (29).

Since its original publication, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" has been thoroughly criticized and revised (including by Mulvey herself in 1989), building an extensive discourse around the problem of female spectatorship and generating many other questions about psychoanalytic and feminist investments in representation. Many feminist theorists have tried to fill in the gaps in Mulvey's theoretical framework, which seems to deny the possibility of female spectatorship altogether, by theorizing female spectatorship from many different perspectives and disciplinary foundations. These theories attempt to elucidate female *looking* in a way that affords agency and desire beyond the "to-be-looked-at-ness" of woman.[4] Others, such as Teresa de Lauretis, have criticized this framework for its inherent assumption of heterosexuality, which seems to deny any form of queer spectatorship and to make queer female spectatorship doubly

[4] See for example Judith Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship*; Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales*; Janet Bergstrom, "Enunciation and Sexual Difference;" Gaylyn Studlar, "Masochism and the Perverse Pleasures of the Cinema;" Miriam Hansen, "Pleasure, Ambivalence, Identification: Valentino and Female Spectatorship;" B. Ruby Rich, "In the Name of Feminist Film Criticism;" and Tania Modelski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Film Theory.*

impossible.[5] Patricia White has argued that a "lesbian specter" has always haunted the theorization of female spectatorship in this discourse because of its almost panicked avoidance of the ways in which female spectators (of any sexual orientation) look at cinematic images that have been coded with female "to-be-looked-at-ness" (75). White attests that, by retreating from the "ghost of lesbian desire" – the obvious lesbianness of women looking at other women – feminist theorists in the 1980s "[relinquished] the very possibility of female desire as well as spectatorship" (75).

The dominant discourse of female spectatorship in film studies also does not often take into account how differences other than sexual difference – such as race, class, and ethnicity – position spectators differently, fracturing the apparent homogeneity of the female spectator and her theorization. What feminist and other interventions into film theory emphasize, occasioned by Mulvey's turn to the place of the look in cinema, is what David Rodowick has described as the need for "all critiques of domination... to attempt to create new positions of interpretation, meaning, desire, and subjectivity, even while acknowledging they sometimes stand on shaky philosophical legs" (qtd. in Drukman 90). At the heart of problems of film spectatorship are larger concerns of how each of us is positioned and how each of us looks, reads, interprets, identifies, desires, and makes meaning from those positions – shaky as our articulations of them may be.

Since the 1980s, the interdisciplinary development of queer theory has led to an expanded address of specifically queer forms of spectatorship, especially arguments about the ways in which queer readers and viewers may appropriate mainstream media for their own pleasures and personal and community identifications. To propose

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[5] See de Lauretis's *The Practice of Love* (especially "Recasting the Primal Scene: Film and Lesbian Representation"), as well as her "Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation" and Patricia White's *Uninvited.*

alternative reading practices and pleasures that negotiate or defy some or all of the (heterosexual) codes supplied by the cinematic apparatus is necessarily to find oneself at what Judith Mayne characterizes as the difficult point of tension between the "passive, constructed" subject of viewing and a "desire for unproblematic and romanticized agency" (62). How much control does the spectator have over what she sees and how she sees it, and how much is dictated by the regimes of connotation imposed upon her by the film's structuring impulses (as well as those that lie outside the film itself)? As White puts it, "[t]he idea that subcultural groups can 'appropriate' mainstream mass media is by now clichéd... [L]esbian and gay film studies still needs to develop an adequate methodology for determining how this process works and what it accomplishes" (xvii).

In *Cinema and Spectatorship,* Mayne identifies three prevalent theoretical entries into thinking about gay and lesbian spectatorship and audience practices:

> first, an essentialist notion of how lesbians and gay men see the cinema; second, an examination of the place of cinema in the development of gay and lesbian identities and the consolidation of gay and lesbian communities; third, a conception of lesbian and gay audiences as constituting a political force, whether to pressure existing film productions or to create new ones. These three entries are not mutually exclusive, but neither are they the same. (166)

While she identifies it as a valuable area of inquiry (one that is most often pursued in empirical or ethnographic studies), Mayne rejects the possibility of coming to any solid conclusions on "essentialist" notions of gay and lesbian spectatorship, and as White further points out in relation to lesbian viewers in particular, "differences in gender

identification among lesbians" – not to mention different positionings by race, class, and ethnicity – "make any unifying theory of the psychic processes in play unworkable (39).

The second and third entries, concerned with gay and lesbian film viewing as a function of identity and community formation and those which posit gay and lesbian audiences as a political force for advocacy, have gained a good deal of favour in the last decade of gay and lesbian organizing. For example, the website AfterEllen.com is a collection of blogs that focus solely on lesbian viewings of film and television, taking as their subjects texts that both explicitly and implicitly solicit lesbian fantasy in one way or another and "contributing to the dialogue about lesbian and bisexual visibility in entertainment and the media through interviews, commentary and reviews" (n.p.). The site takes Ellen DeGeneres's coming out as a paradigmatic point of origin (hence the name) from which it seeks to track the "'explosion' (in relative terms) of lesbian/bisexual visibility in entertainment and the media" (n.p.). AfterEllen bills itself as entertainment journalism aiming to increase the visibility of out lesbian and bisexual stars, and while it edges on what Danae Clark calls "commodity lesbianism" (186), with its slogan "visibility matters" and through its readership, the site also consolidates and makes visible a lesbian audience around shared experiences of spectatorship and appreciation, which it then attempts to mobilize to demand greater visibility and better representations of lesbians in the media.

I want to distinguish between this approach to spectatorship and the one I pursue as I now turn to read several select pieces of art that I mark as acts of lesbian fandom. While I am interested (as are many of these artists) in the ways in which experiences of spectatorship may affect the development of lesbian identities and communities, my

primary interest in these texts is in how they are able to make lesbian make meaning through acts and representations of spectatorship in a way that does not require the deployment of a lesbian fortissimo 'I.' The pieces I look at all take lesbian biography and lesbian fantasy as both constitutive of lesbian meaning at the same time as they thoroughly and deliberately confuse the two. It is not clear in these texts where biography ends and fantasy begins when it comes to lesbian spectatorship – and indeed, that is precisely the point.

*"I believe that while there are lesbian perspectives, sensibilities, experiences and topics, there are no lesbian writers" – Gloria Anzaldúa (249)*

In her essay "To(o) Queer the Writer," Gloria Anzaldúa mischievously responds to a request to contribute to an anthology on lesbian writing by resisting the title "lesbian writer." Anzaldúa is intent to get rid of the lesbian fortissimo 'I' altogether – or at least refuses to claim it or write *as* it – and instead locates lesbianness in acts of reading, which she defines broadly in this essay to include everything from academic theoretical reading, to dyke detective novels, to reading an incident on the street. Indeed, she stresses that learning to read should not be conflated with academic learning by describing the different skills with which she is equipped when encountering a text or situation that are learned, she argues, from experiences deeply inflected by her ethnicity, class, and sexuality as a working class Chicana dyke (258).

Anzaldúa characterizes her own and others' writing as being full of "gaps," or "doors and windows," through which the reader not only can access the text but into which she is also expected to "introject her own experiences" (257, 258). "But,"

Anzaldúa notes, "we haven't been taught to read in that manner. We have, in fact, been taught not to trust it" (259). Reading, especially academic reading, is instead usually taught as an enterprise of decoding a text's internal coherence, in which projecting one's own experiences or thoughts onto the text is held suspect. But what's the fun in that?

> For me, what's fun about reading is those gaps where I can bring my experience into the piece of the writing and use concrete images to go off into my own experience. It makes the writing richer because I can bring more into it... The more I interact with the text the better. The more entrances, the more access for all of us. (259)

Describing public readings in which she has participated, Anzaldúa attests that this desire to interact with the text may be something especially queer: in her experience, "queer readers want to interact, to repeat back or reflect or mirror, but also do more than just reflect back and mirror – to add to the dialogue" (256). For, as she puts it elsewhere, "making meaning is a collaborative affair" (255).

The research for this chapter started out with a relatively straightforward question: what makes the 'cut-and-paste' form – what White calls "cut-and-paste fetishism" (53) – such a common trope in lesbian art? Why is it that so much lesbian cultural production approaches (apparently) non-lesbian texts with a pair of scissors and a glue stick?

In their cut-and-paste montages of print advertisements, "Familiar Names and Not-So-Familiar Faces," Lynette Molnar and Linda Thornburg insert a figure of two women kissing into ads from the 1980s that reflect the "blatant displays of heterosexuality" characteristic of most stock commercial scenes of "love, sex, sales, authority, ownership, news, politics and entertainment" (120). Their aim is one of

objection and subversion – to "exemplify the obvious invisibility of lesbians" by putting them, embracing and lip-locked, into the picture. In "Conspiracy of Silence," Nina Levitt's appropriation of lesbian pulp novels from the 1950s and 60s, the artist inverts scans of the front and back covers of the novels into negative prints. The prints act as a comment on (sexual) 'inversion' but also express something of the tension between the "heterosexual morals" upheld in these novels and the fact that for many women including the artist, these novels were the only source of lesbian representation at the time (61). It is "the contradiction between desire and denial," as White puts it, that fuels these appropriations (47).

White describes cut-and-paste-fetishism as "having it both ways:" a refusal to decide ("like the fetishist") between the desirable images that solicit lesbian desire/identification and the narrative closure that erases it (53). The lesbian fetishist spectatrix has her cake and eats it too, so to speak, indulging in the fantasies these images conjure up while resisting the denial (or pathologization) of her indulgences that the frame may impose. And here is one reason for the commonality of the cut-and-paste approach in lesbian art: "so few representations and so many unfulfilled desires," as Tessa Boffin puts it (49). That is, the "relative paucity of representations" and "impoverished archives" leads lesbian women to 'work with what they've got' to make lesbian meaning, identities, and icons (49). In one scene in *Dry Kisses Only,* Kaucyila Brooke and Jane Cottis's playful film survey of the lesbian subtext in classical Hollywood cinema, Brooke re-performs a scene in *All About Eve,* splicing her performance with shots from the original film. In this version, Eve's tall tale of misery and expressions of fandom are revised into an unambiguous lesbian coming out story and

an expression of the actor's appreciation for Bette Davis as a sustaining figure of queer representation for her adolescent self, when there were no others available.

Classical Hollywood cinema is a common site of identification, desire, and later appropriation for many lesbian viewers.[6] In *Meeting Two Queens*, Cecilia Barriga splices footage from various Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich films side by side so that the two stars "appear to gaze at each other" (Desjardins 28). By fragmenting these scenes from their original (heterosexual) contexts and editing and arranging them in sequence and contiguity, *Meeting Two Queens* constructs a short narrative film of suggestively lesbian scenes 'between' the two stars, who never actually appeared in a film together but who have each become lesbian icons. In this way, Barriga visually fulfills the optimistic fantasies of many lesbian spectators of her generation.

In *Dream Girls*, a photomontage of stills from several Code-Era films, artist Deborah Bright cut-and-pastes images of her visibly butch self directly into the scenes, re-ordering the economies of desire in these images into unambiguous butch-femme romances with Vanessa Redgrave, Katherine Hepburn, and Julie Andrews, among others. In one scene, for example, we see Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracey in a car together (figure 4). Hepburn is leaned over so that Tracey can give her a Code-Era-appropriately-chaste peck on the cheek, and the artist uses the empty space left in the driver's seat to insert herself into this picture. With her sunglasses, leather jacket, cropped hair, and slightly bored expression, Bright "sabbotage[s]... the heterosexual economy of the scene" by appearing as a sultry butch chauffeur just waiting to get rid of Tracey (whose masculine prowess does not fare well in comparison) so that, it seems, the real

[6] White's *Uninvited* does an excellent job of tracking why and how this cinema in particular has historically solicited so much sustained lesbian interest.

*Figure 4*. **The dyke in the driver's seat.**
**Deborah Bright with Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracey, from "Dream Girls."**

romance can begin (152). In the accompanying essay that narrativizes this series as "fantasy postcards from my childhood, sent with love," Bright admits, "[f]or a long time, I resisted doing such obvious 'one-liners' because my training as a fine art photographer had taught me to only make work that was indirect, densely layered, elliptical and metaphorical" (152-53, 151). Despite Bright's description of these as "obvious 'one-liners,'" the kind of representation she effects may in fact be too messy for the modalities of her formal training, and I spend much more than a few lines later in this chapter thinking about the less immediately obvious modes of signification and address that these images effect.

Each of these cut-and-pasted montages makes lesbian meaning visible, front and center, where it was only suggested in the subtext. They give form to exultant affirmations of lesbianism through visibility. By cutting out all those elements that deny the *something else* that these lesbian spectators definitively see and pasting in blatant lesbian representations, these pieces all give flesh to the lesbian ghosts already haunting the margins of these texts and films. Moreover, in doing so, they invite and endorse meaningful lesbian readings of the originals. As Mary Desjardins attests about *Meeting Two Queens,* "Barriga creates a lesbian text (instead of a subtext) and licenses an explicit lesbian identification, rather than relegating the mobilization of such a desire for being and having the other to a closeted activity" (28). This licensing is an especially powerful gesture in the face of lesbian invisibility and denial.

These acts of lesbian fandom as cut-and-paste fetishism work through the mode of reading Anzaldúa advocates, as these artists are all engaged in finding "windows and doors" through which they can access their desire through these otherwise overtly

heterosexual texts, and into which they can introject their own experiences. And where there are no windows or doors to be found, they take out their scissors and make some. As Bright puts it, "it seemed easy enough to fragment the narrative that evoked... desire and [to] incorporate [only] the desirable parts" (152). By interacting with these texts through reproduction and cut-and-paste techniques, these artists participate in the "collaborative affair" of making meaning; moreover, they bring seemingly 'non-lesbian' texts into the collaborative affair of making specifically lesbian meaning.

White coins the term "retrospectatorship" to describe this collaborative affair of gay and lesbian spectatorship of dominant films. She emphasizes that it is "not simply a *decoding* process, the revelation of queer subject matter, the restoration of coherence and meaning" but rather "an *encoding* process, a textual re-vision with the reader-critic as subject of its fantasy" (205, my emphasis). Through their spectatorship, these lesbian readers are not simply looking for lesbian meaning – they are actively involved in making it and in encoding it in the texts they enjoy and consume.

These montages could be read, on the one hand, as simply 'lesbian versions' of the original texts: images and scenes transferred from the initial context in which the artist's desire was not represented into a lesbian context of connotations. Bright points out, however, that the two worlds – her adolescent lesbian fantasies and the world in which, in this case, classic Hollywood films exist and are consumed – are not separate ones: they overlap, and their imageries are contiguous.

> [It was] my adolescent fantasy life that kept me going when I lacked any knowledge of the realising of homoerotic desire, a fantasy life fed by images from my immediate environment. I didn't seek these from illicit or

> underground sources – they were the banal fare of everyday experience, the kinds of shows and novels most of my schoolmates also saw and read, the magazines that lined the coffee-tables of many middle-class, suburban living rooms. (151)

The important point is that, unlike most of her schoolmates, Bright saw and read these images differently. By "re-vision[ing]" familiar scenes to represent their desire, Bright and the others are showing us the processes by which their own modes of spectatorship function: what they have seen, and how they see it. Even though most of these works pre-date the precision of photo-editing technology, many of them intentionally emphasize the 'rough edges' that give them away *as* montages, intertextual engagements that do not stand independently of the texts with which they are interacting – what Julia Kristeva calls "mosaic[s] of citation" (37) – rather than as autonomously coherent scenes. For example, in their description of their advertising collages, Molnar and Thornburg respond to critics who have objected to the way the kissing figures are not very well integrated into the scenes by arguing that these "clumsy" montages are "deliberately not very convincing... enforc[ing] the artificiality of the insertion, producing a sense that this is an act of defiance" (127).

The "clumsiness" of each of these montages makes visible not only the dyke(s) in the picture but dyke (processes of) spectatorship – or as Mayne puts it, their spectatorship as a "mode of encounter," which is intimately caught up in something called 'lesbian' (86). The rough edges of these intertextual romances give away the ways in which the artists are already engaged in finding the dykes in these pictures and the operations by which that looking-desire is encoded into these texts. Rather than covering up the acts of

fracture and refraction that have taken place under the power of the lesbian gaze, the montage form makes visible lesbian genealogies of looking and seeing that open up the possibility of tracing a history of lesbian meaning-making through the operations of that gaze.

As in the Fierce Pussy posters, however, the actual place of the dyke in these pictures is still suspended. In *Dream Girls*, we can definitively *see* Bright, the lesbian subject in the picture, and we could easily take the lesbian meaning to rest with this subject and be satisfied – in the way *Time* is satisfied with lesbian resting comfortably in the signified body of Ellen DeGeneres (and vice versa). To see in this way would be to thus take the desire circulating in these images as simply a property of the dyke in the picture. But what then, of the dyke's collection of film star femme mistresses? What of their desirous looks, now aimed squarely at the butch lesbian body?

Teresa de Lauretis is also dissatisfied with this formulation; lesbian desire, she writes, is too often

> merely assumed to be, and taken for granted as, a property or a quality of individuals predefined as lesbians; whereas it is precisely that 'lesbian desire' which constitutes the kind of subjectivity and sexuality we experience as lesbian and want to claim as lesbians; and which therefore we need to theorize, articulate, and find ways of representing, not only in its difference from heterosexual norms, its ab-normality, but also and more importantly in its own constitutive processes, its specific modalities and conditions of existence. (113-14)

In *The Practice of Love,* De Lauretis turns to fantasy via Laplanche and Pontalis to help her theorize "the kind of subjectivity and sexuality we experience as lesbian," and indeed, following Laplanche and Pontalis's description of fantasy as the setting of desire allows us to read the dyke in the picture in a more refracted and multiplied way. I want to suggest that to identify lesbian in *Dream Girls*, for example, as only reverberating on/as the imaged body of dykey Deborah Bright – the autobiographical lesbian *fortissimo 'I'* as it is deployed here – would be not only severely limiting but also inaccurate in terms of the meaning illustrated and demonstrated in these images. The lesbian meaning here is a chain of signification that is certainly set off by the insertion of the butch body but that does not rest or end there. Bright is telling us something about lesbian not by simply showing us her lesbian body but also, more urgently, by narrativizing and imaging her lesbian desire through the visual construction of a fantasy setting. She says as much herself in the essay that accompanies the series:

> As the title *Dream Girls* suggests, my work is about fantasy. The lesbian subject roams from still to still, movie to movie, disrupting the narrative and altering it to suit her purposes, just as I did when I first watched those films. This lesbian subject is herself constructed: a partial, fragmented representation of someone who may or may not correspond to the historical Deborah Bright who dreamt her into being. But what matters is that she's having a good time and that she's doing it with Julie, Vanessa, Glenda and Kate. (154)

Julie, Vanessa, Glenda, and Kate are the objects of her desire in *Dream Girls*, but Bright problematizes the desiring fortissimo subject that appears in these images by

complicating her relationship to "the historical Deborah Bright who dreamt her into being." And importantly, "what matters" in these images is not this complicated subject, nor even the female objects of desire, but rather that everyone is "having a good time."

Laplanche and Pontalis's reading of fantasy maps on to *Dream Girls* surprisingly well. Once again, they define fantasy as

> not the object of desire, but its setting. In fantasy the subject does not pursue the object or its sign: [s]he appears caught up [her]self in the sequence of images. [S]he forms no representation of the desired object, but is [her]self represented as participating in the scene although, in the earliest forms of fantasy, [s]he cannot be assigned any fixed place in it... As a result, the subject, although always present in the fantasy, may be so in a desubjectivized form, that is to say, in the very syntax of the sequence in question. (26)

In the most obvious parallel, *Dream Girls* is presented, literally, as a sequence of images that is also a fantasy – that is to say, as a sequence of images in which the artist professes to be historically "caught up." Bright shows us not only her lesbian body but also, in putting that body into these specific scenes, a few settings of her lesbian desire.

The lesbian subject as Bright describes her, however, exceeds the statically embodied image that appears pasted into these stills to include the adolescent (as well as grown-up) Bright, what Teresa de Lauretis calls "the lesbian subject of viewing" (100), who is most of all a *roaming* subject: "[t]he lesbian subject roams from still to still, movie to movie, disrupting the narrative and altering it to suit her purposes, just as I did when I first watched those films" (Bright 154). In characterizing a roaming subject as

such, Bright gives movement to these 'stills,' refiguring them as a dynamic sequence in which something, or *something else,* is happening. The lesbian subject that appears, and that does not settle on or as the imaged body, is the one who is actively engaged in stringing these images together by her roaming glances and movements of spectatorship. This stringing- or piecing-together in new ways (that are different from the construction of the original films) is, after all, what makes these images montages. It is also what makes up the syntax of this piece, a syntax that is not stylistically concealed but rather made obvious by the acts of cut-and-paste through which we can trace some of these spectatorial moves.

In this way, it becomes clear that it is not (only) the lesbian body that makes lesbian meaning in these images; it is the operations of fracture and refraction of the lesbian gaze that syntactically arrange available signifiers (including the butch body as well as these images "that lined the coffee-tables of many middle-class, suburban living rooms") to make meaning in a particular (lesbian) way. Reading these montages syntagmatically (through the syntax) as fantasy structures allows me to read these images as acts of lesbian signification, then, not because of the presence of a lesbian body made explicitly visible but because of the ways in which lesbian appears, *desubjectivized*, in the syntax of the sequence. This lesbian body is simply one visible placeholder of the fantasy structure that is projected on to these whole scenes in a brilliant spectatorial and syntactical array, just as the biographical identity-account of lesbian spectatorship imaged here is a placeholder for Bright's more generalizable "caught-up"-ness with the lesbian fantasy she actively constructs and encodes, not merely represents. Bright may label these pictures "one-liners," but a lot can be signified in a single line.

This desubjectivized lesbian subject of viewing, who "[looks] on the fantasy it represents" is exactly what de Lauretis sights in her reading of Sheila McLaughin's film *She Must Be Seeing Things* (99). She argues that, like *Dream Girls*, "McLaughlin's film does not merely portray a lesbian fantasy (as other recent films have done) but effectively constructs a scenario of lesbian spectatorial desire and enables the visualization – it would be appropriate to say the invention – of a lesbian subject of viewing" (99-100). De Lauretis also points out that in constructing a lesbian subject of viewing, the film is able to then address *its* spectator as positioned in this way as well – a subject who "would see herself reflected not in the terms of the fantasy... but in the very representation of desire, in the fantasy scenario itself," a subject "looking on, outside the fantasy scenario and nonetheless involved, present in it" (96). Bright seems to acknowledge this address in the final line of her accompanying essay: "[t]o the lesbian friends who've seen them, these *Dream Girls* have provoked a whoop of recognition and pleasure, and that is satisfaction enough" (154).

Desjardins argues that the significance of *Meeting Two Queens* is also in its potential for the spectator's self-recognition (and pleasure) in its address of a desubjectivized lesbian subject of viewing; or, as she puts it, in "its interpellation of a spectator who identifies with the images as a fan and who responds to their strategies of affect" (26). This is particularly interesting in *Meeting Two Queens* because, unlike in *Dream Girls*, there is no visible lesbian fortissimo 'I' to loudly alert us of a lesbian presence or to cite as the source of the film's lesbian meaning. Gossip and rumours have often positioned both Garbo and Dietrich as lesbian or bisexual, but *Meeting Two Queens* does not seek to *out* either star or to make any definitive claims about either's sexuality.

Similar to the affective strategy of the Fierce Pussy posters, this film's mode of finding the dyke(s) in the picture(s) is more saliently one of metonymy and contiguity, of sideways glances and knowing nods and winks rather than fortissimo declarations. By deliberately editing and placing scenes of the two stars side by side, Barriga arranges the syntax of this film (as a fantasy sequence of images) to make lesbian meaning *without* a representative, subjectivized lesbian that can be definitively seen, even as we do sight the *something else* of lesbian signification just as definitively.

For Barriga, Garbo and Deitrich (like Julie, Vanessa, Glenda, and Kate for Bright) matter not only as beautiful objects of desire but also, and perhaps more so, for the lesbian desire their films and star personas solicit but do not always represent. These images matter to the filmmaker "as a fan who responds their strategies of affect," and in turn, fan-spectators of *Meeting Two Queens* who respond to *its* strategies of affect and fantasy can see slivers of themselves not imaged but still represented in this film.

> While it could be said that all found-footage film texts participate in what Michel de Certeau calls 'textual poaching' in that they take material from other texts and recontextualize it or put it into new use (through new juxtapositions), *Meeting Two Queens* manifests a poaching particular to fan activity. It creates a sense that the material poached... matters as what Larry Grossberg calls 'investment portfolios' or 'billboards' of investment, which secure or advertise the place within which fans locate self-identity. (27)

None of these cut-and-paste projects secure or advertise a definition of lesbian or lesbian spectatorship; rather, as Desjardins points out, what they construct and communicate is a

*place* within which to locate themselves in relation to fandom, to lesbian, and to these films and texts – a move that brings all those things together. As White characterizes her in her reading of *All About Eve*, the lesbian is, like Eve, "the stage door groupie" who "manages to project herself into the picture" (205). In doing this work, these pieces also offer that newly constructed position to *their* spectators, explicitly licensing the readings, desires, and identifications that may have previously remained closeted or indeed, 'impossible.'

The pieces I have discussed here all position their authors as fans of the texts they fracture and reconstruct, texts which sometimes make them lust, sometimes make them cringe, and sometimes elicit "a whoop of recognition." Perhaps because of these mixed reactions, lesbian fandom can never be a simple nod of appreciation; it is, rather, a series of operations – here made manifest through acts of cut-and-paste – by which the lesbian fan, scissors and glue stick in hand, negotiates a position for herself inside texts that may offer a few "windows and doors" but that may ultimately want to erase her and her desires from the picture. Most theorizing of fandom focuses on intense identification with stars, but Bright, for example, does not necessarily identify with either figure in the car scene: she cuts out neither Tracey nor Hepburn to replace them with herself. As I have shown, Laplanche and Pontalis's formulation of fantasy as a setting of desire allows us to see Bright identifying with and desiring the whole scene, rather than specific figures in it. Seeing (and believing in) what is not there, Bright pastes her own image into the 'gap,' which here happens to be the driver's seat, and takes off.

I do not mean to suggest that the lesbian fan possesses an "unproblematic and romanticized agency" with which to get outside these apparatuses (Mayne 62). For the

question remains, are Bright and Barriga lesbian spectators who are fans of the cinema, negotiating a lesbian place for themselves within its framings and positions, or are they cinematic spectators who are *fans of lesbian*, negotiating places within structures of lesbian meaning? Surely these are not mutually exclusive positions, but the latter formulation deserves, by way of conclusion, to be fleshed out a little more.

'Fan,' an abbreviation of *fanatic*, carries negative connotations: to be a fanatic implies interest and enthusiasm that veers towards obsession and irrationality, and indeed most representations of fandom are of obsessed and even psychotic 'fans who go too far' (*All About Eve* is a prime example). Etymologically, fanatic is not, as one might suspect, related to fantasy. The word's origins suggest possession by a god or demon (the Latin *fanaticus* implies divine inspiration), or in most conceptions of fandom, by a star. To be a fan is to be possessed, or, in another sense, to be haunted. I began this chapter by pointing out that Castle is a lesbian fan, and as it turns out, her lesbian fandom – the way she is "caught up" with Fassbinder – is not so different from her hauntedness – the way she is "caught up" with Ed, for example, or all the other lesbian ghosts she chases in *The Apparitional Lesbian*. Avery Gordon writes, "haunting recognition is a special way of knowing what has happened or is happening" (63). To be haunted is to be "caught up" in a particular type of fantasy, especially since the origins of the word fantasy, or *phantasy*, are easily traced to phantasms. Both fantasies and phantasms are, like lesbian, that which is not there but appears nonetheless. And the lesbians in the crowd believe what they see.

Characterizing lesbian meaning as a fantasy, a sequence of images, as I have done here, it becomes clear to me that my interest in lesbian spectatorship lies less in how lesbian women see or read films or texts than in how we see or read *lesbian*, and how

through these acts of vision we not only discover but also render and produce lesbian meaning as such. This seeing often manifests as a hauntedness, as seeing what is not there as "a special way of knowing what has happened or is happening." The copula of being-lesbian loses its grip on the ontological as it becomes a condition or location: to be a lesbian, in other words, may be a being "caught up" in lesbian as a sequence of images. To be a lesbian – and to be a lesbian theorist especially, perhaps – may entail no more or no less than being a fan *of* lesbian, hanging around the stage door paying homage to the images that arouse and sustain us through various and varied acts of fandom.

## Conclusion

## On the Pleasures of Lesbian Fashion

I took home economics in high school. The class was divided into two semesters, the first on sewing and the second on cooking. The first week was devoted to a study of fashion and its purposes, and as a class we read through the photocopied pages of the introductory chapter of an outdated textbook that explained why we wear clothes. The text was accompanied by campy illustrations: Adam and Eve in nothing but fig leaves (*"clothing is worn for modesty"*), Arthurian knights in armour and children in raincoats (*"clothing is worn for protection"*), nurses and police officers (*"uniforms imply purpose or authority*"), hippies dancing barefoot (*"clothing can be a form of self-expression"*), snooty aristocrats with monocles and upturned noses (*"clothing can communicate status"*), a crowd of people in some sort of cult robes (*"clothing can communicate club or community membership"*), and last but not least, a caricature sketch of a pouty-lipped blonde in skimpy lingerie (*"clothing can be worn for seduction"*).

In week two, we moved on to how to use a sewing machine. The classroom was equipped with about fifteen of them and our teacher showed us how to slide open the tops of our desks to pull out the machines that were housed upside down therein. I had no problem with this, but everything thereafter was a nightmare. I could not seem to thread the machine or sew a straight line, let alone keep the fabric from bunching up between my seams. The one thing I did become good at was ripping out the stitches that had gone awry. Luckily, the girl with whom I was paired to share a sewing machine suffered the same difficulties and we became fast friends. Every class, we laughed hysterically at each

other's disasters, even as the teacher tsk-tsked our shocking inability to pick up the simple differences between three kinds of button-holes. While I managed to pass the class with a sad looking tote bag and an almost wearable pair of wide leg pants, my friend and I chose instead to wear our stitching inadequacies as a badge of honour, likely chugging along on a nascently feminist intuition that if we never learned to sew, we would never find ourselves stuck as housewives sewing clothes for packs of ungrateful children. Steeled by this certainty, we both dropped the class at the end of the first semester, so neither of us ever learned to cook either.

Despite my incompetence as a seamstress, I have always loved fashion. As a feminist, I have loved fashion as a guilty pleasure, devouring magazines on the sly and lusting after dresses and heels even as I clothed myself in appropriately gender-neutral feminist uniforms with sensible shoes. *Uniforms imply purpose or authority.* As a lesbian, I have loved fashion as a series of identity projects. *Clothing can communicate club or community membership.* Clothing can bear the visual weight of the acts of lesbian signification we perform on and with the very surfaces of our bodies. I have been writing about lesbian politics of visibility and have not been writing about surfaces, and so I am left with questions like, what meaning does the surface of my body bear? What meaning does it make, and how? If being lesbian is a state of being caught up in a lesbian fantasy, then how, after all, do I look? The surface of my body is white and freckled, marked by a series of signifiers that effect a race and gender. The surface of my body is the shape it cuts in silhouette, the way it moves and feels against the air when I walk, and the markings it bears of sexuality and desire, class histories, fantasies translated into style and clothing, and bruises and scars with stories to tell. The surface of my body is a

mottled montage of guises and addresses, an image and a spectacle, an "array of corporeal theatrics" (Butler, "Imitation" 134).

Many things influence what I choose to clothe myself in each morning. Being a lesbian is one of them. Well, lesbian is a big one. I do not have any definitive answers to the question *what does a lesbian look like?* but I am fascinated by the elaborate systems of appearance and style that furnish lesbian publics and communities with languages of recognition and protection, resistance and conformity, fantasy and seduction. I am fascinated by the many and varied ways in which lesbian women adorn themselves as a means to both construct and respond to lesbian meaning, and by the way coming out often manifests as a gender and style makeover, or two, or seven (or at least it did for me). I am fascinated by the many and varied approaches one can take to appear as lesbian, by the ways lesbian aesthetics snake in and out of masculinity and femininity and all the processes by which those genres are constructed, and by the way arrays of lesbian style condition other corporeal theatrics like behaviour, gait, posture, and gestures.

When people ask what I am writing about and I tell them "lesbian visibility," they sometimes ask me if that means I am studying lesbian fashion, and sometimes I say yes. In many ways, the simple pursuit of being a lesbian is a study in how to recognize a lesbian, as well as how to appear as a lesbian and how to attract and seduce a lesbian, should one be so inclined, and much of this comes down to significations set off by fashion and style. I remember watching an episode of *Oprah* on the topic of lesbianism the first time it was cast as trendy back in the 1990s. Oprah kept asking how it was that lesbian women found one another, if 'gaydar' was a real thing, and if lesbians were simply born with it. At the time – which was, it turned out, a rather tender time in my

own sexual development – I was very concerned about this problem; now, it seems rather silly. *Clothing* – among other signals – *can communicate club or community membership.* Kate Davy attests that gays and lesbians

> don't only find each other in bars and other community venues specific to our various homoerotic cultures; we identify each other covertly in a variety of straight cultural contexts, not by virtue of some secret sixth sense inherent in our ostensibly perverse ontologies, but by virtue of a tacit understanding however tentative or incomplete – of the various and mutable codes we construct and enact to pervert hegemonic signifying systems enough to be read by other literate perverts. (qtd in Robinson 722)

I am always looking for lesbian, and I see her everywhere I go. My dyke sightings in the pictures of my daily landscapes are rarely complicated by the burden of certainty; that isn't the point. Looking for lesbian is, for me, about pleasure: pleasure in looking, in the practice of a language of "mutable codes" of dress, gait, gesture, and looks that also affirms my own membership in (and fandom of) this esoteric dialectical community.

Heterosexuals and homosexuals alike seem to be wracked with anxieties about the ways in which sexual identities do not always show up on the body. Race and gender are often paraded forth as if they enjoy simpler, more straightforward relationships to vision than sexual identity, though a Black butch lesbian who sometimes passes as a white man, for example, could disrupt that perceived straightforwardness. For the fact remains that questions of lesbian visibility are always nuanced by the mutually constitutive visibilities, invisibilities, and passings of both gender and race, and questions of clothing, fashion, and style are always marked by racialized notions of beauty and

classed notions of taste, status, and appropriate sexuality. Clothing also bears the markings of cross-cultural contacts, exchanges, and appropriations, and often residual traces of struggles and resistance as well. Whether we like it or not, clothing is a means by which we all choose to conform to or rebel against norms and expectations of appearance for our given communities, identities, and locations every single day.

As Halberstam characterizes it, when lesbian is considered alongside fashion and style, it skates over "a rather different sexual topography," constituted by "not the closet but the wardrobe" (*Female* 98). Writing about masculine female bodies in general and Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* in particular, Halberstam argues that a sartorial aesthetic – such as the style Stephen Gordon adopts in that novel (which Esther Newton described as the "mannish lesbian" look (281)) – can be a construction of self and gender "that positions itself against the aesthetic of nakedness" (99). In this frame, dressing is an act of gender self-creation, rather than simply gender prosthesis (by which the female body can read as masculine, for example), rejecting the naked body's claim to originality, substance, purity, or wholeness for the surface-meaning of clothing, aesthetics, and style.

The array of corporeal theatrics known as fashion is little more than a high-speed game of constructing 'new' (or at least renewed) manifestations of masculinity, femininity, and androgyny on various corporeal surfaces. Fashion is decidedly not about the naked body; if anything, it is, as in Halberstam's reading of Stephen Gordon's experience, an engagement but ultimate disidentification with the naked body. Fashion is the construction of a new body, not only marked with but also created by the plasticities of gender, which are also simultaneously produced by race, nationality, class, age, dis/ability, size, and politics. If you do not have this body, this surface, the fashion and/or

medical industries may help you construct it, and this is no less true of queer, lesbian, and transgender communities than it is for high fashion couture-chasers.

Postmodernism loves surfaces, and it especially loves surfaces beneath which lies nothing much, surfaces that blanket nothingness, surfaces that can be orchestrated and glamorized for their very *surfaceness* or lack of depth. In describing gender as performative in *Gender Trouble*, Butler seemed to some to be licensing queer as a project of fashion statements.[7] Butler asserted that gender, the body, and the items and prosthetics with which we adorn the body are not expressions of a private self or sexuality going public but rather an incessant, repeating construction of one's self and sexuality in public. Whatever else our cross-dressings had meant, as de Lauretis puts it (quoting Herbert Blau), suddenly queers were seen to be "simply and safely 'acting out the paraphilia of the postmodern,' like everyone else" (109). Cross-dressing in particular acts out and camps up a subversion of the heteronormative logic that weds femininity to femaleness and masculinity to maleness, constructing in its place a radical discontinuity whose visual evidence appears as queer.

When I came out, I butched up. I cropped my hair, cut an androgynous figure in jeans and boys' t-shirts, dumped my purse and kept my wallet in my back pocket. I

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[7] Butler has addressed this reductive reading at length, and my intent here is not to attach the "queer-as-fashion-statement" mode of politics to Butler nor to *Gender Trouble* but rather to take up a particularly reductive popular-cultural response to the theory of performativity, first formulated in *Gender Trouble*, that seemed to license gender/fashion play without taking seriously the implications for subjectivity implicit in Butler's theory. For an extended discussion of performativity that extensively complicates and problematizes this response, see *Bodies That Matter* (particularly the first chapter). See also *The Psychic Life of Power*, in which Butler continues to develop the theory of performativity. Jay Prosser has further complicated performativity and its theorization by critiquing Butler's metaphorization of the transgendered body, putting both the embodiment and the seriousness of this fashion-play in stark relief (see *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*). For a critique of the commodification and commercialization of the queer-as-fashion-statement mode of queer politics, see Rosemary Hennessy's "Queer Visibility in Commodity Culture," and on the general fashionability of queer and queer theory, see Dennis W. Allen's "The Marketing of Queer Theory."

butched up because I wanted to look like a lesbian, and because I wanted my queerness to leave visual traces all over my body for all to see. I butched up because it was fun, because it was nice to feel the sun on the back of my neck and to swagger a little like Ally Sheedy as I walked down the street in heavy boots and baggy, low-rise jeans. I butched up because I felt sexy in baggy, low-rise jeans, and because girls seemed to dig it. (*Clothing can communicate seduction.*) I butched up because I could.

Any project that raises the challenge, even to complicate it, of finding the dyke in the picture necessarily raises the specter of female masculinity, and while there have been several ghosts haunting this thesis, at least a few of them have been butch ghosts. In Chapter Two, for example, when I argued of Deborah Bright's *Dream Girls* that lesbian meaning is made through the syntax of lesbian fantasy, Bright's butch appearance sets off the lesbian signification of these montages, in a way that the feminine bodies in those scenes simply cannot. In Chapter One, I argued that in her account in *The Apparitional Lesbian* and especially in "First, Ed," Terry Castle is enthralled with a lesbian structure of feeling, but she sights the lesbian significance of Ed first in the way she wears her hair, the men's clothing she wears, and her beautiful teenage boy aesthetic, and Ed appears "somehow less than herself" when she dons more feminine attire. In the Fierce Pussy posters I discussed in the Introduction, at the challenge of "Find the Dyke in this Picture," the eye's first response is to look to see which of the two girls posing together in the photobooth might be a little more butch, and even in *The Challengers,* lesbian makes its appearances through cross-dressing and a little girl performing in drag, in part for another (more feminine) one. Haunting all projects of lesbian visibility is always that anxious

question of *what does a lesbian look like*, and haunting that question is the visual image of a woman that emerges as a whispered response: "mannish," masculine, butch.

A few years after I came out, I decided to wear a skirt to the beach – because I could, because I felt sexy with the folds of fabric swishing around my bare legs, because my new girlfriend liked to reach over and brush her fingers over my thighs while she drove. I started painting my nails, letting my hair grow a little to see how it felt, and reading Joan Nestle's fiercely erotic femme declarations in *A Restricted Country* and *A Persistent Desire*. Butching up was, for me, a project of lesbian proclamation, signification, and recognition, and it was constituted by the abandonment of a closet full of clothes and of fashion in general. As a femme, I have loved fashion as a flair and a pursuit, as a studied familiarity with the genders of lines and shapes, colours and textures, with bodies and clothing as a complex language of symbols and suggestions. For queer femme is rarely *only* about femininity: it takes something called femininity as its subject as it explores the ways in which this subject interacts with, merges with, contradicts and snakes in and out of masculinity and androgyny, homosexuality and heterosexuality, maturity, perversity, ethnicity, fashion, status, sex, fantasy, space, and movement, to name but a few. It is, for me, not the absence of visible evidence of queerness, but rather a different type of trace. In this way, femme is not left out of those elaborate lesbian systems of appearance, as some femme theorists complain; it is just another way of engaging with it, an engagement that has a history in lesbian culture that is as strong and honourable – if not always as visible – as the engagement with female masculinity.

Reading femme literature and theory, one begins to recognize a familiar autobiographical trajectory: 'when I came out of the closet I butched up because that's

what I thought lesbians looked like, but when I became more comfortable with my sexuality and with myself I returned to my lipstick and heels.' It echoes my own story, even if I do not always agree with the conclusions many of these authors make. These stories tend to end either happily, on notes of self-acceptance, or sourly, on notes of bitterness for the ways in which lipstick and heels may make one invisible to other lesbians as 'one of their own.' A good deal of femme literature[8] tends to conclude that the lens of visibility is too limiting, too restrictive, or too exclusive to be the focus of a queer politics because it seems to suggest, in its displacement of identity and ontology as a grounds for politics, that if one cannot appear as lesbian, then one is not a lesbian. As Elizabeth Galewski puts it,

> [w]ithin the LGBT community... 'visibility' has often come to be associated with cutting an appropriately transgressive figure in the eyes of the heterosexual mainstream. Within the queer women's contingent, this definition of 'visibility' has tended to raise the butch to a position of prominence. The figure of female masculinity, the butch's visible gender deviance is considered by many within the queer women's community to constitute an interruption of gender expectations. Merely walking down the street, many assert, the butch questions the necessity of female femininity and heterosexuality... For this reason, the butch has often come to be seen as the queer women's community's most effective political

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[8] For arguments on femme invisibility, see for example, Lisa Walker, "How to Recognize a Lesbian: The Cultural Politics of Looking Like What You Are;" Elizabeth Galewski, "'Playing Up Being a Woman:' Femme Performance and the Potential for Ironic Representation;" Dvora Zipkin, "The Myth of the Short-Haired Lesbian;" and Biddy Martin's "Sexualities Without Genders and Other Queer Utopias" in her *Femininity Played Straight.*

> actor. Considered visible, public, and distinctive, the butch has come to signify the queer. (284)

This distinction might be news to many butch women. Arguments like Galewski's about femme invisibility too often find themselves in what Halberstam characterizes as "the untenable position of arguing that butch is a privileged gender because of the disjuncture it marks out between embodiment and appropriate gender presentation," and Halberstam makes the important point that "most of the time, particularly in early years, butch women do not experience their masculinity as a bonus" ("Between" 59). The hypervisibility of a butch body is often not experienced as distinctive or privileged in the heterosexual cultures through which butch women must move everyday, and femme scholarship must not ignore the realities of homophobic harassment and attack to which butch women are often subject.

The butch body is largely unrepresented in the current landscape of assimilationist lesbian chic and deliberately 'straight-acting' lipstick lesbians, in which the popularity and visibility of L.A.-based *The L Word* and the mainstreaming of gay and lesbian politics in general dictate the ways in which lesbian circulates as fashion (and vice versa). Shane Phelan notes that while "'street-level' queer activism has made gender transgression a political action in and of itself," the assimilationist aesthetic that dominates mainstream gay and lesbian political organizing largely "closets" butch lesbians at the demand of "respectability" ("Public," 197, 196). As Ann Ciasullo puts it, the butch "is at once present in the mainstream imagination, the lesbian who appears in the straight mind's eye when lesbianism is mentioned, and the lesbian who is so reviled that she is unrepresentable" (604).

Femme theorists are thus faced with the challenge of how to make a femme scholarship that attends to the specific gender variances, belongings, and unbelongings of queer femininities in this landscape without denigrating or obliterating butchness. At the same time, I also want to refuse the erasure of perverse and non-normative femininities by resisting the conflation of all lesbian femininity with assimilation and conformity to which some theorists are prone. The lead to many an article on lesbian chic in the 1990s presumed that lesbian and fashion were oxymorons, but *not so!* they proclaimed, introducing a new generation of fashionably feminine lesbians ready and willing to be consumed by the mainstream media. These trendy new lesbians were usually cast against the backdrop of the bad butch stereotype, which has often been pushed aside since 1970s lesbian feminism in such a way that also denigrates working class sexualities. For example, in an interview in a 1993 *New York* magazine article, a lesbian woman describes coming from a working class butch-femme scene in Texas to an upper-middle class lipstick lesbian scene in New York City:

> The first lesbian bar I ever walked into, in Houston, was owned by a woman called Papa Bear. She was mildly obese, with short-cropped, masculine, stone-butch hair. She smoked cigars and wore T-shirts and blue-jeans – she had a key chain on her belt loop and a knife in her boot. Her girlfriend was a stripper. There was a certain sleaziness associated with it that I somehow could never accept. (Kasindorf 34)

The classism and butchphobia of this passage is palpable. Ciasullo reads it as such:

> On James Dean, T-shirts, blue jeans, and the accessories might be sexy. On Papa Bear, these attributes contribute to a caricature of a bull dyke and

> her hypermasculinity, a caricature that seems to be presented as simultaneously humorous and loathsome. Couple this with the fact that the butch's girlfriend is a stripper, and the entire image – and, by extension, the entire *body* of the butch – is deemed sleazy. (601)

I agree with Ciasullo's reading, but I cannot help but wonder about the stripper girlfriend. Who is she, and why, when Papa Bear gets such an elaborate description, does she need no more than the marker "stripper" to tell us everything we apparently need to know about her? It tells us but three things: that she is a sex worker, that she is probably working class, and that she is probably femme. Ciasullo continues, "even if it is the whole scene that made [the author] feel uncomfortable, in this passage it is Papa Bear who represents the source of not only discomfort but also 'sleaziness.' The butch here is presented as working class, masculine, and, above all, distasteful" (601). She forgets already how, in her reading, this particular working class butch looked a lot sleazier, a lot more masculine, and a lot more distasteful when paired with the working class femme girlfriend, now dropped out of the equation. The stripper girlfriend is read as the ultimate marker of class and sleaze in this image – an image that suddenly, it seems, does not include her ("the entire image – and by extension, *the entire body of the butch*").

Ciasullo notes that the butch's unrepresentability is magnified by the ways in which her body is marked by class, in contrast to the ways class marks the upwardly mobile feminine lesbians the article discusses elsewhere. However, Ciasullo continually elides butchness with working class and femmeness with upward mobility. In doing so, she completely forgets about any form of femininity that cannot pass as normative, such as those marked by working-class and/or queer signifiers. In writing about the working-

class butch's unrepresentability, then, Ciasullo makes the working class femme even more unrepresentable by not even noticing that she is there.

While few of us are able to live totally free of the fashion industry's powerful influences and significations, to read lesbian clothing or appearance as histories of fashion alone – to trace lesbian style from the aristocratic cross-dressing of Radclyffe Hall to contemporary *L Word* lesbians, for example – tells the story of a small, affluent, and privileged lesbian minority that leaves many out. We ought to pay attention instead to the politics of clothing and dress in which some arrays count as fashion, others count as costume, and others count only as masquerade or impersonation. As Carol-Ann Tyler puts it,

> [a] real woman is a real lady; otherwise, she is a female impersonator, a camp or mimic whose 'unnaturally' bad taste – like that of the working-class, ethnic or racially 'other' woman – marks the impersonation as such. Miming the feminine means impersonating a white, middle-class impersonation of an 'other' ideal of femininity... It is only from a middle-class point of view that Dolly Parton looks like a female impersonator; from a working-class point of view she could be the epitome of womanliness. (57)

Just as some femme theory stabilizes female masculinity as a form of visible queer privilege in order to show the invisibility and erasure of the queer femme body, so some theory stabilizes femininity as normative – based only on a white, middle-class norm of femininity – in order to produce a tacit ground from which to show the cross-dressed, camped up, butch(y) or androgynous female body as appearing radically queer. In doing

so, it ignores the scores of perverse femininities that do not or cannot appear as normative and can only appear as camp, masquerade, or impersonation.

Jewelle Gomez laments the way in which butch and femme have become two poles of lesbian appearance pitted against each other in contemporary theory: "I fear that wedge that comes between groups," she writes, "the idea that suddenly butches and femmes are in competition somehow. Politically, that's death. Culturally and socially, that's a bore" (155). Being butch (or androgynous) may make you a good lesbian but a deviant woman, and being femme may make you a deviant lesbian but a good woman, but neither are particularly easy positions to negotiate. Good and bad women both experience sexism and misogyny, just as good and bad lesbians both experience heterosexism and homophobia, even if they experience them in different ways.

The postmodern retreat from lesbian as identity is often characterized by an embrace of lesbian as appearance and performance. Yet even as this politics of appearance replaces identity politics, lesbian visibility politics still stumbles around this divide, always unclear over whether lesbian is merely appearance and performance or whether visibility is the visual expression of a more stable identity. And all of these political approaches still stumble over those spaces where vision is not so reliable, spaces where, as I have shown in this thesis, lesbian meaning is often made: the in-between places of the ghost, of fantasy and memory, and of perverse lesbian genders that may lie just outside the frame. Lesbian meaning is often inarticulable, requiring obtuse theoretical languages of phantoms, feelings, and suggestions to try to get at the ways in which we continuously sense her, find her, even see her within the syntax, semantics, fashions, and desires of our interlocutions – even as that seeing and finding revels in pleasures that do

not always require the recourse of certainty. As theory continues to retreat from identity, we ought not rush too quickly toward the comfortable visibility to be found in surfaces and optics of appearance. The lesbian apparitions haunting this thesis register a plea to linger a little longer in the pleasures of those in-between spaces where you can never be quite sure of what you see, but you can believe in it nonetheless.

Finding the dyke in the picture is a project haunted by the multiple valences of what we mean not only by lesbian but also by *visibility*. Visibility, like invisibility, means several things. In the context of an international political movement, visibility can mean public prominence and attention in politics and the media. In this sense, visible means powerful, perhaps legitimate. This meaning of visibility is distinctly wedded to notions of public and private, and to a politics of coming-out that posits that it is not enough to be a lesbian in private: lesbianism must 'go public.' In this sense, visible, if successfully executed, might also come to mean fashionable. For an individual dyke in a public place like the street, visibility and fashion might come together to produce gestures of recognizing and being recognized, or not, as she passes another dyke, or it can mean having an appearance so linguistically tied to the word lesbian that men in cars will yell *fucking dyke!* as they drive by. It can also mean being in a lesbian bar and feeling like no one can see you, and in this sense invisible might mean straight, or at least 'not queer enough.' Here invisible also means illegible, that your appearance cannot coherently coalesce with lesbian meaning. Problems of illegibility are also at stake for the dyke harassed for her appearance, perhaps because her simultaneous appearance as 'butch' and 'woman' are illegible within a heterosexual frame.

It is constructive to gingerly pry apart these two threads of the meaning of visibility inherent in lesbian politics: the 'going public' of lesbian as a strategy of achieving political or cultural power, and the recognizability or legibility of lesbian as it is communicated through aesthetics, appearance, style, and gender. I do not mean to pull at these to separate them but rather to try to understand their separate trajectories and consequences. For one, the gap between lesbian aesthetics and lesbian publicity illuminates the gap between a framework that foregrounds the erotics and sociality of lesbian and one that foregrounds her politics and activism. It also shows the contradictions of address: aesthetics are addressed to our communities and have developed into complex languages of fashion, style, stance, and gender, while publicity is addressed to what Michael Warner (via Habermas) calls the mass subject, "the addressee of public discourse [who] is always yet to be realized" (73). This points to the reason why so many explicit gay and lesbian visibility projects take the form of media campaigns (even subversive ones, like Fierce Pussy's), celebrity outings, film and television, and public events – all addressed to something called the public, and perhaps moreover to the murky waters of the 'mainstream,' which is always fickle, and which is always, it seems, heterosexual. It is also a public that, in mainstream culture, the figure of the celebrity is best positioned to address.

In the days after Michael Jackson died, I saw three different people wearing three different homemade t-shirts paying homage to the pop star. Through clothing and fashion, bodies can become billboards of affect where grief, fandom, and fantasy, for example, not only aesthetically merge but also proclaim and address themselves in ways that are both deeply personal and undeniably public. In a few strikingly similar ways, the

processes by which I decide what to wear each morning are also bound up in fandom and melancholy, as well as in desire and fantasy. As both a dyke-fan of fashion and a theorist-fan of lesbian, I adorn myself with a lesbian fantasy, and arrayed as such – making placeholders of both my body and my writing for this desirable sequence of images – I hope I will be recognized, at least a little, by others as being caught up in this way.

One spring Friday night, my girlfriend and I went out to dinner at a nice restaurant. It was a part of the city to which we don't usually go, but we were celebrating something, so we got dressed up – me, in a skirt and heels, her in a blazer and button-down – and left for a nice evening out together. A brief encounter in the parking lot ("fucking dyke," he mumbled as he pushed past us) did not phase us and arm-in-arm we walked to the restaurant. It was, as it turned out, one of those places, or perhaps just one of those nights, when everyone is looking at you. It's hard to explain. The guy in the parking lot aside, no one really says anything but you can see the whites of their eyes a little too long as you are led to your table. They look at you confused (*is that a boy or a girl?... Are they on a* date*?*), too polite to say anything but still they look long enough – and there are enough of them and only two of you – that the result is an uncomfortable feeling. You don't leave or complain, but you try to shrink into your seat a little more and you are just a little more aware of your surroundings, of being watched, of the conversations you do (and do not) have.

At one point early in this particular meal, my girlfriend looked up over my shoulder, squinted a little and said, "is that two women?" I turned and saw the series of framed pictures on the wall, family photos and slices of early 20th century Canadian farm life. In the one right above my head, two figures stood side by side staring proudly out at

the camera, one resting a hand on the handle of a shovel. The photo was blurry and at first glance it looked like a man and a woman, but one only had to look a little closer to see that they were, in fact, two women – the one woman's strong jaw, mannish clothing, and tightly pulled back hair matched by the subtle curve of her breasts evident above her waistband. And to look a little longer revealed her other had subtly placed just behind the hip of her companion.

I imagine the camera shutter going off, lighting up each of their faces in the dusty summer air, capturing this split second in the lives of these two beautiful women that becomes visible now, for us, so many years later. The image comes to life and I imagine the moments the camera doesn't catch: she sets her shovel down and pulls the other woman into her body, grabbing her by the waist and kissing her deeply. I imagine them laughing and dancing and kicking up dust, their house (just visible over their shoulders), their life together. And perhaps the best part, the most nourishing part, is that we know no one else sees any of this. *Did you see that?* I am so appreciative of them, these lesbian ghosts, their proud and joyful smiles, the grizzled honesty of their faces. I know that none of the other restaurant patrons know what we know – even if we do not know for sure, though it seems for a second that these two women are looking directly at us, letting us know we are not alone in here. And so we stop shrinking in our seats, laugh loudly and boldly, and linger long over dessert.

Lesbian meaning is made in these flashes between apparitions and flesh, in the jarring but exhilarating oscillations between fantasy and biography where the lines between image and reality are never so clear and the pleasures in the familiarity of that haziness are never so great. Lesbian is what is understood and recognizable in this

memory, but it is also what is unclear, obtuse; it is the fugitive meaning, the smudge on the photograph, the fantasy that fills in the gaps. When we find the dyke in the picture we find not only biography (and usually autobiography), but also the fleeting presences of feeling and fantasy. We find not only what *is* but what *could be* – what is "still sounding elsewhere" – and, inserting ourselves in the driver's seat, we take off. We get caught up in it, haunted by it, throwing ourselves willingly and joyfully into the fantasy at the same time as we keep our feet firmly planted on the ground.

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