CONSTRUCTIONS AND DECONSTRUCTIONS
Gay Politics, Lesbian Feminism, and Civil Rights

Whatever is unnamed, undepicted in images, whatever is omitted from biography, censored in collections of letters, whatever is misnamed as something else, made difficult-to-come-by, whatever is buried in the memory by the collapse of meaning under an inadequate or lying language—this will become, not merely unspoken, but unspeakable.

—Adrienne Rich (1979, 199)

PROLOGUE

In the winter of 1993, shortly after his inauguration, President Bill Clinton nominated longtime supporter Roberta Achtenberg for the position of assistant director of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Achtenberg, an openly lesbian lawyer and lesbian rights advocate, had served on the Board of Supervisors of San Francisco from 1991 to 1993. Her selection to a position in the president’s cabinet required the approval of the Senate, making her the first openly gay or lesbian nominee ever to face the Senate confirmation process. Because she made no secret of her sexual orientation, Achtenberg and her supporters anticipated some resistance to her candidacy from conservative senators. However, the battle began sooner and more brutally than expected, with Senator Jesse Helms’s statement to the Washington Post that the Senate should refuse to confirm “a damn lesbian.” Many of Helms’s colleagues condemned his outright bigotry, yet the issue of Achtenberg’s sexual orientation became a key point of attack for her mostly Republican opponents.

Colonel Margarethe (Grethe) Cammermeyer had been a highly re-
pected nurse in the United States National Guard for twenty-seven years when she began preparing to apply for the War College to enable her to compete for the position of chief nurse of the National Guard in 1989. During the routine questioning required for top secret security clearance, Cammermeyer revealed that she was a lesbian. As a result of the military board hearing that followed, and despite a flawless record of service, in 1992 she was not only refused the promotion but was also separated from the National Guard, stripped of her rank, and denied a number of the benefits of her long tenure. Cammermeyer subsequently filed a civil discrimination suit against the military and was reinstated by a district court judge in 1994. Nevertheless, the battle left its scars. Cammermeyer was denied her lifelong dream of attaining the rank of general, serving as chief nurse of the National Guard, and retiring with full military honors. Instead, she spent the culminating years of her distinguished career embroiled in legal battles against the institution to which she had dedicated her life, fighting against the people and the country she had defended and loved.

**Introduction**

Since the 1970s, the feminist and lesbian/gay rights movements have made substantial progress in advancing their struggles for equality. At times, the two movements’ goals have coincided, and they have joined together to pursue mutually beneficial ends. These include challenging gender stereotypes, broadening narrow gender roles for women and men, and affirming the right of all individuals to control their own bodies. On other occasions, the two groups have worked with a complete disregard for each other or even at cross-purposes. At such moments, each has been insensitive to the oppression experienced by the other and to the ways in which each has participated in and benefited from the other’s oppression. Caught in the middle are those women who belong in, yet are frequently marginalized by, both movements: gay women, or lesbians, whose existence has often been disregarded or concealed by the leaders of both social movements.

To examine the status of lesbians within and between these movements is to engage feminist theory, gay studies, and public discourse at a powerful and controversial crosscurrent. The feminist movement continues to raise many of the major ongoing debates of our time, forcing public confrontation of issues as broad-ranging as rape, domestic violence, abortion, sexual harassment, and the feminization of poverty. Anyone who doubts the dissent that still rages around feminism need only observe the broad-based sup-
port for the current conservative Republican Congress or the vast radio and television audiences who avidly follow Rush Limbaugh’s diatribes. As the right-wing backlash continues to spread, the perceived feminist attack on “family values” is overshadowed by a group seen as even more threatening: gays and lesbians. The gay and lesbian claim to equal rights has produced one of the most explosive public debates in progress today.

The arguments surrounding gay and lesbian rights constitute crucial public debates, not only because they are conducted through public channels and institutions but also because they directly engage questions about the relationship between public discourse and minority identities. As the military’s current “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy attests, the very formation of identities is based in part on their assertion: who we are depends in part on how we represent ourselves, and on how others represent us, through language and visual images (Shotter and Gergen 1989, ix). The point is not simply that giving the name to gay or lesbian individuals and communities affirms our existence. More broadly, by highlighting certain facets of gay and lesbian lives and obscuring others, the discussions produced by gay and lesbian rights controversies help constitute identities. They do so by providing particular frameworks within which gays and lesbians may be seen and understood, by ourselves and by others.

In relation to these frameworks, lesbians occupy a tenuous position that places us both within and outside the feminist and lesbian/gay rights movements. We are multiply silenced, our existence doubly erased. First, we are negated by a dominant culture for whom we are emphatically “Other” by virtue of being neither men nor heterosexual. Second, we are often forgotten or ignored by groups of gay men and heterosexual women, for whom we are neither wholly insiders nor outsiders. For lesbians who are also marginalized with respect to race, class, age, physical ability, or other elements of identity, experiences of exclusion are further intensified through a dynamic that has been called “multiple jeopardy” (King 1988). Perhaps because of this multiple marginality, even those scholars who specifically set out to reclaim silenced or “lost” public voices have frequently neglected the study of lesbians.

Among scholars who study communication, for example, attention to women’s speech or “women’s issues” has gradually grown more prevalent and more accepted, although this change has occurred at a painfully slow pace. Nonetheless, these scholars by and large continue to ignore the prodigious public discourse on gay and lesbian rights generated in this country in recent years. While the American public and the mass media in particular
widely debate the implications of gay and lesbian rights struggles, those who study public discourse have remained unusually silent on the subject. Such neglect is striking in relation to an issue that currently constitutes one of the most widespread topics of public debate in this country and is likely to become even more contentious in the coming years.

If communication scholars have been reluctant to address gay issues generally, however, they have been hesitant to the point of nearly unbroken silence to broach the specific issues of lesbian speech or lesbian rights struggles. Those wishing to research any facet of communication about lesbians often find themselves scanning the indexes of books with gay, feminist, or women in the title, hoping to find an entry for lesbians. Frequently, they find none. In fact, those wishing to do lesbian scholarship are immediately confronted with a number of obstacles. First is the fear of discrimination and prejudice against one’s work or oneself when one pursues a research project about lesbians, regardless of one’s own sexual orientation. Second, materials are often not easily accessible, as much of the writing that does exist is published by alternative presses or small journals that are unavailable even in the libraries of large research institutions. Finally, the considerations of publishing and academic job security discourage scholars from writing about lesbians. As both a marginalized and a stigmatized minority, lesbians are considered at best a “special interest group” and at worst a threat to family values and the American social fabric.

The neglect of lesbian issues within speech communication has persisted despite growing bodies of lesbian feminist work in related areas such as literary studies, cultural studies, history, and psychology. Because these fields have led the way in developing lesbian studies, their disciplinary perspectives predominate in this emerging field. The result has been a relative flourishing of scholarship that focuses on fictional accounts, personal narratives, and other artistic and cultural endeavors, highlighting self-expression and the sharing of personal experience. Still needed, however, is another framework, crucial to any movement for social change: a method for examining public expression as communication, representations as political strategies, and messages in terms of their effects.

Such a framework would highlight self-identification as a distinct mode of communication. Declarations of identity serve several functions: they are at once powerful individual expressions, reinforcing one’s sense of belonging to a particular group; communicative messages, conveying that identification to others; and representations, offering particular portrayals of the individual and his or her group to the public. Statements of self-identity can
modify public understandings and portrayals of a group, while a group’s public representations can influence individual and collective self-identities. This mutual interaction of language and identity may either extend or abridge the available range of identities for a given group (Shotter and Gergen 1989, ix). Such consequences may be particularly striking for lesbians and gays, who are, as a group, “consciously involved in creating [their] own identity and purpose,” and whose public representations remain hotly contested (Fejes and Petrich 1993, 397).

To understand how various uses of language expand or restrict gay and lesbian identities, access to rhetorical approaches becomes vital. The word rhetoric is often used disparagingly to refer to language that is all ornament and little substance (Foss 1996). However, the term also refers to the art of using language effectively and persuasively. More broadly, rhetoric refers to the use of symbols, such as language and visual images, for the purpose of communication. Those who study rhetoric examine how speakers and writers use such symbols not only to represent reality but to create it. “Rhetoric is not simply the translation of some knowledge that we acquired somewhere else into a communicable form. It is the process by which our reality or our world comes into being; reality or knowledge of what is in the world is the result of communicating about it” (Foss 1996, 6).

From a rhetorical perspective, investigating the effects of language is a crucial form of inquiry because “what we count as ‘real’ or as ‘knowledge’ about the world depends on how we choose to label and talk about things” (Foss 1996, 6). The term rhetorical criticism describes the process of analyzing persuasive symbols and their effects in a given situation or context. Rhetorical critics analyze how persuasive appeals are constructed to create particular understandings of the world and to affect a given audience in a specific way. Such critics are therefore able to suggest how certain kinds of “knowledge” and versions of “reality” come to be widely accepted, and how others come to be devalued or erased, through the strategic use of symbols. Rhetorical approaches focus on how language and images function in concrete situations. They thereby enhance our ability to become more thoughtful, discerning, and critical consumers of public discourse.

Although those who study rhetoric have not granted the issue of gay and lesbian rights the attention it deserves, given its social significance, a rhetorical approach does have a valuable and needed perspective to add to those that are contributed by other disciplinary and interdisciplinary standpoints. Rhetorical perspectives can make a dual contribution to the analysis of lesbian and gay rights initiatives. First, they take as their texts persuasive, non-
fictional public discourse, which enables them to analyze representations that proliferate in some of today’s most widespread and influential discussions. Second, they illuminate not only the intentions that motivate such discourse but also the consequences of particular uses of language for various audiences. Rhetorical analysis allows us to set aside questions of “positive” or “negative” images. It allows us to examine, instead, how particular language and images function in a given context and for a designated audience.

This book investigates the representations of lesbians produced in two primary arenas of civil rights struggle: the United States political and military systems. It focuses on two case studies of discrimination against lesbians, examining how the language and images employed by advocates and opponents in each case shape available understandings of lesbian (and often gay) lives. More specifically, it examines how a focus on equal rights arguments, also referred to as civil rights strategies, constrains lesbian and gay identities and self-definitions; how such an approach regulates future liberatory endeavors; and how it prescribes a particular set of lesbian and gay public images that excludes certain individuals and communities. This book identifies those possibilities we create and those we exclude through an emphasis on civil rights strategies. It examines, finally, the role rhetoric can play in illuminating the heterosexual nature of institutions, both military and political, and in revealing the inherent inequalities on which such institutions are founded.

More broadly, this book points to the ways in which all categories of sexuality are shaped and delimited by language and in which sexual and other minority classifications may be produced by the very discourses that seek to regulate or protect them. These discourses at once assume the existence of such categories and create their parameters. In the process of constructing minority identities, dominant identities are also established and legitimated. Their boundaries are strengthened by the force of the binary opposition at work, and by the marginalization of the out-group. This process of group definition and differentiation solidifies distinctions between heterosexuality and homosexuality. The dividing line between categories is thereby strengthened, and sexual self-definition is limited on both sides. This process is thoroughly rhetorical and of the utmost importance. It influences at an intimate level the ways in which we are able to conceive of ourselves and others, touching on our most deeply held convictions about our own identities and the identities of those around us.

I begin this book by highlighting the exclusion of lesbians from much of feminist scholarship and gay studies. I offer a brief introduction to the
mainstream lesbian/gay rights movement and its guiding civil rights agenda, examining how the specific oppression of lesbians challenges a number of this movement’s goals. A lesbian feminist analysis of lesbian/gay rights discourse enables us to consider both the advantages and the risks of two of the movement’s guiding objectives: voice and visibility. Voice refers to political participation and cultural influence, while visibility represents the right to acknowledge openly a gay or lesbian identity. To explore the complexity that is introduced into these concepts when lesbian specificity is taken into account, I examine the cases of Roberta Achtenberg and Grethe Cammermeyer. Their stories illustrate some of the ways in which lesbians have been represented in recent years through particular institutional discourses. I focus on the language and images used to characterize these women and to establish their relationship to the category “lesbian.” I also suggest how these representations might influence broader public understandings of lesbians as individuals and as a group.

I argue that when some level of lesbian and gay voice or visibility is achieved, as in these high-profile cases, another level of institutional oppression is imposed to maintain the dominant culture’s control over the images and language that proliferate around a controversial issue. Images and language are continually subject to the threat of misinterpretation or assimilation, and the gains associated with greater visibility are balanced with some attendant losses. Rhetorical criticism examines not only the value of expressing one’s identity but also the consequences of public discussions of identity. In this book, I analyze such discussions for their potential to extend or limit opportunities for self-definition and the formation of individual and group identities. Metaphors of visibility and voice convey the importance of self-expression as a form of individual empowerment, independent of its public consequences. However, social movements must concern themselves not only with individual self-realization but also with identifying broadly effective political strategies and creating coherent visions for liberation. These imperatives call for a rhetorical perspective, grounded in textual analysis, to examine how various discursive strategies produce particular outcomes. Rhetorical analysis, drawing on the theoretical insights of feminist, gay, and lesbian studies, can bring these insights to bear on the concrete circumstances that directly affect the lives of millions of gays and lesbians every day.

As I begin this investigation, a few qualifications will help clarify my terminology, my intentions, and the scope of my analysis. Throughout this book I refer to a “dominant” American culture, an identifiable “main-
stream,” and “dominant” groups of people whose views have shaped traditional institutions. Yet it is important to recognize that such references are inevitably problematic and oversimplified. Our identification as insiders or outsiders in relation to a “dominant” culture is constantly shifting, so that nearly all of us feel included based on some elements of identity and excluded based on others. We may be privileged by our gender, race, age, education, physical ability, religion, or social class, to name but a few variables; we may also be excluded based on any of these characteristics. Very few of us can identify consistently as either mainstream or marginalized, when all social stratifications are accounted for.

Thus, while I want to account for the effects of oppression on marginalized individuals and groups, I do not want to perpetuate the fiction that we can identify a single, powerful group of individuals who constitute a societal mainstream (Clausen 1997). I am not suggesting that a particular individual or group can be identified either as omnipotent or as entirely without power. Nor do I wish to homogenize individuals based on their group identification, and so fail to acknowledge, for example, feminist men, antiracist whites, gay- and lesbian-friendly heterosexuals, and others for whom privilege has not blunted social consciousness.

Likewise, by identifying the political strategies favored by a powerful or “dominant” group of mostly white, middle-class or affluent gay men within the lesbian/gay rights movement, I do not wish to deny or discount the presence of more radical gay men. Groups of gay men such as the Radical Faeries or Black and White Men Together are often denied the publicity granted to those in the movement who present more mainstream or “acceptable” media images. I do not wish to minimize, either, the presence and influence of outspoken lesbian feminists throughout the history of the movement. Even my use of the phrase “lesbian and gay rights movement” represents a distortion. Rather than having one cohesive political center, the movement has always been a divided, contested site. Conflicts have occurred within the movement both historically and currently. Thus, although the themes of assimilation and equality have predominated, they have never been exclusive themes. My use of this phrase, while necessary, nevertheless obscures and artificially unifies a multitude of perspectives, priorities, identities, and strategies for the purposes of clarity and convenience. At the same time, it obscures the vital contributions of numerous bisexual, transsexual, and transgender men and women to the movement. I use this distortion consciously, although reluctantly, because of the danger of portraying the movement as monolithic and obscuring the rich diversity that is one of its
greatest strengths. I hesitate, moreover, to represent our movement as a straw person that is easily attacked, wishing instead to provide a thoughtful and nuanced critique of the movement in all its complexity.7

Finally, I acknowledge the limitations of choosing to focus on these particular case studies. Both Roberta Achtenberg and Grethe Cammermeyer are white, professional lesbians, privileged by race and class (although Achtenberg is Jewish, another marginalizing factor). Because they are members of the dominant race and class, these features of their identities go unmarked, and unremarked upon, in the context of these debates. As a result, within their struggles “questions of discrimination based on race or class, and the interconnectedness of these forms of oppression with homophobia, are bracketed” (Phelan 1994, 117). The hiddenness of race and class in these discussions may tempt us to neglect or discount their impact. Nevertheless, such factors are always implicitly present, interwoven throughout these debates with conceptions of gender and sexual orientation.

Even the movement’s focus on silencing as a hallmark of lesbian oppression is deficient when it fails to account for the varying configurations of silence and voice available to women in different ethnic communities. Thus, whereas lesbians are silenced in the wider societal context “as lesbians,” this silencing may vary in form and intensity among different groups of lesbians. For example, in contrast to the historical division of public and private spheres that has denied white, middle-class women a public voice, “the distinct division between male and female spheres of activity . . . has never been prevalent in black speech communities.” Perhaps as a result, “black women have been described as generally outspoken and self-assertive speakers. . . . There is a fundamental tendency toward male-female communicative parity in black culture which starkly contrasts to the tendency toward communicative asymmetry which scholars emphasize for white women and men” (Stanback 1985, 181, 182; see also Collins 1991). The constraints on African American women’s speech must therefore be distinguished from those that affect white women. “In black communities (and diverse ethnic communities), women have not been silent. Their voices can be heard. Certainly for black women, our struggle has not been to emerge from silence into speech but to change the nature and direction of our speech, to make a speech that compels listeners, one that is heard” (hooks 1989, 6).

In light of such differences, I am mindful of the ways in which choosing to focus on the cases of two white, professional women risks homogenizing gays and lesbians by portraying “a false unity among what is in fact a tremendously diverse collectivity” (Phelan 1994, 117). Examining the stories of such
women is an indispensable part of assessing the overall consequences of civil rights-based approaches. However, these women should not be viewed as representative of gays or lesbians as a group, nor should the importance of their relative privilege be overlooked. Their stories are significant, provocative, and inspiring. Yet they must also serve as a constant reminder of the vast number and endless variety of stories we have yet to hear. This book is only a beginning.

**Background and Significance of the Book**

On June 28, 1969, in an event that had become commonplace in New York’s Greenwich Village, police raided a popular gay bar known as the Stonewall Inn. What distinguished this raid from hundreds of other raids of gay bars was that on this night the patrons responded not only with resistance but with confrontation, turning a routine police action into a two-day riot. Gay men, lesbians, and transvestites, some patrons of the bar and others who came to support their fight, battled physically and psychologically with police to defend their right to the same freedom of assembly enjoyed by heterosexuals. While these men and women were not the first to argue for their right to fair and equal treatment, what has come to be known as the Stonewall Rebellion remains a landmark event in the fight for lesbian and gay liberation. This event is often identified as the official beginning of the social movement for gay and lesbian rights.8

The Stonewall Rebellion marked a new kind of visibility for gays and lesbians, whose everyday lives were otherwise defined by a careful monitoring of self-expression. What erupted during the riots at Stonewall was, certainly, a claim for equal rights. However, it was also something more: the beginning of a movement not just for equality but also for liberation and social change. The participants in this movement aimed to intervene not only in police procedure and the legal system but also in the public and private discourses that regulated their identities and circumscribed their lives. On that night, and through the days and nights that followed, many gays and lesbians refused to remain hidden any longer in deference to these constraints, insisting on being seen and heard in ways they had not previously demanded. Rather than disguise who they were to avoid social ostracism and police persecution, they “came out”—out of their individual and collective “closets” as well as literally out of the bar and into the streets—to demand acknowledgment of their existence and humanity. In their move from private to public space, this small group stood up for itself and, in the process,
spoke out for many others who had lived for too long behind shrouds of invisibility, silence, and shame.

The contemporary lesbian and gay rights movement has come a long way in the nearly thirty years since Stonewall, bringing about political change and social acceptance for gays and lesbians that was unimagined, and unimaginable, just a short time ago. Gay men and lesbians are, as both our supporters and opponents are eager to note, more visible than ever before. “Out” gays and lesbians occupy positions of power in a variety of fields, including the entertainment industry, journalism, sports, politics, and even religion. Debates over gay and lesbian rights consume many pages of local and national publications, appearing on the covers of magazines with widespread circulation and popular appeal, such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News and World Report*, and the *New Republic*. In addition, a burgeoning industry of gay- and lesbian-produced mass media has emerged, with a proliferation of local and national newsletters, newspapers, magazines, journals, films, and television programs produced specifically by and for gay and lesbian audiences.

Within the legal realm, domestic partner benefits for cohabiting gay and lesbian couples have become available in some cities. Such benefits are also offered by an increasing number of businesses, including universities such as Emory and Northwestern and major corporations such as IBM, Apple Computer, Microsoft, Bank of America, Walt Disney, and the San Francisco 49ers. The legalization of same-sex marriage is being pursued in Hawaii’s courts, with some signs of success. The Supreme Court overturned Colorado’s Amendment 2, an anti-gay rights initiative passed by state voters, stemming the tide of anti-gay initiatives on ballots across the country. The Clinton presidency, though fraught with disappointments for lesbian and gay rights activists, has nonetheless brought questions of gay and lesbian rights to the forefront of American consciousness, as the hotly debated “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy forced military personnel and civilians of all sexual orientations to examine their views on a formerly taboo subject.

Yet, while the gains of the lesbian and gay rights movement have been substantial, a right-wing backlash has emerged, predictably, to swing the pendulum back. In response to efforts to legalize same-sex marriage in Hawaii, state legislatures across the country have rushed to outlaw same-sex marriage in their states. The Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), which limits the definition of marriage to a union between a man and a woman, was easily passed by Congress in 1996. In the midst of what has been nicknamed the “lesbian baby boom,” legislatures have taken steps to prevent gays and
lesbians from becoming foster parents or adopting children, while gay and lesbian parents are being denied custody of their biological children at an alarming rate. The military has stepped up its dismissal of gays and lesbians despite the implementation of the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy. The Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA), a federal bill that would have prohibited discrimination against lesbians and gays in the workplace, was narrowly defeated by Congress in 1996. In addition, violence against gay men and lesbians continues at an alarming rate, in incidents ranging from the fatal beating of naval officer Allen Schindler by his shipmates in 1992, to attacks on lesbian and gay high school students by their peers, to the bombing of a lesbian bar in Atlanta in February 1997 (which remains, to date, unsolved).

The resurgence of right-wing efforts to halt and reverse social change, the persistence of anti-gay violence, and ongoing discrimination against gays and lesbians in areas such as housing, employment, child custody, and military service have all galvanized the lesbian and gay rights movement to renewed social and political struggle in the 1990s. Partly as a result of the movement’s battles, victories, and defeats, media coverage of gay and lesbian issues has proliferated. American public discourse has returned again and again to discussions of homosexuality: what “causes” it; what should be “done” about it; and to what degree it should be accepted or tolerated in families, schools, communities, the arts, religious institutions, and the military. As a result, “in place of the silence that once encased the lives of homosexuals, there is now a loud argument” (Sullivan 1993, 24).

Lesbian and gay rights are undoubtedly among the most contentious and widely debated issues of our time. These debates reach into the heart of individual and community values, raising questions about gender roles, love, sexuality, and the family. Inevitably, then, the discussions generated around such issues have been numerous, heartfelt, and heated. Gay and lesbian issues, like gays and lesbians themselves, continue to grow both more central to and more controversial within American public discourse. How we talk about such issues, and how we hear others talk about them, influences our sense of self, our perceptions of one another, and our vision of the society we want to live in, now and in the future. Just as various views of women have influenced the fate of women’s rights throughout history, so today competing portrayals of gays and lesbians call for different political strategies and produce varied social consequences. The public discourse generated today around gay and lesbian issues will have lasting effects on how we see ourselves, sexually and otherwise, well into the next century.
At one level, what is at issue for gays and lesbians today is whether and where we will “fit” in a heterosexist, patriarchal society, as evidenced by the struggle for control over laws and other forms of public influence. Yet beneath this level of struggle lie issues of representation and self-definition, crucial questions about who we are, how we want to be perceived, and how much we are willing to sacrifice as the price of “tolerance.” The interaction of public and private discourse in debates over gay and lesbian rights may encourage, erase, liberate, or regulate gay and lesbian identities. In doing so, such speech may enrich or impoverish the range of available opportunities for gay and lesbian lives. It can present us with possibilities we had not previously imagined, or conversely, it can construct barriers that limit the potential we see in our lives. These questions thus involve not only the present but also the future of the gay and lesbian movement.

Given the importance of language in influencing the strategies and success of the movement, as well as the quality of gay and lesbian lives, my investigation seeks to answer two broad questions. First, what kinds of lesbian representations emerge from the competing discourses in each of these case studies? How are “lesbians” and “lesbianism” constructed, represented, and understood within these contexts of American public life? The second and related question examines the effects of these representations. How do the strategies of supporters and opponents broaden the possibilities for lesbian self-definition and enable a wider range of lesbian identities and politics? How do these rhetorical choices constrict or eliminate such possibilities?

This book investigates the construction of the category “lesbians” in political and military discourse. The relationship between language and identity in lesbian representations is of particular interest because homosexuality represents a “limit case” of the range of invisibility experienced by marginalized groups. Members of nondominant groups experience varying degrees of invisibility in relation to the dominant group (Sedgwick 1990). Some minority individuals are literally “visible” to others, due to characteristics such as gender, skin pigmentation, facial features, or physical disability. However, these individuals may nevertheless be ignored by members of the dominant culture, treated individually or collectively as though they cannot be seen or do not exist. Others may be able to “pass” as members of the dominant culture in some situations, as they may or may not be recognized as members of a marginalized group; examples include many Jews, light-skinned African Americans, and those who are physically disabled in ways that are not apparent in all situations. Still other marginalized individuals and groups are rarely or never identifiable by outward characteristics. For them,
visibility requires an act of will, and invisibility may become a strategy for survival. Members of these groups, whose nonconformity to the assumptions of the dominant culture is not visually marked, are constantly misrecognized unless they take steps to counter such assumptions (Taylor 1995).

It is in this last category that lesbian identity is most often located, because despite popular stereotypes, lesbians are not reliably recognizable from external features (particularly to nonlesbians). Lesbian identity is most often invisible unless specifically acknowledged by the lesbian herself. Such a revelation is referred to as “coming out of the closet,” or simply “coming out.” Coming out is the act of making one’s sexual identity known to oneself and others. Because of the prevailing assumption of heterosexuality, revealing one’s lesbian identity frequently requires a deliberate act of verbal or nonverbal communication. Moreover, the paucity of lesbian representations in the mass media and the lack of role models in the experience of most lesbians mean that creating a lesbian identity depends heavily on the transmission of experiences either interpersonally or from available books and other resources (Lynch 1990; Plummer 1995; Trebilcot 1994).

Coming out by publicly identifying oneself as a lesbian has long been, and remains today, an important means of combating both sexism and heterosexism. Although much has changed in the discourses of gay rights and lesbian feminism since the 1970s, the importance of reclaiming a marginalized identity remains fundamental to many gays and lesbians. Where our identities have been used as weapons against us, many believe, we are empowered by reclaiming those identities and organizing around them to produce social change. Such a view has been continually asserted by many in the lesbian/gay rights movement, as well as by members of other social movements. Affirming one’s love for a member of the same sex in the context of a homophobic society is such a radical and transformational act that it has generally been viewed as a cornerstone of gay and lesbian liberation.

The act of coming out, for this highly invisible group, is not a one-time occurrence but an ongoing concern. In every situation and with each new person encountered, the choice must be made whether or not to acknowledge one’s minority identity (Sedgwick 1990; Zimmerman 1982). Hiddenness and visibility are rarely absolute, so that for most of us, secrecy and openness coexist, in various combinations and with differing degrees of comfort or unease. Most of us are out to someone significant in our lives: a friend, a family member, a counselor, or another lesbian or gay man. Yet, because of the stigma and the material disadvantages imposed on gays and lesbians, “there are remarkably few of even the most openly gay people who
Moreover, given “the deadly elasticity of heterosexist presumption,” even gays and lesbians who make a concerted effort to be out in all situations “find new walls springing up around them even as they drowse.” Each day requires a renewed commitment to self-disclosure, for “every encounter with a new classful of students, to say nothing of a new boss, social worker, loan officer, landlord, [or] doctor, erects new closets” (Sedgwick 1990, 68). Like communication itself, the act of coming out is a continual process. It occurs in an endless variety of contexts, and its effects depend on numerous situational variables. Though little studied, the coming-out process may represent a central mode of interpersonal and public communication in contemporary societies, where multiple differences abound but dominant cultural assumptions remain entrenched.

The act of coming out originated in the lesbian and gay community. However, it has been borrowed by other marginalized groups to refer to any act of acknowledging or revealing a marginalized identity, regardless of its degree of visibility. For example, one can come out as a Jew (Bennett 1982; Sedgwick 1990), but one can also come out with pride as a fat woman (Sedgwick 1990). Thus the rhetorical processes that produce lesbian and gay identities do not exist in a vacuum but are related to the processes that shape other minority identities. For this reason, the study of lesbian representations may help us understand how metaphors of voice and visibility influence the self-identities of other marginalized groups.

The lesbian and gay rights movement that has evolved over the past three decades shares some characteristics with lesbian feminism, while differing in other respects. The predominance of metaphors of visibility and voice and the emphasis on a close connection between being seen and being heard are shared by many minority groups. Yet strategies for addressing these issues often differ. For example, some lesbian feminists are committed to developing and valuing a space along the margins of society from which to challenge patriarchal institutions and develop a culture of their own. Such efforts may be located on a spectrum of possibilities, bounded on one end by absolute separatism and on the other by the goal of complete assimilation. The mainstream lesbian and gay rights movement often falls nearer the latter end, striving to attain equality within existing institutions. Patterned implicitly and often explicitly after the model of change established by the black Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, the movement for lesbian and
gay rights argues for the recognition of its members as constituting a “sus-
pect class” as defined by law and thereby entitled to the protections granted
to other minority classes based on characteristics such as race, religion, or
disability (Robson 1992).

Lesbian legal theorist Ruthann Robson provides a helpful de-
fi
nition of the concept of suspect class status as it relates to sexual orientation:

The hallmarks of a suspect class are . . . derived from legal notions of race. Tra-
ditionally, a suspect class must be a social minority that has been historically
discriminated against and continues to be relatively politically powerless, and
its members must possess immutable characteristics that are identifiable. Al-
though these criteria are certainly not absolute, arguments that lesbians are
within a suspect class based on sexual orientation must work within the tra-
ditional hallmarks. The most troublesome factor is the immutable identifiable
characteristic. Discussions of the applicability of this factor lead to debates
whether lesbianism is an identity or an activity. For legal protection, it must
be an identity, and a relatively unchanging one. (1992, 82)

By appealing to the still-controversial claim of an innate and immutable les-
bian or gay identity, the argument for suspect class status places issues of
identity in the forefront of gay and lesbian civil rights efforts.

More broadly, “suspect classifications” are defined by law as “acts of clas-
sification that are suspicious under equal protection doctrine” (Halley 1991,
354). The establishment of a group as belonging to a suspect classification is
the first step in protecting its members under this doctrine. Equal protection
laws scrutinize government acts that appear to disadvantage a group based
on an irrelevant characteristic of their identity. For example, it is legal for the
government to distinguish between classes of individuals according to their
annual income, and to tax them at different rates based on this distinction,
without violating the equal protection clause. It is illegal, however, for the
government to impose different rates of taxation on individuals of different
races who earn the same annual income, because race constitutes a suspect
classification and therefore is not an appropriate basis for such distinctions
(Wolinsky and Sherrill 1993). The suspect classification designation is in-
tended to protect all citizens against decision making based on certain pro-
tected characteristics.

This emphasis on decision making or “acts of classification,” rather than
on minority individuals themselves, highlights a frequently misunderstood
element of anti-discrimination laws. In relation to racial discrimination, for
example, “the fact that most race-based suits are brought by people of color
does not change the fact that anti-discrimination provisions protect all citizens of all races” (Fajer 1996, 211). The scope of such laws is therefore not limited to protecting the members of minority groups. “A landlord does not violate the Fair Housing Act by refusing to rent to an African-American, but rather by refusing to rent to anyone on the basis of their race.” This distinction is important because an individual who is not a member of such a group but who is discriminated against because he or she is perceived as belonging to that group is still protected under such laws. Thus “firing someone because you incorrectly believe them to be Jewish ought to be illegal, even if the person is not a member of the ‘protected class’ of Jews” (Fajer 1996, 210). This clarification suggests that gaining protections based on sexual orientation is not just an issue of concern to gays and lesbians. Such a change in the law would benefit not only self-identified gays and lesbians but also a much broader range of men and women whose appearance or behavior does not conform to traditional gender roles. Because they may be perceived as gay or lesbian, they, too, are at high risk for discrimination. Heterosexuals would also be protected under such laws from decision making that would exclude them from privileges based on their heterosexuality, if such protection were needed.

The reality of the need for civil rights is unavoidable in the face of rampant institutionalized discrimination against lesbians. Like gay men, lesbians can still be legally harassed in the workplace, fired from jobs, discharged from military service, evicted from homes, and denied custody of children on the basis of sexual orientation alone (Phelan 1994). The question, then, is not whether lesbians should engage in civil rights initiatives but, rather, what is gained and what is lost in specific examples of such endeavors. This book focuses that question on the potential for lesbian self-definition and representation, examining how these possibilities are shaped by the language of civil rights arguments. This approach shifts the question of civil rights away from wearying debates about the nature or “origins” of homosexuality. It concentrates instead on how “lesbianism” and homosexuality in general are constructed through language in two interconnected arenas of civil rights struggle.

The cases of Roberta Achtenberg and Grethe Cammermeyer illustrate various dimensions of the public debate over lesbian civil rights. These women’s stories are unusual in that both received national media coverage rarely accorded to gay rights cases generally, and to lesbian rights cases especially. Such high-profile cases are particularly significant because they make visible the struggle for control over meanings of lesbianism as it occurs
within some of the most influential realms of American public life. At the same time, the cases thrust these particular lesbians into the limelight “as lesbians” and thus establish them, with or without the blessing of gay and lesbian communities, as representatives of a much larger but far less visible constituency.

This work adds to a growing body of scholarship on lesbians that has been largely concentrated in the fields of literature and history. Lesbian fiction and poetry have been the subject of an increasing number of articles and books, yet virtually no scholarship outside of law reviews looks at the nonfictional discourse surrounding lesbian issues. Even though Achtenberg and Cammermeyer are nationally known figures whose words and actions place them at the forefront of the public debate over lesbian and gay rights, to date no scholarly work (other than law articles) has been published about either woman. Yet what is said about them and the language used to portray them—whether by supporters or opponents, whether in a Senate chamber, military board hearing, or court of law—will have profound effects on public perceptions and understandings of lesbians. Of equal, if not greater, significance is the fact that because many lesbians themselves lack representations or role models, what we come to know and understand about these public figures through the discourse that surrounds them may deeply affect lesbians’ self-images and identities. These include, importantly, the self-images of young women just beginning to identify themselves as lesbians. For these reasons, it is vital to examine the rhetorical strategies employed in these debates and the key terms of voice and visibility, highlighting both the emancipatory and the regulatory potential of these strategies.

At a time when American politics have shifted abruptly to the right and conservative groups have succeeded in reversing the civil rights gains of other minorities, there is an urgent need to assess the direction of the lesbian and gay rights movement (Vaid 1995). The juxtaposition of lesbian visibility—witness the capitalist production of “lesbian chic”—with the evident power of the religious right forces us to examine existing representations in order to ascertain whether all increases in visibility mark progress. If not, we need to ask whether and when the aims of lesbians and gay men are undermined by the achievement of minor concessions and provisional tolerance that stave off larger demands. Likewise, we need to examine these representations with an eye to discovering what the newfound and widely hailed “inclusion” of gays and lesbians in the mainstream represents. We need to determine whether, in fact, it is only the “whitest and brightest” who are accepted or, more likely, tolerated, while those who are unable to pass for all but sexually
straight are excluded. The mainstreaming of a few powerful figures at the expense of, rather than for the benefit of, other gays and lesbians should be a matter of concern for all of us (Hollibaugh 1993; Smith 1993).

From a legal standpoint, we must assess the limits of existing institutional frameworks for the purposes of lesbian liberation. The fragility of civil rights gains has been demonstrated by the crumbling of affirmative action initiatives in the mid-1990s, and some observers have argued that the Civil Rights movement never accomplished for African Americans all that it was credited with achieving (Bumiller 1988). The legal system, along with other mainstream institutions, may be inherently unable to advance minority rights precisely because it is founded on the very principles of exclusion and hierarchy that those who desire such rights seek to overturn (Becker 1995; Robson 1992; Smart 1989; Wilson 1995). If inequality is built into the system itself, those who seek parity within its framework will be forced to adapt themselves and amend their objectives in relation to it. In doing so, they inadvertently reinforce its authority, hierarchies, and injustices.

Recognizing these limitations invites a shift of focus from looking at lesbian identities as a puzzle or problem to examining homophobic social institutions as the problem. It encourages us to ask how the discourse of these institutions constructs lesbians in a way that deems us both “sick” and “scandalous” (Phelan 1993, 775). By viewing institutional structures as problematic and contestable, we are reminded that gains and losses, victories and defeats, are rarely unambiguous in relation to such systems. In examining the consequences that ensue when we do and when we do not achieve our ends, we must consider not only the gains of victory and the losses of defeat. We must also consider the possibility of advancement through our apparent losses, as well as the failures that may accompany even our most celebrated victories. We need to take a broader, macroscopic view of the political landscape, examining how our strategies contribute to an overall vision of a more egalitarian society. Only then can we identify which strategies we need to rethink, refine, or reject in response to counterattacks or attempts at assimilation.

Finally, we must examine the liberal discourse through which civil rights initiatives are expressed, looking carefully at what it says and does for us. What kinds of self-definitions and self-understandings does liberal discourse construct for lesbians? What happens to lesbian voices under the aegis of liberal politics? What roles are available and what kinds of visibility and empowerment can lesbians access within a liberal framework? Equally important, to whom is this visibility and empowerment available within lesbian
communities? If we choose to work within existing institutions, we must examine the kinds of identities available to us through the language of these institutions and the degree to which we can successfully challenge and broaden institutional limits. Otherwise, our efforts to confront institutions and demand inclusivity may inadvertently validate the legitimacy and authority of these structures, reestablishing the dominance of homophobic thought and language in the larger social structure.

Issues of lesbian representation, like other lesbian issues, have rarely been addressed in scholarly literature as valid questions in their own right, to the great detriment of lesbian studies. “As soon as the lesbian is lumped in—for better or for worse—with her male homosexual counterpart, the singularity of her experience (sexual and otherwise) tends to become obscured. We ‘forget’ about the lesbian by focusing instead on gay men” (Castle 1993, 12). The experiences of lesbians differentiate us in important ways from both heterosexual women and gay men. Yet these differences are unaccounted for in analyses of feminist or gay discourse (Wolf and Penelope 1993). While issues of lesbian identity clearly overlap with questions of heterosexual female and gay male identities, then, lesbian identities exceed the bounds of both. They therefore deserve and demand independent consideration (Zimmerman 1992).

A comprehensive understanding of the discourse surrounding lesbian oppression and lesbian rights remains some distance in the future. Scholarship about lesbians is still scarce, and the need for research is pressing. It can be overwhelming to consider how little is known about these and other marginalized women and to recognize the degree to which we are impoverished by our lack of knowledge about such groups. Speech communication is but one academic discipline that suffers from its inattention to the discourse of gay and lesbian rights. This book is intended to help fill this gap in our knowledge, and to bring us nearer to that encompassing understanding in the future.

### Theoretical Contexts for This Work

Lesbian studies is an interdisciplinary perspective located at the intersection of women’s studies and gay studies. Recently, it has also been influenced to varying degrees by “queer theory,” an approach that seeks to destabilize our taken-for-granted assumptions about sexuality and categories of sexual orientation. Each of these perspectives informs the analysis and critique undertaken by this book. A brief explanation of each field of study follows.
Gay Studies

Gay scholarship would seem an obvious place to start looking for work on lesbians. The term *gay*, like the more clinical designation *homosexual*, ostensibly refers to both men and women with an erotic or affectional orientation toward members of their own sex, while *gay liberation* refers to the attainment of freedom and equality for all such individuals. However, many books that claim to focus on “gay” issues in fact concern themselves solely with men or incorporate only a passing claim to inclusivity, with no real attention to lesbian specificity. With few exceptions (see Altman 1982), books written by gay men have been singularly inattentive to the experiences and problems of lesbians (Edwards 1994). In other minority cultures whose men and women establish primary, intimate relationships, the writing of men often abounds with images of their female counterparts, however stereotyped, objectified, or idealistic. In contrast, the writing of gay men is at times devoid of any awareness of, or reference to, lesbians and their lives. Thus, while the writing of other groups of men is prone to objectifying or fetishizing women in a manner that highlights their “Otherness,” the writing of gay men is often guilty of precisely the opposite offense: the erasure of lesbian specificity or difference, brought about by the mistaken belief that lesbians suffer from forms of oppression and, consequently, have needs and objectives that are identical to those of gay men.

On the one hand, therefore, gay scholarship is largely unhelpful in offering insight into the lives, experiences, and concerns of lesbians, including concerns surrounding identity and representation. On the other hand, such work cannot simply be dismissed. Many of the issues of discrimination faced by gay men and lesbians are similar, and the lesbian and gay rights movement has attempted at some levels to coordinate efforts among gay men and lesbians for common gains. Moreover, and perhaps most important, gay men and lesbians often remain undifferentiated in public discussions. This is true for many supporters as well as for those who would perpetrate violence against us (Phelan 1993). For these reasons, it is crucial that we acknowledge the ways in which gay male perspectives have shaped and continue to shape the lesbian and gay rights movement and in which gay male interests and images have reached the dominant culture, to a much greater extent than have lesbian concerns or representations.

Investigating lesbian representations provides an avenue for exploring the role of voice and visibility for gay men as well. Men who transgress traditional masculine gender expectations are often subject to greater censure
than are women who are perceived as imitating men. For example, it is relatively acceptable and even stylish for a woman to dress in men’s clothing, including such traditional male apparel as a suit and tie. In contrast, men who dress in women’s clothing are swiftly and strongly reproached. The hatred of gay men is a fear of men who behave “as women.” Such men are seen as subjecting themselves sexually to another man, allowing themselves to be objectified, penetrated, and thus possessed by a man in the way that is expected of women. Where lesbians are hated for their strength, gay men are hated for their perceived weakness. Where lesbians are feared for their power, gay men are despised for occupying a position of powerlessness and thereby raising the possibility that any man might occupy such a position. Analysis of lesbian representations provides a much-needed link between feminist theory and gay studies, between two groups who too often fail to recognize the resemblance between their situations, either theoretically or materially.

Lesbians in Feminism

Historically, within much of feminist theory, gender has provided the primary (if not sole) lens through which to analyze structures of oppression. In response to the historical silencing of women’s voices, some feminist critics have sought out the lives and words of women who were neglected by traditional scholarship, at the same time developing approaches that value women’s contemporary experience and facilitate the telling of women’s stories. By emphasizing the distinctiveness of women’s ways of knowing, reasoning, speaking, and writing, these scholars often highlight differences between men and women and constitute women as a group with important shared characteristics (Belenky et al. 1986; Gilligan 1982; Showalter 1985).

In recent years, however, numerous writers have challenged the presumption that women’s interests are best served by representing themselves as a group defined by their resemblance to one another and their differences from men. Women of color, Third World women, Jewish women, working-class women, and lesbians of all backgrounds have argued that their needs have been discounted by feminist critical approaches that ignore the differences among women in favor of a group identity. “Not all women experience sexism in the same way” (Anzaldúa 1990a, 219). Thus it is vital that we attend to the manner in which “class, culture, race, and sex intersect in various ways to produce different kinds of women, lesbians, and lesbian communities” (Sandoval 1982, 242).

Such an awareness suggests that the differences among women are of a
significance equal to, if not greater than, our commonalities, and that the predominance of white, middle-class, heterosexual perspectives in the feminist movement has often silenced other women’s voices by glossing over such differences in the name of sisterhood. What is lost in succumbing to such illusory unity is the precision and incisiveness that enables a persuasive critique of oppression. As Cherrie Moraga cautions, “The danger lies in failing to acknowledge the specificity of the oppression” (1983, 29). Responding to the call for specificity, women who are multiply marginalized have begun to develop their own critical methods to explore texts from more complex and particular perspectives of race, class, and gender (see Anzaldúa 1990b; Collins 1991; Flores 1994; Lugones 1990; Minh-ha 1990; Rebolledo 1990).

The emphasis on articulating specific configurations of oppression has led to a form of lesbian politics grounded in reclaiming and celebrating marginalized elements of identity. Such a perspective identifies the multiple, hidden, and contrary positions as insiders and outsiders that characterize lesbian experience, resulting in the fragmentation of the self into various, sometimes conflicting compartments of identity (Anzaldúa 1990b; Frye 1983; Grahn 1984; Rich 1979). As Audre Lorde explains, “I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self. But this is a destructive and fragmenting way to live” (1984, 120). One way to counter this effect is to unite with others who are subject to the same forms of oppression, pursuing a politics that addresses multiple sources of marginalization and enables its adherents to be “all of who we are” (Beck 1982, xxx). In this way, the assertion of identity provides a crucial link between individual survival and political empowerment.

What such a politics of identity works against most clearly is assimilation, a loss of specificity that occurs when difference is diluted into the sameness of the dominant culture. A politics based on identity influences understandings of lesbian identity for both lesbians and nonlesbians. The question of how to conceive of identity is at once a compelling theoretical issue and a deeply personal one, marking a key tension in feminist, and especially lesbian feminist, theorizing. Understandings of identity provide the ground on which politics are organized and alliances forged, but they also shape most profoundly our sense of self, influencing our lives from our most private interactions to our most public acts. A politics based on identity often emphasizes the influence of characteristics rooted deep within us, identifying this inner depth as the source of the true selves and authentic voices that must be reclaimed, revealed, and celebrated.
Although white, middle-class lesbians have responded to mainstream feminism with much the same feeling of exclusion as have women marginalized by race or class, their situation differs in notable ways. Most centrally, whereas other groups of women have been historically (and in most cases, continue to be) underrepresented in the feminist movement, lesbians have been central to feminism from its earliest days and have actively participated in all of its undertakings. They have not always been visible as lesbians in these roles, sometimes because of individual choice but other times because of general anti-lesbian sentiment among feminists (Douglas 1990) or because their visibility as lesbians was seen as detrimental to the feminist movement (Kaye/Kantrowitz 1992; Mennis 1982; Rich 1986).

Nevertheless, despite the failure of the feminist movement to acknowledge or address many of the problems that lesbians face, some of the most influential, respected, and visible feminist writers have been lesbians. The very homophobia of the early women's movement, as expressed by Betty Friedan's labeling of lesbians as a “lavender herring” and, later, a “lavender menace,” testifies to the presence of large numbers of lesbians in the movement (Gomez 1995, 35). Thus a tension exists between the clear influence lesbians have had on feminist politics and theory and the feminist movement's history of dismissing as “special interests” the concerns of lesbians.

Too often, heterosexual feminists fail to recognize the connections between lesbian oppression and the oppression of all women. Yet only when feminists have crystallized this connection can we recognize the importance of lesbian liberation for all women. Because “heterosexuality is a social organization of power . . . that enforces gender inequality between biological males and females” (Blasius 1994, 76), any female rejection of male dominance is often read as a refusal of heterosexuality as well. Thus the hatred and fear of lesbians and the social forces that make lesbianism stigmatized and invisible constitute a threat to any woman who fails to conform to a traditional “woman’s role,” whatever her sexual orientation. This includes the woman who, for any reason, chooses not to marry, not to bear or to raise children, or not to live in a situation of financial and emotional dependence on a man regardless of her marital status. It includes the woman who chooses a nontraditional career, who fails to dress or speak or behave in ways that are appropriately “feminine,” who sleeps with many different men, or who refuses to sleep with a certain man or any men (regardless of her sexual orientation). It includes, as well, the woman who refuses to signal her possession by a man in even symbolic ways, as by choosing not to wear a wedding ring or by keeping her own last name after marriage.
Prejudice against lesbians is grounded in sexism and misogyny, as is prejudice against gay men (Bunch 1987; Kaye/Kantrowitz 1992; Koedt 1973; Pharr 1988). The mistrust of any woman who does not need a man signals a fear of women’s strength and autonomy. It indicates as well a recognition of the threat posed to male power when women discover that, despite what we may have been taught, we possess the intelligence and strength to succeed without relying on a man. The derision directed at lesbians is, in fact, directed at all women who have the audacity to function independently of a man’s support, whether or not they choose to relate sexually to men. Similarly, the hatred of gay men is grounded in the definition of women as those who are sexually available to men and the consequent perception that a man who is sexually available to other men puts himself in the despised position of a woman.

Many women who proclaim themselves feminists are accused of being lesbians, as are women who have short hair, participate in sports, don’t wear makeup (or high heels, jewelry, or dresses), or whose appearance or behavior in any other way defies feminine stereotypes. A heterosexual woman who believes she is protected from homophobia need only proclaim audibly that she doesn’t need a man to find out how quickly the label lesbian will be applied. We can recognize immediately the transgressive nature of her statement, and many listeners would become suspicious about the sexual orientation of a woman who made such a statement. This response suggests that the hatred directed toward women who acknowledge loving women is undergirded by the fear of women whose self-esteem does not depend on male approval and who find sources of power and means of survival other than dependence on a man.

Clarifying the connection between homophobia and misogyny demands a broader conceptual framework than a heterosexual feminist perspective provides. Thus although this discussion may seem to have strayed from its focus on lesbian identity, in fact it has returned to an issue that is central to the acknowledgment of such an identity. Coming out as a lesbian involves not only the choice to love other women but usually, though not necessarily, the choice not to be the intimate partner of a man. While this may seem self-evident, it is significant because it marks the decision to live without material and other forms of privilege granted to heterosexual women who conform to society’s standards of femininity. Acknowledging and accepting a lesbian identity represents both a personal gain and an accompanying loss of privilege, and it is the threat of this loss that imposes such widespread silence. Yet, if one is forced to hide from others and from oneself, this entails
another kind of loss and another form of deprivation, a diminishing of self into the pain of invisibility.

Voice and Visibility

Public voice and political visibility are seen as key goals in the struggle for lesbian and gay civil rights. Attention to voice often parallels concerns of visibility; lesbians, for example, are both silenced and invisible as lesbians. Indeed, invisibility implies a degree of silence, and lack of voice implies hiddenness. Yet, while these are not mutually exclusive processes, neither are they completely identical. For example, many women have historically been denied a public voice, forbidden to speak publicly or to claim political influence or representation. Nevertheless, they have been far from invisible, either historically or currently. For centuries, women have been looked upon and treated as objects or possessions. Through portrayals in art, literature, law, and even scientific treatises (see Keller 1985), some groups of women have been denigrated as sex objects, while others have been idealized and put on pedestals. In both cases, they have been granted visibility yet denied an empowering voice. Certain classes of women, like children, have long been admonished to be seen and not heard. This directive communicates clearly the possibility that visibility and lack of voice can and should coexist and may even be prescribed. This juxtaposition of visibility with silence has long characterized the oppression of such women, as ubiquitous images portray them as objects to be admired and possessed rather than as human beings to be respected and valued.13

Conversely, women have long worked behind the scenes to contribute to important, ostensibly male accomplishments. In this way, women’s influential voices permeate our entire history, even where women themselves remain invisible. Many of women’s assigned domestic tasks, like many functions carried out by poor and working class men, are relegated to the background in a manner that obscures recognition of who has done them. Such concealment not only masks the identity or the existence of the worker; it often prevents even the awareness that work has been done.14 Women may have a voice in household decisions. They may influence or actively participate in their husband’s or boss’s career. They may participate in numerous other endeavors where they make key contributions to a variety of fields. However, their work and influence have remained largely unseen, virtually invisible. Such contributions, like the everyday work of raising children or running a household, show how women’s influence may be abundantly pre-
sent while women themselves remain concealed. History abounds with examples of extraordinary women whose intellectual and artistic contributions have been and continue to be widely misidentified as the work of men. This pattern of voice without visibility signifies participation without recognition or acknowledgment, reaffirming women’s second-class status by denying their claim to their own accomplishments. In this way, voice without visibility, like visibility without voice, can be more oppressive than liberating.

This same hiddenness characterizes gay and lesbian achievements. The influence of lesbians and gay men has always been pervasive throughout our culture. Yet such participation has come at the price of our visibility. To have our voices heard, we have been forced to remain closeted as gays and lesbians. When we do achieve public visibility, we are often subjected to misrepresentations that deny our humanity, distort our words and images, and denigrate our lives and love. Both configurations—voice without visibility and visibility without voice—are characteristic forms of oppression. They are familiar attributes of prejudice based on class, race, and gender as well as on sexual orientation. When we contribute our ideas and skills while being denied recognition or credit, or when we achieve visibility only to be exploited as objects, we confront the double bind that is oppression’s most tell-tale sign (Frye 1983).

In emphasizing voice or visibility as a key strategy for our movement, we necessarily adopt the clusters of meaning, both literal and metaphorical, associated with each choice. Visibility directs our attention to what can and what cannot be seen. The centering of vision necessarily raises the question of what is inaccessible to vision, returning us to questions of secrecy and taboo, of what must not be seen: sexual secrets. This metaphor directs our attention to bodies, to physicality, and to sexuality. A concern with visibility draws attention to questions of behavior or conduct—from political activism to “appropriately” gendered activity or dress to sexual practice itself. Emphasizing physical presence can be a strategy of resistance when large numbers of people visibly support an oppositional cause. Groups can influence the political process by demonstrating a voting bloc or by challenging oppressive institutions or practices, in ways ranging from peaceful demonstration to outright violence. Nevertheless, focusing on physical presence can also be a technique of the oppressor. Dominant groups may exaggerate the numbers of or the threat posed by a marginalized group, in order to provoke fear and hatred of its members. An emphasis on the body may be used to debase a group, by reducing it to its physical being. Oppressors
thereby portray minority group members as animals, subject to physical drives unchecked by morality or reason. This strategy has been effective in many campaigns of hatred, most notably in the discourses of Nazi Germany and U.S. slavery.

Whereas visibility directs our attention to the corporeal, to bodies and actions, metaphors of voice emphasize ideology and identity, the power of ideas and stories. Our voices are instruments through which we challenge dominant beliefs when we speak of our lives in ways that contradict dominant representations. Historically, many groups of women, along with groups of minority men, have been denied the right to speak publicly. Women who are multiply marginalized are likewise multiply silenced. Even the power of self-naming has been withheld, as the dominant culture imposes gender, racial, and sexual identities without regard to the self-identification of individuals. Because of this disregard for subjective identity and the sweeping imposition of silence, voice serves as a powerful metaphor for resisting oppression. This is true not only in the field of speech communication, where an emphasis on voice would seem inevitable, but also in feminist, lesbian, and gay studies across the disciplines. The importance of finding one’s own voice and making that voice heard is widely acknowledged as a means of personal and collective empowerment among many minority groups.

Nevertheless, the value of voice remains equivocal because of its reliance on language, a tool that most often operates in the service of the dominant ideology. The categories of language are generated and given meaning within a system of patriarchal belief, and even a rebellious application of language represents an engagement with and reliance on a sexist and heterosexist conceptual framework. While voice is often viewed unproblematically as a liberatory concept, we must remember the ways in which our use of language may be complicit with dominant interests. Using language as a mode of resistance is a double-edged sword, because it means adopting categories and terminology that are often inherently at odds with our own experiences or beliefs. The French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard cautioned that “being in opposition is one of the modes of participation within a system” (Phelan 1993, 776). Indeed, to rebel against a stigmatized identity, groups are often forced to organize around that identity, defining themselves through the linguistic categories imposed by the very ideology they wish to undermine (Epstein 1987).

In identifying either voice or visibility as our key concern, we prioritize one of two senses, hearing or seeing, and we select a particular framework
within which to perceive the project of liberation. Feminists as well as lesbian and gay rights advocates employ both concepts to some extent. For example, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) has used the phrase “Equality through Visibility in the Media.” The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT-UP), one of the most radical groups of AIDS activists, employs the slogan “Silence = Death,” which draws on Audre Lorde’s admonition that “your silence will not protect you” (Segrest 1995).

Opponents of lesbian and gay rights often fail to distinguish between these concepts at all. The military’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy, for example, stubbornly equates voice with visibility. It seeks to uphold its ban on gays and lesbians and to maintain the appearance of uniform heterosexuality by imposing a smothering silence that maintains invisibility. This prevents the military from having to acknowledge the many gays and lesbians who have served and currently serve in its ranks, and who include some of its most decorated soldiers. The military’s effort to equate voice, visibility, and identity—what we cannot see and do not say does not exist—illustrates the power of language to create or suppress what we come to think of simply as “reality.” It testifies, as well, to the influence of public representations on the ability of minority group members to name and define themselves. As Adrienne Rich has written, “Invisibility is not just a matter of being told to keep your private life private; it’s the attempt to fragment you, to prevent you from integrating love and work and feelings and ideas, with the empowerment that that can bring” (1986, 199–200). Such effects are only intensified for those whose history has been largely hidden not only from outsiders but even from themselves.

The Ambivalence of the Closet

The achievement of voice and visibility is crystallized in the act of coming out, marking the shift from confusion or hiddenness to awareness or acknowledgment, a move from private to public identity. “Coming out” has a dual meaning, referring both to an individual’s self-awareness of being gay or lesbian and to the decision to share this information with others. In a context in which heterosexuality is presumed, heterosexuals generally do not need to state their sexual orientation to have it accurately perceived.¹⁶ In the same context, a gay man or lesbian who does not explicitly come out as such is often misperceived as heterosexual. The presumption of heterosexuality is so deeply rooted in our culture that any declaration of lesbian identity is momentous. On a national level, where representations of lesbians
are especially scarce, the identification of oneself as a lesbian represents a particularly bold and courageous act.

A key element of the silence imposed on gays and lesbians is that we are required to display a certain “discretion” in public settings. Even when one’s gay or lesbian sexual orientation is known to others, secrecy is often expected or demanded by admonitions not to “flaunt” our sexuality (see Sedgwick 1990). Those few nationally known figures whose gay or lesbian identity is a matter of public record are nevertheless expected to minimize its visibility or discount its effect on their public lives. Quite often, this has been the road taken by (mostly male) gay politicians, who see in this strategy the means of least resistance in attaining access to political power.

The act of coming out on the national level, like coming out to family and friends, is subject to multiple interpretations and possesses a multitude of possible consequences for gays and lesbians, politically and otherwise. For example, in one sense there is a clear victory for lesbians and gays in the appointment of a lesbian to the president’s cabinet or in the reinstatement of a lesbian colonel to her military post. Nevertheless, these events also have a price and may not send as unequivocal a message as we first suppose. The assertion and affirmation of identity categories, even oppositional categories such as “lesbian” and “gay,” is not an unquestionable good, for “identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes.” As a result, “the invocation of identity is always a risk” (Butler 1993, 308). Specifically, the rhetoric that is used to achieve these victories and the ways in which lesbians are portrayed through this discourse may have lasting effects on how the public sees lesbians and how lesbians see themselves. The act of coming out and the figure of the closet associated with it are themselves problematic and fraught with tension. While movement leaders often present the refusal to be closeted, and the greater exposure coming out affords, as an uncontested good, political strategy demands a more careful examination of the various consequences of “outness.” “The discourse of ‘coming out’ has clearly served its purposes, but what are its risks?” (Butler 1993, 308). Or, more colloquially put: “The good news is, we finally exist to people other than ourselves. The bad news is, on what terms?” (Hollibaugh 1993, 27).

The question is a provocative one, for lesbians and gays have often realized that whereas hiddenness or “closetedness” has its liabilities, it also bestows a certain freedom from regulation, along with opportunities for self-naming and self-preservation, that would be impossible under conditions of visibility. “Becoming visible means being forced into categories that do not fit, that are premised on the denial of our reality” (Becker 1995, 147). Thus,
although the closet may be seen as a structure that excludes and confines gays and lesbians, from another perspective it can be viewed as a shelter that shields us from the dangers “outside.” The closet offers a measure of protection for lesbians and gays even as it insulated heterosexuality from the potential challenge of our presence. Voluntarily coming out (as opposed to being involuntarily “outed”) signals a relinquishing of the closet’s protection along with an escape from confinement. Coming out marks both one’s subjection to public stereotypes of homosexuality and one’s readiness to challenge these dominant misunderstandings. The act of coming out, then, is inevitably characterized by contradictions and trade-offs in terms of safety and freedom. “Freedom from” is sacrificed to the pursuit of “freedom to,” as we forgo what feels like the safety of silence and invisibility in order to stand up for our rights and liberties.

In the discourse of coming out, the assertion of an “outside” always reaffirms the existence of a closet. “Being ‘out’ always depends to some extent on being ‘in’; it gains its meaning only within that polarity. Hence, being ‘out’ must produce the closet again and again in order to maintain itself as ‘out.’” The continual reinscription of this binary opposition prompts the question “We are out of the closet, but into what?” (Butler 1993, 309). This “outside” is always, first, a disappointment, as it inevitably fails to provide the anticipated freedom of total disclosure. Within this system of meaning, another impenetrable space always exists beyond the closet. “The closet produces the promise of a disclosure that can, by definition, never come” (Butler 1993, 309). Thus the act of coming out involves at best a reconfiguration of boundaries that places us inside yet another set of walls. In these terms, being “out” is always something of a letdown. Yet, this partial and unsatisfactory disclosure nevertheless renders lesbians and gay men more exposed and highly vulnerable. What is visible is subject to discrimination, regulation, appropriation; that which can be seen and recognized by the dominant culture may also be labeled and defined by it. “As more homosexuals come out, new stereotypes are created; the assertion of homosexuality has in turn created new forms of homophobia” (Altman 1982, 22). In this way, the act of coming out, as an act of making visible, is inherently subject to reinterpretation and appropriation.

Moreover, as minority groups are well aware, any representation is not necessarily better than no representation at all. While our public invisibility gives us at least some opportunity to define our own self-image, when lesbians and gays are portrayed by and for the mass media, the images may be at best unflattering, at worst inflammatory. These images may incite hatred
and even violence against us. Portrayals of lesbians and gays in television and film, when they have existed, have historically been grossly stereotypical. They have presented ridiculous characters who are frequently objects of scorn. Only recently have mainstream movies and television shows begun to incorporate gay and lesbian characters who are multidimensional and sympathetic, rather than solely laughable or narrowly sexual beings. Although such portrayals are increasing in both television and film, they remain rare enough to be notable, as evidenced by the furor over Ellen DeGeneres's character coming out on her television show, *Ellen*. Because we have so few images of lesbians or gay men, those that exist take on representative status. This situation is exacerbated by the hiddenness of the variety and diversity among lesbians and gay men in many communities. Because of their significance, the few representations we do have must be scrutinized for the understandings they create and the possibilities they obscure. This is equally, if not more, true for the representations created through public language, during debates over policy and within the context of legal decisions.

Coming out, then, is a mixed blessing, not only for individuals but on a societal level as well. For this reason, we must look at the “success” of the Achtenberg nomination and the Cammermeyer court battle in terms of both their liberating and their limiting potentials. We must examine the impact that such high-level debates may have on broader cultural constructions of homosexuality; for lesbianism in particular has, arguably, benefited from its lack of visibility. Our cultural constructions of sexuality deny that sex is possible without the presence of a penis, and so sex or signs of affection between women are often not strongly condemned or regulated partly because they are not believed, because intimacy between women is inconceivable or nonexistent in our binary system of gender and our definition of sexuality (Faderman 1981; Wittig 1992). “Lesbianism is not explicitly prohibited in part because it has not even made its way into the thinkable, the imaginable, that grid of cultural intelligibility that regulates the real and the nameable” (Butler 1993, 312). Bringing lesbianism to light in the public manner of a Senate debate or a civil court hearing thus introduces both an opportunity and a threat to the self-definition of lesbians and of lesbian and gay communities.

Queer Theory

A final context of scholarship, queer theory, has emerged in recent years from earlier scholarship on sexuality. This perspective encompasses theories by and
about gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transsexuals, and transgendered people (see Wiegman 1994, 17n. 1). Taking its inspiration, its direction, and much of its content from the writings of the late French philosopher Michel Foucault, queer theory argues that categories of sexual identity and understandings of sexuality are not timeless or naturally occurring. Instead, they are social constructions, created and maintained through mechanisms of power and varying across different social, historical, and political contexts. Denying a view of sexual drives and scripts as innate or even as clearly classifiable, queer theory reveals the instabilities underlying the seemingly rigid and unchanging categories of sexuality. Its technique is sometimes referred to as “queering” existing categories, an act of challenging and destabilizing, or “making strange,” the fundamental assumptions that uphold such classifications.

In place of stability and permanence, queer theory offers a view of sexual identity categories as socially constructed and rigorously policed. Queer theorists attempt to undermine or “deconstruct” the hierarchical arrangements that reduce complex, multiple differences to simplistic binary oppositions (Butler 1993; de Lauretis 1993; Sedgwick 1990; Wittig 1993). Yet, rather than proposing additional categories, queer theorists question the feasibility of identity categories per se, challenging claims of a shared identity within groups classified by sexual orientation (“gays,” “lesbians,” etc.). Instead, they identify the classification of people based on sexual orientation as a recent and historically specific phenomenon, designed to serve the interests of those in power by creating deviant and marginalized categories of people rather than simply types of behaviors. With this rationale, some queer theorists challenge the personal and political utility of coming out, which represents in their view a misguided acceptance and embracing of the labels imposed on us by an oppressive dominant culture (Butler 1993).

In contrast to a politics that embraces identity categories, queer theory criticizes the easy acceptance of such labels. It contends that identity categories do not dwell within individuals but instead are culturally constructed and assigned to us. Because our identities are constructed in and through powerful social institutions, we internalize these categories as part of our fundamental sense of self. Thus, despite their external origins, such classifications come to feel as though they emanate from deep within us. Such a view rejects the assumption that categories of identity are “natural” or “innate,” that is, that they exist prior to or outside of language and other relations of power. It argues instead that such categories are not real or internal but display an “apparent ‘interiority’ and ‘reality’” that is actually “an illusion produced by our internalization of what is, in fact, a highly politicized and public dis-
course” (Bennett 1993, 96). Far from reflecting our inner selves, such categories compel us, with varying degrees of success, to conform to their boundaries. When we acquiesce, the categories appear unshakable. When we refuse, we reveal their instability. Within this view, the ways in which we conceive of individual subjects and stratify those subjects by gender, race, class, and sexuality are historically and discursively constructed, maintained entirely through language and other power relations. These relations construct and enforce the appearance of continuous, stable identities. They police the boundaries of those identities and arrange them hierarchically.

The notion that language and reality construct each other, that what we think of as “reality” is itself constructed through language, is grounded in the sociological tradition of social constructionism. Social constructionism argues that what we may accept as given or natural “facts” are actually constructed and reinforced by the very language and behaviors through which they are expressed. From this perspective, the struggle to integrate various categories of identity is illusory, misleading, and dangerous insofar as it represents the acceptance and internalization of externally imposed labels. Categories of difference, or identities, are seen as sources of oppression that we must vigorously reject, not embrace. Whereas a politics of identity advocates the construction or assembly of identity against the forces that impose fragmentation from without, this contrasting view urges the continual rejection of apparently uniform and stable categories. It decries the “regulatory imperatives” that stealthily inhabit consciousness, imposing an illusory sense of difference that exerts control not only from without but also from within (Butler 1993, 309).

This challenge to categories of difference reminds us that what is politically strategic in the short run may have negative consequences in the long run, as any external labels we accept can still be manipulated by others and used against us. This perspective also cautions against mistaking strategy for “truth” when we allow legal concepts to replace our own lesbian self-definitions (Robson 1992). We must be wary of the dangers of naturalizing myths that disguise social constructions as biological givens; they can mislead us into viewing categories of difference as historically invariable and our second-class status as therefore unchangeable. Such accounts uphold oppression by reaffirming heterosexuality’s primacy and naturalness and by leaving the notion of fixed sexual categories intact. As long as we continue to organize people into two “opposite” categories of heterosexuals and homosexuals, the latter will always remain subordinate “Others,” the lower rung in a hierarchical relationship.
From this perspective, acceptance, much less celebration, of externally imposed categories as authentic differences reinforces rather than undoes identity-based oppression. Where a politics of identity resists oppression by reclaiming marginalized identities, queer theory pursues the same objective by rejecting identity categories altogether. It identifies heterosexuality and homosexuality as equally constructed (as opposed to “natural,” or biologically rooted in individuals), each dependent on the other and on structures of power and language for its meaning. In this view, no individual or group is either “inside” or “outside” systems of power. Instead, all identities and their meanings are constituted through the very operation of such systems, all equally subject to regulation and, potentially, transformation.18

The case studies I present here represent historical instances in which various sides struggle for authority over the meanings of contested language and images. Such moments provide rare opportunities to watch the process of meaning making at work. These examples, like other “contests for the production of sexual meanings . . . provide important opportunities to challenge, if not renegotiate, the public limits on how human (erotic) pleasures can be both embodied and represented” (E. Cohen 1993, 212). The debates on the Senate floor and in the courtroom may be examined as the sites of precisely these kinds of contests. In these battles, the victor is determined by more than the outcome of the confirmation vote or the judge’s decision, and the stakes are higher than one woman’s political or military career. If coming out is always a risky proposition, then political and legal discussions of lesbian and gay issues offer no guarantee “that the instrumental uses of ‘identity’ do not become regulatory imperatives” (Butler 1993, 309).

In fact, establishing one woman as the only visible lesbian in the upper echelon of government and another as the only visible lesbian in the upper levels of the military has caused these high-profile individuals to attain in the public eye a representative status for all lesbians. The entire question, so highly controversial in the lesbian and gay movement, of “which version of lesbian or gay ought to be rendered visible” (Butler 1993, 311) is sidestepped by the presence of such a highly placed politician and a National Guard colonel. Moreover, the movement’s true diversity—the differences of race, class, and other characteristics among lesbians and gay men—is replaced by a homogenizing image of white, professional lesbians. These particular representations become the ground on which gay and lesbian activists must do battle, whether or not they have or would have chosen it.

It is possible to see in the Achtenberg and Cammermeyer debates a microcosm of the anti-gay and “pro-gay” arguments and to analyze both the
value and the limitations of these arguments for achieving their respective political goals. Such issues as whether homosexuality is a choice or is biologically given, the separation of public and private realms, the historical and contemporary discourses of perversion, the threat lesbianism poses to male dominance and ideals of masculinity, and the controversy over “family values” are all addressed in these discussions. Each issue provides a link between political or military competence and the discourse of sexuality. Such pairings have become increasingly familiar in the political climate of the 1990s, most notably since the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas hearings and the advent of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” Centrally, and underlying these other disputes, rests the issue of whether homosexuality refers primarily to a category of human beings or to a particular sort of behavior. The ways in which this question is addressed, on the Senate floor and in the courtroom, both reflect and create a narrow, limited, and limiting conception of homosexuality in general and lesbianism in particular. Bringing to bear the understandings gleaned from a variety of theoretical contexts allows us to examine such representations and to analyze their advantages and drawbacks for the project of lesbian and gay liberation.

Informed by the literature of feminist, lesbian, gay, and queer studies, this book investigates how struggles over the meanings of lesbian identity manifest themselves within particular, concrete battles. It examines, as well, how lesbian specificity may be sacrificed within the broader struggle for gay and lesbian rights. My analysis draws on the stories of two women who, despite their very different backgrounds and objectives, shared a willingness to stand up for their beliefs and a refusal to hide or deny who they were. Their freedom to differ was met with hostile opposition, from Congress and from the military. It is as a result of their integrity and courage in facing these challenges that their personal stories became visible to a nation.

**Conclusion**

In a context of gay civil rights and lesbian feminism, right-wing backlash and “lesbian chic,” this book examines the political and social construction of “the lesbian” in the 1990s. By analyzing the discourse surrounding the struggles of two lesbians whose stories attracted national media attention, I explore the kinds of lesbian representations that emerge from debates within military and political institutions. In a broader frame, I investigate the complexity of notions of visibility and voice in assertions of lesbian identity, as
well as the promise and the threats that accompany the highlighting of these metaphors as liberatory strategies.

This study will contribute to scholarship in rhetorical, feminist, and gay and lesbian studies, all of which intersect in instances of lesbian representation. Lesbian oppression is accomplished in part through rhetorical means, particularly the suppression of language and the denial of representations. However, when such suppression is no longer entirely effective, new language and representations, whether generated by opponents or proponents, can themselves further the cause of oppression. In addition, the language and images a group employs to portray its own struggle shape both the manner in which the group envisions its liberation and the ways in which its detractors formulate their opposition. By focusing on a marginalized group that has only recently begun to generate images and language that reach a public audience, this study reveals how choices about representation shape the possibilities for individual identity, group identity, and a liberatory vision. Those choices, at the same time, help define how a group articulates its struggles, its defeats, and its triumphs.