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Seeing Lesbian Queerly: Visibility, Community, and Audience in 1980s Northampton, Massachusetts

Susan E. McKenna
*University of Massachusetts Amherst, qmckenna@comcol.umass.edu*

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SEEING LESBIAN QUEERLY:
VISIBILITY, COMMUNITY, AND AUDIENCE
IN 1980s NORTHAMPTON, MASSACHUSETTS

A Dissertation Presented
by
SUSAN E. MCKENNA

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University of Massachusetts in partial fulfillment
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SEEING LESBIAN QUEERLY:
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Approved as to style and content by:

________________________________________
Carolyn Anderson, Chair

________________________________________
Anne Ciecko, Member

________________________________________
Mathew Ouellett, Member

________________________________________
Douglas Anderton, Acting Department Chair
Department of Communication
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This study investigates the transitioning terms of lesbian visibility and identity in the distinctive spatio-temporal context of Northampton, Massachusetts in the 1980s. Drawing on interviews with a diversified sampling of lesbian-, bisexual-, and queer-identified participants, I consider the coalescing of two lesbian communal formations – a social community and a social audience – as mediating sites for the interrelations between subculture and dominant culture. Informed by the literatures and methods of queer theory, cultural studies, and feminist film criticism, I examine the 1980s queer crossover from lesbian subcultural separatism to mitigated assimilation by the end of the decade. The 1980s crossover was a constellation of interlocking factors manifested through the entrance into national visibility of gay liberatory and feminist politics, the incorporation of overt lesbian sexuality into Hollywood and independent films, and the surfacing of the conservative and feminist backlashes alongside “Reaganomics.” These converged in an anti-lesbian backlash produced in Northampton in the 1980s through the
interrelations between the rapid revitalization of the city’s downtown and the increasing visibility and concentration of the lesbian population.

The emergence into public visibility of a lesbian social community and a lesbian social audience in 1980s Northampton prefigured questions about the desirability of a goal of cultural assimilation for lesbian and gay people along with concerns about the role of consumption in the assimilative process that were to become important to LGBT politics in the 1990s and 2000s. In this project, I consider the multidimensional and conflictual aspects of assimilation as well as the gender-specificities of lesbian film consumption and the lesbian Sex Wars as part of the crossover from subcultural separatism to mitigated assimilation. In spite of the strides in the acceptance of the lesbian population in Northampton in the 1980s, I argue that such changes were laden with tensions negotiated through the contradictions between appearances of tolerance and acceptance versus experiences of discrimination and violence. The constellation of factors that manifested in the 1980s queer crossover provided symbolic materials not only for a realignment of lesbian subjectivity, but also for a realignment of heterosexual subjectivity.
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CHAPTER I
WAYS OF SEEING LESBIAN

The overarching structuring tension of this dissertation will be concerned with the key axes of visibility and identity. Visibility involves different modalities and hierarchies of visibility, both in media and in everyday life. Identity includes both individual and community identities and both constructed subjectivities and social identifications. In the following I will stress the interrelations of ways of seeing lesbian – of simultaneously seeing and identifying expressions of lesbian and lesbianism – on film and television screens, in socio-political contexts, and in everyday street lives. Accordingly, I will use the trope of seeing, the grand metaphor of film viewing, to articulate the interactions of visibility and identity, between visual practices and disparate realms of subjectivities as well as between viewing experiences and other social experiences. Thus, the theoretical tenet of the symbiotic relationship between visuality and knowledge will be productive in my making sense of the mutually generative axes of visibility and identity. Central to my discussion will be the understanding that seeing has dual trajectories: both sensory functions and epistemological functions. Ways of seeing lesbian is an obvious homage to John Berger’s 1972 seminal book, Ways of Seeing. Berger begins, “The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. . . . The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe” (7-8). I emphasize the interrelations of ways of seeing lesbian to acknowledge the Althusserian adage that we are always/already implicated in the modalities of visibility and identity – of seeing, of recognizing, of defining, of identifying.
This study will be an investigation into how individuals who identified as lesbians remembered the changing interrelations of lesbian visibility and identity in the spatio-temporal context of Northampton, Massachusetts in the 1980s. My research will make use of the theories and methods of several areas including queer theory, cultural studies, and feminist film criticism. I intend to explore the concurrent comings out of a lesbian social community and a lesbian social audience as potential sites for examining the transitioning terms of lesbian visibility and identity. An understanding of the interactions of subculture and mainstream in relation to the processes of assimilation will be important to my focus on these communal formations. Previous studies of lesbian communities describe dramatic changes in communal continuity during this time period and I conjecture there may be similar transitions in the Northampton context (Bensinger; Burstyn; Franzen; Green). I also propose that academic debates about the goal of cultural assimilation for LGBT people\textsuperscript{ii} will be relevant to this discussion (Bawer; Bronski; Harris; Phelan, Sexual; Rimmerman; Seidman; Andrew Sullivan; Vaid; Walters All; Warner). I hypothesize there will be a queering of a stable model of lesbian identity and communal continuity as the Northampton regional lesbian population moved into mainstream visibility in the 1980s. As will be discussed in my concluding chapter, I envision a type of \textit{queer crossover} that captures the movements between subculture and mainstream.

By \textit{queer crossover}, I refer to the boundary crossing between subculture and dominant culture. The notion of crossover has been traditionally associated with the movement of both individual members as well as subcultural codes into mainstream culture as in the processes of cultural assimilation. LGBT assimilation, especially as
associated with consumer culture, has pejorative connotations in queer theorizations and has been linked the erasure of politics, identity, and sexuality (Barnhurst; Chasin; Jacobsen and Zeller; Kates; McCloskey; Sender; Andrew Sullivan; Vaid; Walters, All). That conceptualization of a crossover is in line with the central tenets of queer theory that problematize two broad cultural oppositions: the opposition between fixed versus malleable identity along with the opposition between subculture and heterosexual mainstream (Butler, Gender; Foucault, History; Sedgwick, Epistemology). Queer has a dual meaning: queer functions as an umbrella term for sexual identities, but “to queer” also means a fragmenting of categories and dichotomies, specifically stable models of categories such as lesbianism. In this study, I make use of these queer insights to investigate broader questions about the desirability of a goal of cultural assimilation for LGBT individuals with some consideration of the aspects of assimilation associated with LGBT consumption.

Following a feminist cultural studies approach, I conducted a series of interviews asking a diversified sampling of lesbian-, bisexual-, and queer-identified participants questions about recollections of community as well as experiences of film viewing. As the interviews progressed, the 1980s come into view as a cultural moment of particular note with an emphasis on the changing terms of lesbian visibility, subjectivity, community, and audience during that time period. Informed by respondent discussions, a constellation of factors emerged including changes in social and media visibility that were disseminated on the local level in 1980s Northampton. These changes in lesbian visibility and identity led me to focus on the 1980s as a distinctive cultural moment in which the terms of defining lesbian, and, in turn, of lesbian community and audience,
were transformed as part of the 1980s to 1990s queer crossover. In addition, 1980s transitions in lesbian visibility and identity as dispersed in the localized Northampton context prefigured broader questions that were to become central to academic and activist debates about queer visibility and identity in the 1990s and 2000s. Moreover, I wish to emphasize the importance in the conceptualization of a queer crossover of what Michael Bronski has termed the power of “seeing the sexual.” All individuals need symbolic materials including erotic materials through which to construct identifications of self and desire. Kath Weston discusses the significance for queer people of “seeing the sexual” in the constitution of queer identity and community, and, I will extend that to include the constitution of a lesbian social audience. Therefore, I will emphasize the power of “seeing the sexual” for both the lesbian citizens of Northampton as well as the heterosexual citizens.

The constellation of factors that comprised the distinctive primacy of the circulation of lesbian visibility and identity in the 1980s typified what Suzanna Danuta Walters defines as “a cultural ‘moment’ – a convergence of various discourses . . . that produce a particular sensibility or ethos” (Material 116-117). While all periods of time can be seen as moments in flux with profound cultural transformations, I intend to emphasize the particular transformative and primal significance of the 1980s lesbian visibility cultural moment as the period under consideration. As John D’Emilio has stressed in his discussion of historical sexual and gender identities, time periods in which exchanges occur between previously invisible social identities such as lesbian and the mainstream, presumably heterosexual culture, can lead to the development of additional conceptualizations of identity. I conjecture that the exchanges between the regional
lesbian population and the mainstream Northampton culture typify a type of queer crossover into public life. That crossover, I propose, may disrupt not only the model of stable lesbian subjectivity and community upon which subcultural separatism has traditionally hinged, but also the presumption of heteronormativity that queer theory tells us regulates and maintains mainstream culture. It will be my premise that the 1980s crystallized a series of boundary crossings in expressions of lesbianism that cut across media contexts and social venues to distinctively impact upon the cultural zeitgeist of the time period.

In this study I will investigate the geographic- and gender-specificities of the emergence of a regional lesbian community in the spatio-temporal context of Northampton, Massachusetts in the 1980s. My inquiry into the movement into public visibility will have a particular consideration of the geographic- and gender-specificities of the city and region. While all respondents lived in the Northampton, Massachusetts area, I will rely on a broader definition of the Northampton lesbian population to include individuals who lived in the broader region during that time period. Northampton’s geographic specificity revolves around the reputational template of an area of exceptional beauty with abundant resources and prosperous downtown venues that is also an artistic and educational mecca with a diverse, harmonious community. The city’s reputation for social diversity, progressive politics, and educational opportunities was sustained and enhanced in the 1980s through the dramatic revitalization of Northampton’s downtown, which had been previously designated by the local paper, the Daily Hampshire Gazette, as a sleepy “ghost town” (Fitzgerald, “Business” 11).
Lesbian cultural grapevines have long acknowledged that the Northampton area is exceptional in the dense concentration of a lesbian population and in the blend of urban and rural environs. In the 1980s the Northampton area emerged into local and national visibility as home to a uniquely concentrated lesbian population. Lesbian communities are typically perceived as existing on the periphery of a large gay male urban community (Ingram; Bouthillette; Retter) or in the isolation of rural environs (Krieger; Wolf). The development and emergence into public visibility of lesbian economic, political, and social networks in the Northampton area became centered in the city in the 1980s as the lesbian population became increasingly implicated in the downtown revitalization. The perception that the Northampton area lesbian community, unlike most lesbian communities, did not exist on the periphery of or alongside a larger gay male community was important to the gender-specificity of Northampton. Northampton’s lesbian population was and is demographically unique in the size and concentration of the lesbian population. As such Northampton’s geographic-specificity was in a coactive relationship with the gender-specific aspects of the region. The city’s gender-specificity has been evidenced in Northampton’s historical and ongoing reputation for diversity, education, and progressive politics. Moreover, feminist politics in the region have been institutionalized through the presence of two women’s colleges – Mount Holyoke College and Smith College – along with the Women’s Studies Program and the Everywoman’s Center at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

**Theory, Method, and Research Design**

My investigation into the interrelations of the changing terms of lesbian visibility and identity in the 1980s will be informed by the literatures and methods of cultural
studies, feminist film criticism, and queer theories. Under the broad framework of cultural studies, a theoretical approach to studying the discursive movements across multiple media venues and social contexts has been developed. This theoretical approach has been applied in research using the methods of ethnographic studies of subcultures as well as the methods of reception studies of differentiated audience members. The interdisciplinary approach of cultural studies has been of particular significance, especially the semiological model of “encoding/decoding” and the feminist approach to ethnographic interviewing. Feminist film inquiries into gendered spectatorship will also inform my research with some consideration of the historical materialist approach to contextualized reception. Additionally, queer theories of discourse, identity, and power will be important for understanding the changing terms of lesbian visibility and identity as part of 1980s queer crossover from a 1980s stable model of lesbian identity to the emergence of a model of identificatory fluidity in the 1990s. In the following, I briefly discuss the concepts and methods that will be most relevant to my research.

**Cultural Studies – Theory and Method**

The most explanatory theories and methods of cultural studies include ideological understandings of the interrelations of media forms and lived experience, semiological approaches to identifying texts and patterns between text and viewers, and feminist interviewing practices that incorporate a politics of interviewing. The theoretical task of critical cultural studies has been to study, in Stuart Hall’s words, “the relations between structure and practice in the domain of the ideological” (“Ideology” 49) with an emphasis on formulating an analysis of the interrelations between the nonconscious mind and the material world. Through a research agenda that addresses issues of dominance and
opposition, cultural studies has stressed how groups defined as subcultural negotiate, resist, or stand in opposition to structures of power through everyday cultural practices (Hall and Jefferson; Hebdige). Relatedly, cultural studies media analyses investigate how cultural forms and meanings circulate and transform in ordinary lives (Fiske; Hobson; McRobbie).

Because I will be concerned in this study with how individuals understand both lived experience and symbolic materials, I will follow research in media studies on the ideological and semiotic interrelations between texts and audiences. Stuart Hall’s expansion of the model of encoding/decoding greatly impacted upon the understanding that audiences are heterogeneous and that texts can potentially give rise to a multiplicity of meanings (“Encoding”). Researchers have made use of “encoding/decoding” to demonstrate how signification, the process of creating meaning, is constructed through the interconnections between popular culture and viewers (Bobo; Condit; Fiske; Jhally and Lewis; Natif; Roman). The application of this model to specific audiences stresses how the process of encoding/decoding is inflected through interactions with lived experience and cultural determinants. The encoding/decoding model provides an explanatory framework for studying these interactions across social contexts and media venues, particularly in terms of underrepresented audiences. There is recognition in cultural studies research that marginalized groups have to negotiate the challenges of self-imaging through lack of or limited symbolic materials available to them historically and culturally (Fiske; Hennessy; McRobbie, “Girls”; Weedon). The understanding that cultural space is a site of contestation is closely linked to the recognition of the tenacity and creativity of individual audience members in constructing oppositional pleasures and
resistive readings. Moreover, an understanding of a struggle for cultural meaning will contribute to my conceptualization of the subtle aspects of a queer crossover that included a transformation from the limited symbolic materials available to lesbians in the 1980s to a more complex and varied range of lesbian imagings in the 1990s. The constant struggle for meaning, John Fiske suggests, “recognizes the heterogeneity of society and allows for that heterogeneity to be understood in terms of power relations” (14). In cultural studies research, the interactions of texts and individuals are examined within an explanatory framework that extrapolates and engages these responses in a broader societal and political context that takes into account the hegemony of mass media (Hall “Two Paradigms”).

Of note in the processes of encoding and decoding are the concepts of cultural capital and cultural competency as developed in the work of Pierre Bourdieu. As applied to popular texts by John Fiske, cultural capital “consists of the meanings and pleasures available to the subordinate to express and promote their interests” (314). Fiske’s extrapolation is specifically relevant in suggesting that viewer interpretations can be linked to social positions such as race, class, gender, and sexuality. Cultural competencies refer to the range of information and experience audience members bring to bear on the meanings constructed through watching a film or television program. The repertoire of interpretive strategies and extratextual knowledges – the cultural competencies – that an individual brings to the act of watching a film, Jacqueline Bobo states, “has a major impact on how viewers construct responses to or readings of a film” (“Black Women” 102). The concepts of cultural capital and cultural competency will offer theoretical vehicles for understanding the linkages between subjectivity and signifying practices.
Roland Barthes’ application of linguistic concepts to a range of cultural sites including film texts was also significant for my study. Most important is Barthes’ demonstration of how meanings shift and re-align over time periods through hooking onto different ideological and socio-historical co-ordinates. A Barthesian theory of denotation (literal meaning) and connotation (ideological meaning) suggests a way to chart the tentative and incomplete transformation of ideas and identities across cultural sites and over time periods. New meanings are added onto existing ones to make a different formation (sign) that contains meanings from both the old and new. This approach provides a way to map how ideas change historically and culturally, yet retain traces of earlier meanings.

Stuart Hall’s work on articulation more explicitly tackles the question of how to theorize the interactions among lived experience, signifying practices and popular culture within hegemony. Articulation is a model for examining how individuals negotiate subjectivity through cultural forms that can be linked at the cultural level to the material realities of daily lives (“On Postmodernism”). An articulation, according to Hall, is a way of making a connection between two different elements: a social group and a discourse. For Hall, it is not the individual ideological elements that have the political potential, but rather the way they come together in a new discursive form. Janice Radway and Jacqueline Bobo both apply the concept of articulation to the study of, respectively, women readers and romance novels and black women and film. Radway stresses that subjectivity is constructed through multiple sites and envisions ethnography as a tool to locate areas where transformation might occur (“Nomadic”). In doing so, Radway suggests cultural studies “might better be able to understand just how often and how
extensively women have managed to resist dominant practices of patriarchal signification “(Reading 98). Radway, however, is not clear as to how the process of articulation makes connections between individuals or between an individual and a social movement. She argues instead that romance texts provide false solutions to and temporary respite from real problems, and leave the system of social relations unchanged and unchallenged. In contrast, Jacqueline Bobo examined how the oppositional responses to the racist and patriarchal aspects of a film such as Steven Spielberg’s The Color Purple (1985) may become articulated to daily lives at the cultural level. Nonetheless, Bobo and Radway agree that individual readers or viewers can constitute an interpretive community through shared reading strategies and interpretive interventions. Bobo extends the concept of community to include an activist component in which she argues that black women “utilize representations of black women that they deem valuable, in productive and politically useful ways” (Black 22). Although in most analyses of a shared symbolic or interpretive community, the viewers do know one another, Bobo’s interviews with black women have been important to this study in offering a model for conceptualizing a collective consciousness that can be transformed and linked to material practices.

The tradition of feminist cultural studies, which includes Jacqueline Bobo and Janice Radway, has made valuable additional contributions to a conceptualization of heterogeneous audiences with alternative, contradictory readings (Baumgardner and Richards; Grodin; Kauffman; Kuhn, Dreaming; Long; Press; Roman; Jackie Stacey Stargazing; Walkerdine). In looking at the actual audience member as a social spectator instead of as an imaginary subject, these scholars have explored how women and girls negotiate popular culture. Feminist cultural studies conceptualizes subjectivity through
investigating the multiple factors that impact on how viewer responses link with cultural and historical factors. Common themes include an emphasis on active subjectivity, a focus on differences such as class and race, a stress on everyday lives, a postmodern critique of sexual and gender categories, and an understanding of the potential for numerous sites of resistance. This approach has been typified in Angela McRobbie’s research into how girls use popular materials to construct resistance (Feminism) and in Tricia Rose’s argument that through black cultural production ordinary people use cultural forms to construct meaning and community. Similar to Radway and Bobo, both McRobbie and Rose consider how real, embodied girls and women use popular texts to carve out common points of resistance in their daily lives. Moreover, McRobbie (“Dance”) and Rose suggest that additional forms of female subjectivities are possible through the reworking of signifying practices to challenge or refuse the positions offered by popular culture. Of additional note is Rose’s notion of a multiply determined subjectivity that can be re-negotiated and linked to community formation. Last, many of these researchers employ the techniques of ethnographic interviewing, and, thus, feminist cultural studies will be of particular significant to my research design.

**Feminist Film Criticism and Historical Materialist Reception**

Since the mid-seventies, film criticism has witnessed an intense debate about the role of the female spectator in viewing narrative film. Typically associated with psychoanalysis, feminist film criticism as theorized by major critics such as Laura Mulvey, Mary Ann Doane, and Teresa de Lauretis has many limitations including difficulties with dense language and with conceptualizing a universal female spectator. Although feminist film criticism was problematic in its earliest forms, psychoanalytic
processes such as the construction of pleasure and identification are intricately embedded in the act of watching a film, and, therefore, will provide background for my investigation into collective lesbian film viewing rituals in the 1980s. Moreover, feminist film theory has a particular place in the history of the study of gendered spectatorship that intersects with the feminist cultural studies emphasis on gendered and sexual subjectivities as constituted through the interactions between televisual texts and daily lives.

Differences between film and television research can be noted in how the interactions between the text and audience member have been theorized. Psychoanalytic approaches, Ann Kaplan writes, “assume that the reading subject is created (or constructed) in the very act of reading – that there is no reader outside of the text and no text, for that matter, outside of the reader” (264). In contrast, feminist televisual criticism theorizes a more active and differentiated spectator and takes into account a socio-cultural approach to reception. Although always understood in relation to the text, the socially- and historically-situated televisual viewer may not necessarily take on the positions that a text potentially constructs. Viewing a film, theorists such as Ann Kaplan (“Feminist”), Annette Kuhn (“Women’s”), and Jackie Stacey (Stargazing) argue, can also encompass the social and historical context as well as the constitution of sexual and gender subjectivities.

Important to the understanding of cinematic viewing as a social and historical process is the differentiation between the psychic spectator and the social audience member. The psychic spectator, according to Kuhn, “is a subject constituted in signification, interpellated by the film or television text” (“Women’s” 21). The
constructed subjectivity exists on a psychic level, a form of consciousness distinct from the social audience member who is physically in the theatre sharing the viewing experience. Kuhn’s differentiation provides a framework for hypothesizing that viewing a film with a primarily lesbian audience might be a different experience from seeing it with a primarily heterosexual audience. The differentiation between social audience member and psychic spectator sets up a framework for understanding the similarities between collective lesbian film viewing and other social rituals. As Kuhn further notes, “both spectators and social audience may accordingly be regarded as discursive constructs” (27).

Another difference between film and televisual viewing is the distinction between watching a film with an audience in a theater and watching a television program in the home. Informed by the work of Michel De Certeau, John Fiske, and David Morley, televisual viewing has been understood as a constellation of practices that are inserted into the rhythms of everyday life. Following from here, feminist researchers such as Annette Kuhn and Jackie Stacey suggest that practices associated with film viewing can also be inserted into the daily lives of viewers. Stacey examines the extension of the film viewing rituals beyond the parameters of the theater into individual lives through the discursive interactions between film and other social identifications. Both Kuhn and Stacey agree that film consumption can extend into other consuming practices such as shopping or dining out. I hope to expand upon these insights to consider the extension of film viewing into other social practices including consuming practices as part of the interactions between a lesbian social audience and a lesbian social community in 1980s Northampton.
Moreover, the notion of a social audience, a viewing community formed in the theater through the process of physically watching a film, offers a model for studying a lesbian social audience in interaction with a lesbian social community in 1980s Northampton. A social audience is distinct from an interpretive community, which generally refers to a shared consciousness formed through common interpretive strategies and viewer identifications. Thus, an interpretive community retains the shared consciousness that is traditionally associated with the psychic spectator of feminist film criticism. In comparison, a social audience member effectively combines shared consciousness with socio-historical specificity. “In taking part in the social act of consuming representations,” Kuhn writes, “a group of spectators becomes a social audience” (21). Kuhn calls this moment a “point of continuity” between psychic and social spectatorship, a moment when the construction of pleasure and identification linked with film spectatorship intersects with a socio-cultural audience (27). Although a social audience and an interpretive community overlap through an understanding of a shared viewer consciousness, an understanding of the social audience combines the insights of feminist film criticism with the everyday social practices associated with televisual viewing. The notion of the psychic spectator associated with feminist film criticism is still significant for understanding how textual discourses construct and situate potential audience readings. The audience member, Jackie Stacey stresses, is “a social subject, who is herself inscribed by various and competing discursive formations (such as gender, class, ethnicity and sexuality)” (Stargazing 47).

Research that explicitly applies the insights of cultural studies television research to film audiences has been the exception. Most notable is research into film audiences by
Jacqueline Bobo, Annette Kuhn, and Jackie Stacey who all take into account the everyday rituals of film viewing in conceptualizing spectatorship. Both Kuhn and Stacey also incorporate the historical materialist suggestion that the cinematic spectator can be studied as contextually situated. Historical materialist reception stresses a contextualized approach to film reception investigating the discursive production of historical spectatorship through artifacts such as film reviews and production history (Ellsworth, “Illicit”; Fruth; Kuhn, Dreaming; Staiger; Jackie Stacey, Stargazing). Central to this tradition is the research of Janet Staiger with insights into historical spectatorship, particularly that of underrepresented groups. Staiger’s research demonstrates a multifaceted model for reconstructing audience memories when the actual viewers are not interviewed (Interpreting; Media; Perverse). Staiger stresses:

A historical materialist approach acknowledges modes of address and exhibition, but it also establishes the identities and interpretive strategies and tactics brought by separators to the cinema [italics in original]. These strategies and tactics are historically constructed by particular historical circumstances. The historical circumstances create “interpretive communities” or cultural groups such as fans who produce their own conventionalized modes of reception. (Perverse 23)

Underrepresented identities are frequently taken under consideration in historical materialist research including Staiger’s on black audiences (Interpreting), Ellsworth’s on lesbian viewers (“Illicit”), and Fruth’s on gay male spectatorship. Thus, the historical context of film reception is conceptualized as a convergence of disparate factors that reflect the complexity of the reception process. The emphasis in historical materialist reception on artifacts such as letters to the editor will be of pertinence in making use of historical print data to locate this study in the context of 1980s Northampton.

Due to the obvious constraint of studying an earlier time period, historical materialist reception studies typically do not include interviews with actual viewers.
Exceptions include Annette Kuhn’s research on the viewing habits and identifications of British women in the 1930s (Dreaming) and Jackie Stacey’s research on female British film audiences of the 1940s and 1950s (Stargazing). This work was influential in my investigation into the coalescing of a lesbian social audience within the context of Northampton in the 1980s. Such work, Jackie Stacey writes, “has helped to promote a sense of female agency through its work with audiences which has shown the need for an interactive model of text/audience/context to account for the complexity of the viewing process” (47). Writing in 2008, Goldstein and Machor agree that contextualized reception studies are necessary for understanding counter-hegemonic audiences:

> Reception study accommodates the interpretive practices of the twenty-first century, when, in addition to an author’s intention, . . . [this approach] examines the reader’s reactions . . . as well as the author’s, reader’s, or audience’s sexuality, gender, race, or nationality. (xiii)

In addition, several historical materialist researchers including Mariam Hansen and Annette Kuhn take into consideration the space of the theater as an element of the contextualized study of audiences. Mariam Hansen in stressing the close interactivity of film texts with the collective aspects of film reception also references the specificity of the film viewing space (14). Annette Kuhn also emphasizes the theater space in her study of British female film viewers in the 1930s:

> Cinemas, as physical space – as places – embody all these qualities of liminality and heterogeneity: they are very much part of the built environment, and yet they conjoin the mundanity and materiality of bricks and mortar with the worlds of fantasy and the imagination [italics in original]. (Dreaming 141)

I envision that the downtown city theaters will be important in locating collective lesbian film rituals and lesbian film consuming practices in Northampton in the 1980s. Feminist film criticism and historical materialist reception effectively combine the understanding
of constructed gender and sexual subjectivity with the understanding of reception as a social and historical process that takes into account the social dimensions of film viewing as well as the significance of the theater space. The insights of queer theory and discourse analysis continue the emphasis on the lesbian viewer, audience, and viewing space as constructed entities within a spatio-temporal context.

**Queer Theory and Discourse Analysis**

As developed in the work of Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Gayle Rubin, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, queer theories conceptualizing the interactions of discourse, subjectivity, and power relations will be important for understanding the changing terms of the 1980s to 1990s queer crossover. In queer theory, identity is seen as constructed and fluid, and normative categories of gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation are problematized (Foucault). Instead of two gender roles, or two sexual orientations, queer theory argues that a range of possibilities exists within and outside these categories. Hennessy elaborates, “queer theory calls into question obvious categories (man, woman, Latina, Jew, butch, femme), oppositions (man vs. woman, heterosexual vs. homosexual), or equations (gender = sex) upon which conventional notions of sexuality and identity rely” (“Queer Theory” 964). It is also useful to consider the distinction between identity and identification. In critical usage, identity is understood to mean a socially and historically constructed category. Identity is fluid and unstable. According to Annamarie Jagose “identity is a constellation of multiple and unstable positions” (3), and is “ongoing, and always incomplete, it is a process rather than a property” (79). In contrast, self-identification is an individual act and an effect of social structures. Simply put: queer
theory seeks to interrogate identity categories as a way to displace the traditional notion of what it means to belong to a particular group in a particular time.

Research under the rubric of queer makes use of discourse analysis to examine the discursive relations between constructed categories of identity and power. The understanding of diffuse power is a vital component of Foucault’s analysis of sexuality as part of a system of discursive relations. A central premise of Foucault’s argument is that sexuality is not outside of language, but is instead produced through discursive mechanisms. “Modern subjectivity,” Foucault argued, “is an effect of networks of power” (History 80). In Foucault’s analysis, power and language are intertwined within discourses about sexuality that operate as productive and regulatory forces. Following Foucault’s observations, Judith Butler’s influential work questions how categories of identity are interconnected within power relations that are naturalized as fixed and ahistorical. From here it is possible to see identity as a discursive practice regulated within a diffuse model of power. Butler contends that “gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Gender 33). The category of woman, according to Butler, is a regulatory category constructed through cultural codes that normalize gender and sexual identities. Moreover, queer theory suggests, traditional models of gender and sexuality create a hierarchy in which some categories are privileged over others.

Gayle Rubin emphasizes the constructed stratification of traditional models of gender and sexuality in which some categories are privileged over others. For instance, because heterosexuality is considered the norm in most cultures, homosexual becomes
the displaced term in the binary. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick agrees that within the stratified categorization of identity, heterosexual and homosexual identities become mutually constitutive of one another with the hierarchical structure maintained by the rigid belief that these categories are distinctly separate. Identity, Sedgwick writes, “is never to be circumscribed simply as itself, can never not be relational, is never to be perceived or known by anyone outside of a structure of transference and counter transference” (“Epistemology” 54). Following from Foucault’s analysis of power and subjectivity as discursive practices, discourse analysis, Barry Smart explains “problematizes evolutionary concepts of change as succession” (50), and, thus, examines how particular discourses emerge, disappear, or become recycled during different periods of time. In discourse analysis, Smart continues, the objects of analysis are contingent upon “what statements survive, disappear, get re-used, repressed or censured; which terms are recognized as valid, questionable, invalid; [and] what relations exist between ‘the system of present statements’ and those of the past” (48). Thus, sexuality is a discursive effect of which categories and codes are culturally recognized as valid in a specific historical period.

Discourse analysis asks questions about material existence by examining the changing configurations of the interrelations among discourses, groups, and individuals at specific historical junctures. Through application to cultural icons such as James Bond (Bennett and Woolacott) and Marilyn Monroe (Dyer, Heavenly) discourse analysis suggests a framework for studying the changing terms of lesbian visibility and identity in the 1980s. Informed by Roland Barthes, Bennett and Woollacott suggest that Bond becomes “a malleable sign” through taking on different meanings at different times, in
different contexts and for different audiences. These different meanings are constructed as the character forms a relation with or is linked to "ideological and cultural co-ordinates" (11-12). It is the relations between these co-ordinates that give a character or a film the power and popularity that reverberates through cultural consciousness. Richard Dyer examined how images of Marilyn Monroe became part of larger discursive formation of ideas that clustered around sexuality in the 1950s (Heavenly). As a sex symbol of the 1950s, Monroe not only signified sexuality, but also embodied “a way of thinking” about sexuality that was popularly seen as commonsensical and natural. In Dyer’s analysis, the construction of meaning is located on multiple levels and can be associated with various cultural sites ranging “from the self-conscious Playboy ‘philosophy’ to the habitual forms of the pin-up, from a psychoanalytic theory through psychotherapeutic practices to the imagery of popular magazines and best-selling novels”(19-20). Dyer envisions sexuality as a discourse that runs across different social sites and media venues, providing a model for investigating the subtle movements of the 1980s queer crossover.

Discourse analysis has been re-worked in numerous studies, notably in feminist approaches to various popular media forms (Jeremy G. Butler; Elliott, et. al; Fiske; Hermes; Lotz; Press and Livingston) along with feminist inquiries into the role of texts and cultural artifacts in building community (Baumgardner and Richards; Walkerdine). John Fiske notes, “social experience is much like a text: its meanings depend upon the discourses that are brought to bear upon it” (15). Although none of these researchers except for Walkerdine makes connections between specific discourses and actual individuals, there is the understanding that discourse analysis can be used to make
connections between popular cultural forms and everyday life experiences. “A
discourse,” Dyer points out, “runs across different media practices, [and] across different
cultural levels” (Heavenly 19). A particularly good example of a discourse analysis that
also makes use of aspects of historical materialist reception is Elizabeth Ellsworth’s study
of hypothesized lesbian viewers, feminist interpretive practices, and the 1980s film
Personal Best. Ellsworth states that individual viewers, in constructing similar responses
to a film, move patterns of emotions “into the sphere of public discourse by giving social,
semantic form to anxieties and desires” (46). Although Ellsworth, similar to most of
researchers noted above, does not interview actual viewers, nor make linkages between
discourse and social lives, the connections between shared interpretive strategies and
other social practices are explicitly theorized. Ellsworth’s analysis is additionally useful
for my study as she discusses the collective consciousness of a lesbian interpretive
community. The concept of an interpretive community recognizes that "systems of
domination (economic, sexual, racial, representational) shared within particular groups
(like feminists) generate specific patterns of hope, anxiety and desire” (Ellsworth 194).

The theoretical and methodological groundwork for this dissertation will be
located in the theorizing of the potential interrelations between the lesbian subcultural
community and the lesbian social audience as developed in cultural studies and feminist
film criticism in conjunction with the methods of ethnographic interviewing. In addition,
I will incorporate insights from analyses of feminist geography and historical materialist
reception. These theories and methods intersected in and were expanded upon by queer
theories through the understanding that sexual and gender subjectivities are constructed
through the discourses of everyday life within a model of diffuse power relations. In the
literature review at the end of this chapter, I provide an overview of research into two areas: first, studies of lesbian and gay communities with attention to studies that apply the insights of queer theory and space; and second, research into lesbian audiences and queer spectatorship.

**Research Design**

For this dissertation, I conducted twenty-four in-depth individual interviews over a two-year period, from 1999 to 2001 in Northampton, Massachusetts. Informed by feminist ethnographic interviewing techniques, I asked a differentiated sampling of lesbian-, bisexual-, and queer-identified individuals general questions about memories of viewing films as well as about experiences of community. The unifying factors were self-identification as a lesbian-, bi-sexual, or queer-person and a connection to the Northampton area. I cited respondents only through confidential pseudonyms, and because the Northampton area was and is a relatively small region, I was careful not to “out” individual participants.

I interviewed a total of 32 individuals, but used response data from 24 for this study. The twenty-four participants were aged between 23 and 72; 6 identified as working class, 15 as middle class, 2 as upper middle class, and 1 as upper class. 2 were high school graduates, 5 had completed some college, 9 were college graduates, and 8 had obtained graduate degrees. 16 individuals self-identified as lesbian, 5 as queer or queer-identified, 2 as bisexual, and 1 as transgendered; 19 reported they were feminists. 4 had been previously married to men, 17 were currently in relationships, which they categorized as either partnered or married, with women; 3 had older or grown children, 3 had young children, and 1 was trying to get pregnant. Two women identified as African-
American, 1 as Korean-American, 1 as Japanese-American, 1 as Latina, 2 as bi-racial, and 2 as Jewish; all others self-identified as White. All respondents lived in the Northampton, Massachusetts area.

The twenty-four participants were selected through applying a mixed methodological sampling approach to locating individuals who might be especially useful in charting the transitioning elements of lesbian visibility and identity. Through networking suggestions, I initially identified and interviewed several key informants each with a long-term or highly visible relationship to the Northampton regional lesbian community. Such key informants, Lindlof writes, can be sources of background materials about “the group or organization’s philosophies, purposes, mythic origins, recent history, current personnel, procedures, immediate challenge, and prospective agenda . . . helping the researcher to raise and resolve any remaining issues about method choice and sampling strategy” (124). These key respondents were helpful in developing a sense of the general terrain of this project through identifying significant themes and for generating suggestions about potential respondents. Moreover, references emerged during these first interviews to particular 1980s films, places, and events that were important to community history, and, thus, impacted the decision to focus on the 1980s as a particular moment of transition in the interactions of lesbian visibility and identity.

I also used maximum variation sampling to facilitate an efficient, yet diverse sampling. Maximum variation can be obtained through first, identifying the central themes, and then, the diverse characteristics that are important for the project. The researcher purposefully sets up demographic variations as a way to emphasize the common experiences of respondents. In maximum variation sampling, Patton states, “any
common patterns that emerge from great variation are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared aspects” of all cases (qtd. in Lindlof, 126). In maximum variation sampling, the methodological weakness that might come from interviewing a small sample of great diversity is effectively offset by the acquisition of knowledge about common themes. In examining common themes across some identificatory variations, my goal was not to generalize broadly about the lesbian population, but instead to come up a range of information about lesbian identifications.

Using the method of snowball sampling, each interviewee was chosen serially beginning with the key information interviews as a source for networking suggestions and potential respondents. The serial approach combined maximum variation sampling with the efficiency of snowball sampling as a way to find individuals who had attributes that would be especially relevant to the research goals. Snowball sampling, Lindlof states “uses a person, usually an informant, as a source for locating other persons from whom a type of date can be generated, who then refer the researcher to other persons, and so on” (127). Such a sampling approach is commonly acknowledged to somewhat replicate a group’s or community’s social and political networks. Through using this mixed approach to sampling, I attempted to achieve a sample that was partially representative of the regional lesbian population. However, the sampling did not represent a comprehensive profile of Western Massachusetts or of the Northampton area lesbian population and no claims are made about the equivalence of respondent identifications with social community or social audience identifications. Instead, the goal will be to problematize text-based analyses of lesbian reception, and, to explore the interactions
between the collective viewing rituals of a lesbian social audience and the social rituals of a lesbian social community with the context of Northampton in the 1980s.

Each interview lasted at least two hours and I conducted a second interview with the majority of the respondents. All interviews were audio taped, and, subsequently, transcribed. The interviews followed a feminist cultural studies approach using an open-ended conversational format with a stress on narrative story telling (Grodin; Kauffman; Long; Radway, “Ideological”; Roman; Stacey, Stargazing). In an interactive, reflexive format, Janice Radway offers, “one is at least attempting to record a conversation . . . precisely the operation that makes it possible for two different individuals, with two different histories, to begin to approach each other's world (97). All interviews followed a general interview guide with the focus on questions about recollections of film viewing and memories of community in the Northampton region. I began with an introduction about the parameters of and reasons for the study. This preface was followed by questions about film viewing. The second aspect of the interview consisted of questions about lesbian communal experiences and lesbian identifications. The interview questions were designed to closely consider the everyday activity of self-identification and to flush out the shared assumptions and understandings that might be held in common between community experiences and viewing rituals. I concluded each interview with a reflexive component, asking questions about the interview process, and taking the feedback into account in structuring subsequent interviews. The use of a conversational interview format, Bette Kauffman stresses, includes a self-reflexive awareness of the interview politics. Last, using semiology and discourse analysis, I examined the interview transcripts through a comparative structuring that located, and then, considered the key
themes and patterns that emerged in memories of community rituals and events as well as discussions of collective viewing experiences and individual texts.

The focus on the 1980s lesbian visibility cultural moment will be further underscored through a limited sampling of print materials from that time period. Influenced by the historical materialist approach to contextualizing reception. I collected materials that specifically referenced Northampton in national and local publications, both mainstream and alternative. These included cover stories in Rolling Stone (Van Gelder) and Harper’s (Harrison) that discussed the changing visibility of lesbians in the 1980s and specifically highlighted Northampton, and multiple articles in the local press including Northampton’s Daily Hampshire Gazette, Springfield’s Republican, and the regional alternative publication, the Valley Advocate. In navigating the rudimentary technology of the online-version of the 1980s Gazette, I found increased references to homosexuality or lesbians including numerous letters to the editor clustered around the dates of the Northampton pride marches in the 1980s. I also collected articles and letters to the editor on the downtown revitalization as well as the backlash against the lesbian population. Several alternative publications wrote about the changing visibility of and the subsequent backlash against Northampton lesbians in the 1980s. These included the national feminist magazine, Off Our Backs, the gay and lesbian Boston-based newspaper, Gay Community News, and the Northampton-based Lesbian Calendar and Valley Women’s Voice.

Although much of the background on feminism and lesbianism in the Northampton region and many of the references to specific places and events came from participants’ detailed recollections, I relied on print sources for names, dates, and
additional background. The archives of the Valley Women’s Voice, at the Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, and the archives of the Valley Advocate at the W.E.B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts Amherst were excellent resources for information on the lesbian community in the 1980s. There were also several individuals in the Northampton area operating archived collections from their homes including the now defunct Lesbian Calendar and the Sexual Minority Archives still operating in 2009. The reference department staff at Forbes Library in Northampton was of particular help in navigating the online 1980s Daily Hampshire Gazette. In addition, the online basic chronologies of the Valley Women’s History Project was of use in providing specific dates and times that confirmed individual interviewee references. Last, several respondents provided access to personal copies of 1980s editions of the Valley Women’s Voice and the Lesbian Calendar. Although it was not a goal of this project to conduct a conventional historical materialist reception study, this background material was critical in locating this study in the geographic- and gender- specificities of Northampton in the 1980s. Moreover, these print resources were invaluable as it was not possible to conduct an exhaustive community history. I was fortunate to have access to these institutional archives, informal archives, and personal collections.

Last, I sought out general historical and demographic background on the town of Northampton, some of which was generously provided by the Northampton Chamber of Commerce. I made extensive use of the city’s online promotional materials including the official Northampton city website and the websites and publications of the Northampton Chamber of Commerce, the Northampton Historical Society, and the Northampton Business Association. The Smith College website also provided general information
about the city. I additionally examined several books that have been written about the history of Northampton (Parsons; Wikander), multiple tourist guides that mentioned the city, and numerous articles about Northampton that have been published in the local paper, the Daily Hampshire Gazette as well as in other area newspapers including the Valley Advocate, Springfield Republican, and The Boston Globe.

The focus on the 1980s as a specific transitional moment in the changing terms of lesbian visibility and identity was heightened by recurrent references to four particular films that were released during that time period: Personal Best (1982), Lianna (1982), Entré Nous (1983), and Desert Hearts (1985). According to Suzanna Danuta Walters, such films can be termed, “symptomatic texts,” as films that become particularly representative of a cultural moment as part of a larger discourse (Material). Jacqueline Bobo also discusses how a film can become strongly invested with a type of cultural currency for a particular group, especially an underrepresented group. In Bobo’s analysis, the film The Color Purple (1985) became responsible for carrying the burden of representing an entire race as illustrated in the oppositional responses that black men and black women brought to the film. As will be detailed in Chapter Four’s discussion of identity articulations in 1980s films, the four symptomatic texts were particular sites for the definitional realignment of lesbian identity as a subset of the 1980s queer crossover.

**Research Questions**

There are a number of questions to be asked about the implications of the changing terms of lesbian visibility and identity in Northampton in the 1980s: How does this particular cultural moment shape understandings of lesbian subjectivity, community, and audience? How does examining the emergence of social community alongside the
coalescing of social audience add to previous studies of lesbian community and reception? What can this particular convergence of factors in this specific spatio-temporal context reveal about the interrelations between subculture and dominant culture? How can we account for the queer crossover from subcultural separatism, stable identity, and communal continuity in the 1980s to mainstream engagement, malleable subjectivity, and communal discontinuity in the 1990s? What do 1980s repositionings of lesbian visibility and identity have to tell us about the broader debates of the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) political arena? I will explore these research questions through examining the definitional realignments in lesbianism within the context of the coming out into public visibility of a lesbian social community and social audience in the spatio-temporal context of Northampton in the 1980s.

**Literature Review**

**Lesbian Community**

Much of the historical research on sexual communities has focused on gay male urban communities, with lesbian communities seen as existing alongside these urban spaces (Beemyn, “A Queer”; Chauncey; D’Emilio, *Sexual*; Johnson; Meeker). This research envisions gay males as more physically connected to the geographic urban space of the city than lesbian women. The study of gay and lesbian communities, the editors of *Queers in Space* comment “reflects the dichotomy of women forging communality in space and men having sex in it” (Ingram, et. al 10). Studies of pre-1970s lesbian communities provide background for this inquiry into the coalescing of a lesbian social community and social audience in 1980s Northampton, Massachusetts (Faderman; Kennedy and Davis; Lewin; Newton). Previous studies on the particulars of 1970s and
1980s lesbian communities offer validation of my examination of a lesbian community in the Northampton region (Sally Crawford; Esterberg, Lesbian; Faderman; Krieger, Lockard; Ponse; Whittier; Wolf). In particular, Verta Taylor, Elizabeth Kaminski, and Kimberly Dugan’s article, “From the Bowery to the Castro: Communities, Identities and Movements,” provides a comprehensive overview of gay and lesbian communities. These investigations make use of anthropological, sociological, and psychological approaches in conceptualizing lesbian communities as subcultural separatist havens coalescing around the feminist emphasis on women-identified women. Similar to cultural studies analyses of 1970s British subcultures (Hebdige; Hall and Jefferson; McRobbie, “Girls”), studies of 1970s and 1980s lesbian communities in the United States agree that the relationship of the community to the broader culture is that of a marginalized subculture.

Many previous inquiries into the constitution of lesbian community have been located in rural settings with the exceptions of Green's on London, Franzen’s on Albuquerque, and Whittier’s on Columbus, Ohio. Whittier’s study of the lesbian feminist community in Columbus most paralleled aspects of the Northampton region’s lesbian population in terms of the emphasis on feminism in communal formation through support groups, consciousness-raising groups, social activities, and activist organizations and events along with resources such as a newsletter. Also similar to the constitution of the Northampton lesbian population in the 1980s was the emphasis on working against violence against women, including both physical violence and what was characterized as symbolic violence such as pornography. However, the large city of Columbus is very distinct from the small city feel of Northampton and surrounding rural environs, and there
was no parallel in Columbus in terms of the lesbian population’s impact on the 1980s revitalization of the downtown, which worked hand-in-hand with the economic gentrification.

Several general aspects of previous studies were especially relevant: first, that 1970s and 1980s lesbian communities were viewed as lesbian ghettos that functioned to provide safety through combating isolation and homophobia; second, that these marginalized subcultures were constructed through somewhat defined sets of rituals, codes, and ideologies; last, and most importantly, that the separatist subculture was contingent on participation in feminist politics, and, relatedly, on a definition of lesbian identificatory homogeneity. Writing in 1982, Jacqueline Zita explained:

Lesbian community is a place where lesbians can relax; where worry of offending straight women no longer exists; where homophobia is erased; where the women you meet share common interests, and experiences, and desires; where lesbian sensibility and erotic caring are givens. It is the place we feel at home – a radical kinship in the making. (175)

Studies of 1980s lesbian communities stressed both the explicit and the implicit connections between feminist theory and practice in community formation and continuity (Esterberg, Lesbian; Ferguson; Franzen; Green; Krieger; Lockard; Ponse; Whittier).

Lesbian feminism of the 1980s emphasized a woman-centered culture and carried connotations of essentialism in positioning women and men as innately distinct (Daly; Frye; Lorde; Rich). Central characteristics of radical lesbian feminist communities emphasized the rejection of patriarchal institutions and structures; that rejection was put into daily practice through a focus on women that included a separation from men (Jeffries; Stein). Marilyn Frye, the feminist philosopher whose thinking in the 1980s so influenced the development of feminist theory, defined the significance of separatism as:
Separation of various sorts or modes from men and from institutions, relationships, roles and activities that are male-defined, male-dominated, and operating for the benefit of males and the maintenance of male privilege – this separation being initiated or maintained, at will, by women [italics in original].

(408)

The belief that the “personal is political” was an integral component of the resistance to the hegemonic patriarchal culture, and, therefore, the personal choice of a lesbian feminist identification was interconnected to feminist politics. Feminism was incorporated into everyday aspects of life, and, evidenced in assumptions about political affiliations, clothing, hair styles, behavioral rules, and, as we shall see, in making choices about media consumption including film viewing. Thus, feminist theory and practice was central to the coalescing of, and, moreover, to the continuity of, lesbian communities in the 1970s and 1980s. Coming out as a lesbian was in conjunction with coming out as a feminist. The conflation of lesbian with feminist worked against the medicalized definition of lesbian to conceptualize a shared identity through communal structures that emphasized women and worked against the normative gender and sexual roles of the patriarchy. That shared lesbian feminist identity was expressed in the safety to be found in regional and urban lesbian communities as well as the broader sense of a “Lesbian Nation” with far-reaching ideological interconnections that reflected the localized intertwining of lesbianism and feminism in Northampton. The clear ideological connection between feminism and lesbianism was a naturalized aspect of the deep collective investment in an authentic lesbian identity. In emphasizing a stable model of lesbian identity, the subcultural community provided a sense of safety through shared feminist beliefs. Community formation in the 1970s and 1980s, Krieger writes, was
theorized from the perspective of "how lesbians have managed to have identity, . . . in a largely hostile world" (95)

Community provided not only a safe space, but also a pedagogical space. The formation of lesbian identity was interrelated to the tendency of the community to encourage a high degree of conformity and acceptance in both individual members and groups (Ponse). Additionally, the conflation of feminist and lesbian manifested itself in a communal self-monitoring that rested upon identificatory conformity (Esterberg, Lesbian; Franzen; Green; Whittier). As Zita continued, “A lesbian is once again whatever the community decides is lesbian” (177). The role of feminist theory in the formation of 1980s lesbian communities was sometimes manifested in community tensions about what counted as a real or true lesbian identity. A belief in the universal sameness of lesbians was an important component in maintaining a community, partially constructed through the radical feminist understanding of power as a dyad, with patriarchy as oppressive of women. A lesbian, Barbara Ponse wrote in 1978, “[was] understood to be a woman who relates sexually and emotionally to other women” (36). The manifestation of that basic principle of lesbian authenticity was central to the constitution of subcultural community in the 1970s.

Additional studies on subcultural lesbian communities in the 1980s have focused on a more social constructionist approach to community (Franzen; Green; Phelan; Identity; Rothblum). In particular, Sarah Green’s study of a lesbian community in urban London in the 1980s and Trisha Franzen’s study of the Albuquerque, New Mexico lesbian community from 1965 to the 1980s offered validation for my focus on the 1980s lesbian visibility cultural moment as a time period when the model of a constant
subcultural lesbian identity began to be disturbed. Both Franzen and Green, along with others, have examined community conflict over race and class differences (Anzaldúa; Franzen; Green; McKenna, “The Queer”; Rothblum; Stein, “Sisters”; Whittier) along with deep and divisive conflict over lesbian sexuality (Burstyn; Bensinger; Echols; Esterberg, Lesbian; Franzen; Green; Hemmings; Krahulik; Phelan; Christine Robinson; Stein, Sex; Summerhawk and Gagehabib; Jillian T. Weiss; Whittier; Jillian T. Weiss) and gender identity (Crawley; Hemmings; Halberstam, Female; Jillian T. Weiss).

Research into communal formation in the 1990s and 2000s provided additional background for the 1980s prefiguring of conflict and divisiveness over what constituted genuine lesbian identity and behavior (Esterberg, Lesbian; Krahulik; Stein, Sex; Summerhawk and Gagehabib; Christine Robinson; Jillian T. Weiss; Whittier) as the subcultural community was further disrupted through moving into engagement with the heterosexual mainstream culture (Krahulik; Christine Robinson). In particular, the work of Kristin Esterberg on the malleability of lesbian social identities was particularly valuable for my inquiry. I conjecture that these studies of the continuities and emerging discontinuities of a 1980s lesbian community will validate my conceptualization of a 1980s queer crossover when lesbian identity and community transitioned into public visibility with different formations that set up the context for the continuities and discontinuities in 1990s Northampton.\textsuperscript{xi}

\textbf{Queer Space}

Since the late-1990s both queer theorists and queer activists have raised the question about the effectivity of the term community. In place of the prior understanding of a separate subcultural haven, a theory of queer space envisions linking together
numerous queer communities through the broader queer imaginary (Bell and Valentine; Halberstam, *In a Queer*; Ingram, et al.; Phelan, *Identity*). Some queer theorists argue that the concept of community may even place limits on coalition building within a politics of difference. Research on queer space and sexuality has expanded upon previous studies of gay and lesbian community and identity construction. Exemplified in two anthologies, *Mapping Desires* (Bell and Valentine) and *Queers in Space* (Ingram, et al.), theorizations of queer space examine both public and private spaces as well as the sexualized spatial configurations of the landscape and the body. This scholarship develops several areas that will be useful for this project: first, to further explore the study of sexual identities; second, to extend earlier studies of gays and lesbians to conceptualize community as other than a subcultural haven; last, to add to the conceptual framework for exploring the interrelations among space, identity, and popular culture.

Research using the insights of queer theory and cultural geography stresses that the spatial relations of community are discursively constructed (Bell and Valentine; Ingram, et al.), and, moreover, stresses the mutually constitutive interactions of space and identity (Bell and Valentine; Ingram et al.; Massey; Gillian Rose). Space as linked to a theorizing of subjectivity hinges on the conception of the spatial as discursively as well as physically constructed. This view, Doreen Massey argues, “challenges any possibility of claims to internal histories or to timeless identities. The identities of place are always unfixed, contested and multiple” (5). Concrete places of the city, however, have material as well as constructed components. Feminist geographer Gillian Rose stresses that place refers to “a specific set of interrelationships between environmental, economic, social, political and cultural processes” (41) and is regarded as a human entity “full of human
interpretation and significance” (43). The spaces of the lesbian world, to borrow George Chauncey's argument, "reterritorialized the city in order to construct a gay [lesbian] city in the midst of (and often invisible to) the normative city” (23). Space has distinct theoretical connotations with space envisioned as constructed and malleable as well as regulated and contradictory.

The notion that space is constructed is closely allied with the postmodernist understanding of identity as constructed, and, thus, includes the awareness that space can, for example, be raced, sexed, or gendered. The recognition that space is discursively constructed extends the emphasis on geographic location and physicality as central to community formation. As Bell and Valentine write “a whole body of work is emerging . . . that explores the performance of identities and the way that they are inscribed on the body and the landscape” (8). In these studies, Bell and Valentine propose, space becomes more than another “trendy post modern word” as researchers examine how individuals such as gay men and lesbians “struggle to stake out psychic or cognitive space, as well as physical space, in the world” (6-7). Although there is a strong belief in the centrality of geographic location to lesbian communal formation (Faderman; Kennedy and Davis; Krieger; Lewin; Newton; Lockard; Ponse; Wolf), the understanding that the spatial is discursively as well as physically constructed is central to this analysis. As the editors of Queers in Space suggest, gender has impacted how space is used, occupied, sexualized, and inflected economically.

Following the insight that space is not necessarily contingent on physicality or temporality, research on queer space and identity utilizes a discursive approach to analyzing community. Instead of the notion of subculture, researchers use the insights of
queer theory and discourse analysis to conceptualize community in interaction and formation with the dominant culture. A queer space, Jean-Ulrick Desert argues, “is an activated zone . . . it is at once private and public” (21). Desert further suggests that the activation of queer spatiality “requires that a catalyst such as the observer’s perception or a collective consensus of readings bring forth that queer latency from being merely implicit to explicit” (22). Queer spaces become implicit or explicit depending on who is doing the perceiving; this understanding of activated space follows from the Foucaultian understanding that discursive relations such as those of invisibility and visibility are in interaction. In addition, the model of an oppositional community constituted through interaction with the dominant culture follows from the insight that just as dominant culture uses discourses of the oppositional to define and maintain itself, so does the oppositional define itself through dominant discourses.

The model of a communal formation constituted through interaction with the mainstream is intricately connected to the disruption of the broader cultural opposition of heterosexual versus homosexual as best typified in the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Sedgwick, following Michel Foucault, explains it is not possible to construct either heterosexual or homosexual as “an unproblematically discrete category of persons” (“Epistemology” 55). Instead, an identity “is never to be circumscribed simply as itself, can never not be relational, is never to be perceived or known by anyone outside of a structure of transference and counter transference” (54). This relational structure suggests a mutually constitutive relationship between heterosexuality and homosexuality. As many have stressed, dominant categories such as heterosexuality or whiteness (Dyer White) are presented unproblematically, and it is up to The Other to construct and make visible the
power relations. What is important to remember is that gays and lesbians need the discourses of the mainstream to construct subjectivity, although somewhat differently than the mainstream needs the "Other" to self-define. Sarah Green, in her study of a lesbian community in 1980s London, affirms, “oppositional groups and ideas usually reflect cultural traditions as much as non-oppositional ideas” (8). The historical analyses of Weeks and D’Emilio argue that historically homosexual cultures rose alongside and in relation to capitalist consumer culture, and, therefore, homosexual and heterosexual cultures exist within a symbiotic relationship. The queer critique of the lesbian subculture works in conjunction with the queer disruption of the essentialized lesbian subject and reflects the refusal to use universalized notions of “lesbian” in queer theory.

Jon Binnie’s study of the European gay male communities in relation to the broader context of capitalism and urban life makes use of the queer theorizing of space. Binnie combines elements of ethnography with discourse analysis within a broader cultural and political context, and, therefore, offers a model for my research. In addition, as noted previously, both Sarah Green’s and Tricia Franzen’s analyses of lesbian community include queer insights that disrupt the notion of a stable subcultural lesbian identity or community through exposing the “continuities and discontinuities” of community formation. In addition, two separate researchers, Susannah Dolance and Tiffany K. Muller, further extend the notion of lesbian community in their conceptualizations of the Women's National Basketball Association as a discursively constituted and contested lesbian space. The literature of queer spatial identities adds depth to previous inquiries through stressing that lesbian communities are constituted through and within the broader heterosexual culture.
Lesbian Texts, Viewers, and Audiences

The vast majority of academic analyses of lesbian viewers have been text-based with a hypothetical lesbian spectator and an implied homogeneous lesbian audience. Text-based analyses of lesbian audience and spectatorship have included: discussions of positive and negative imaging and the subsequent need for separatist feminist aesthetics (Grover); theorizings of lesbian spectatorship organized through a psychoanalytic framework (Coffman; de Lauretis, The Practice; Grosz; Isiling; Merck; Whatling); text-based constructions of hypothetical lesbian as viewers who re-read both historical (Andrea Weiss, Vampires; Mayne, “Lesbian Looks”) and contemporary invisibility and stereotyping (Griggers; Hanson; Hinds; Kenneday; Stacey, “‘If You’”); and applications of the insights of queer theory to text-based studies of lesbian spectatorship (Doty; Barale; Evans and Gamman; Nataf). Several researchers have followed the practice of historical materialist reception in making use of film reviews to contextualize lesbian viewers as ideological feminist audiences who constructed against-the-grain readings (Ellsworth; Vickers), while others conducted interviews with lesbians about interpretive strategies and viewer identifications (Dobinson; Straayer, “Personal”).

Early theories of lesbian representation dismissed the mass media as a tool of the patriarchy while emphasizing lesbians as media consumer outsiders who would potentially produce a separatist lesbian cultural lexicon. Consistent with early feminist analyses of film and media, common themes of early analyses of lesbian imaging were: critiques of pornography (Brownmiller; Dworkin; MacKinnon), challenges to the male gaze (Becker, et al.), and a search for positive or true images combined with separatist art making (Grover). Positive imaging is linked to the feminist theoretical perspective of
radical feminism (Daly; Millet), and the understanding that women should create their own forms of language and not use patriarchal representational conventions in creating positive images designated for women's eyes only. As Jan Zita Grover clarifies, due to cultural scarcity and derogatory stereotyping, the pursuit of positive lesbian separatist images carried a great deal of emotional and political currency in the 1980s.

One of the problems with positive imagery analysis is the positive image is itself frequently an oversimplified concept. Walters explains, “to argue for less stereotyped images avoids an attack on the deep structures of the signifying practices that produce such images in the first place” (Material 42). Positive imaging does not account for the complexity of understanding power relations or the processes of signification. Oversimplified positive images, as Marlon Riggs has elaborated, can be just as limiting as negative stereotypes. It is important, however, to acknowledge how central positive imaging has been to conceptualizations of lesbian identity and community. The search for positive or authentic portrayals of lesbianism carries the implicit connotation of an essentialized stable lesbian identity that was so central to communal continuity in the 1980s. Moreover, recording the history of lesbianism was an integral part of building a separatist, and, therefore, authentic and positive lexicon through archiving photographs and other documents of lesbians, lesbian spaces, and lesbian events during this time period.

The conversancy of lesbians in early feminist media analyses was honed in the interpretive strategies of reading against the grain of historical invisibility and stereotyping along with the reinterpretation of sexist ideologies of gendered portrayals.
As discussed in a 1981 special issue devoted to “Lesbians and Film” from the progressive film journal, *Jump Cut*:

> Given the importance of subcultural identification, much lesbian film viewing and criticism depends upon subtexting. Such readings can be valuable and accurate. They can resolve ambiguities otherwise inexplicable in the film text . . . Or they can construct alternate explications entirely. . . . The most important viewing strategy has been to concentrate on the subtext, the "hidden" meaning, of commercial films. (Becker, et al. 18)

The understanding of lesbians as viewers who read against the grain of pathological, subtextual, and heterosexual portrayals was significant to my study as textual ambiguities and contradictions were sites of negotiation and disruption for heteronormativity. The dominant heterosexual narrative can be disrupted by reinterpreting looks between female characters or other codes that illustrate the bonds of female friendship as well as through reworking other erotic codes that might be read as lesbian.

The notion of lesbian viewers as savvy deconstructors is closely linked to feminist cultural studies research on how real women resist, use, negotiate, and transform cultural products in their daily lives (Radway, *Reading*; McRobbie, *Feminism*; Roman; Tricia Rose). Feminist researchers such as Chris Straayer and Elizabeth Ellsworth have long conceptualized lesbians as a unique viewing audience because of the position of lesbians as outsiders who live in a subculture, yet simultaneously live within the dominant culture. Lesbians, according to Straayer, “are well trained for subversive reading . . . their position simultaneously inside and outside society certainly facilitates a critical consciousness (“Personal Best” 43). Others agree that lesbians have a unique perspective on the reading of representation because they practice a form of simultaneous critique and pleasure that mirrors their reflexive position of living both inside and outside of a heterosexual culture. The notion that lesbians have universally developed a
deconstructive sixth sense is a cornerstone of inquiries into lesbian spectatorship. Lesbian viewers, Z. Isiling Nataf states, are “conscious of themselves individually and collectively as a critical and ‘strategic audience’ . . . [who] make impatient demands on current texts” (78). The theorizing of lesbians as audience members who make textual demands as a conscious interpretive strategy is important as potentially linked to the understanding of lesbians as community members who use self-reflexivity in reading against the grain of not only media codes, but also social codes as a political practice. Popular cultural forms, Gina Marchetti suggests, “have a subtext which allows them . . . to be read in an originally unintended way” (73).

Both of the above approaches – the search for positive images and the strategy of deconstruction – situate lesbians as cultural outsiders who make use of the materials of the mainstream in reconstructing meaning. Such research begins with the presumption that lesbians relate to popular culture in different ways than heterosexuals and reinforces the perception of lesbians as members of a unique subculture, in this case, as subcultural readers. Lesbians and gay males, Corey Creekmur and Alexander Doty point out, “often found their cultural experience and participation constrained and proscribed by a dominant culture in which they are a generally ignored or oppressed, if logically integral, part” (1). The notion of lesbians comprising a resistive subcultural audience is centrally linked to the understanding of a resistive lesbian subcultural community. The constitution of a subcultural resistive space has been a longtime strategic response to homophobia, pathologization, and invisibility in both media venues and social contexts. Framing lesbians and gay audiences as marginalized reflects unevenness in access to both material resources and symbolic materials. In addition, B. Ruby Rich argues, “lesbian and gay
culture was once afraid of the contamination of the popular” (qtd. in Smyth, 124). In theorizing different ways of engaging with mainstream portrayals, queer popular culture suggests a movement away from the notion of subculture and the accompanying belief in essentialized subjectivity. Queer analyses, Creekmur and Doty, suggest, offer ideas about how to negotiate a place in culture as both producers and consumers, about “how to occupy a place in mass culture, yet maintain a perspective on it that does not accept its homophobic and heterocentrist definitions, images, and terms of analysis” (2).

**Queer Readings**

Critical cultural studies scholarship created a theoretical and practical foundation for queer studies of popular culture that will serve as an important background for my conceptualization of a queer crossover from a 1980s model of stable lesbian identity and subcultural community to a 1990s model of malleable identity and partially assimilated community. “Queer,” Creekmur and Doty point out, “has become an attractive oppositional self-label that acknowledges a new cultural context for politics, criticism, reception-consumption, and production” (6). Following from feminist film theorizings of textual ambiguity and against-the-grain readings in conjunction with cultural studies research on textual instability, oppositional interpretive practices, and the production of counter-hegemonic subjects, queer popular culture research examines the construction of both historical and contemporary queer readings (Budge and Hammer; Creekmur and Doty; Evans and Gamman; LaValley; Nataf; Andrea Weiss “A Queer”). This scholarship makes use of the queer debunking of a model of stable lesbian identity through the insight that heterosexual and homosexual cultures are mutually constitutive. Moreover, the queer critique of essentialized subjectivity has been extended into queer popular
culture research that rejects universalized models of lesbian spectators and readings. Most of the work on queer popular culture is text-based, with understandings of the interactions between audience and text hypothesized. These ideas are exemplified in Richard Dyer’s seminal research on gay culture and gay readings, Alexander Doty’s analysis of queer readings of television programs, and Andrea Weiss’ study of lesbian readings of Hollywood films and stars in the 1930s.

One central premise of queer analyses is that lesbian codes pass into the mainstream unknowingly. As Dyer explains, “a major fact about being gay is that it doesn’t show . . . There are signs of gayness, a repertoire of gestures, expressions, stances, clothing, and even environments that bespeak gayness, but these are cultural forms designed to show what the person’s person alone does not show: that he or she is gay” (“Seen to be Believed” 2). The codes of gayness are slippages read by lesbians and gay males through various extratextual discourses and cultural competencies. For instance, homosociability is manifested representationally through male buddy films such as Howard Hawks’ Red River (1948). The characters in these films have been read historically against the grain as gay through signs associated with gayness including cowboys, male camaraderie, and gun displays. Furthermore, it has been conjectured, some gay audience members interpreted Red River through the knowledge that Montgomery Cliff was a gay man. Dyer reasserts that, “such a repertoire of signs, making visible the invisible, is the basis of any representation of gay people involving visual recognition, the requirement of recognizability in turn entailing that of typicality” (2). The reading of male bonding as gay in Westerns is a good example of how slippages in the text occur when discourses such as homosociability – male bonding – and
homosexual desire intersect. Again, just as the mainstream uses homosexual to define itself, so does gay culture use the discourses of heterosexuality.

Alexander Doty contends that interpretive strategies such as reading homosociability as gay are accompanied by the understanding that such a possibility might be constructed either knowingly or unknowingly on the side of production. In going beyond oppositions such as homosexual and heterosexual, Doty suggests “queer reception is often a place beyond the audience’s conscious ‘real-life’ definition of their sexual identities and cultural positions” (“Something Queer” 83). Heterosexual stars or characters, for example, can be read as lesbian through queering or misreading the various gender-bending codes such as short hair or assertive behavior that constitute female masculinity. Such queer re-readings illustrate the potential for constructing a cross-gender identification through heterosexual codes, and, thus, for the constitution of gender-ambiguity. Natif reaffirms, “It is the ambivalence which causes a queer feeling” (77).

Accordingly, changes in 1980s lesbian visibility raised questions about heterosexual desires and identifications. It is interesting to note that the Motion Picture Code of 1934 prohibited references to homosexuality. Mayne points out that “the public could be teased with the possibility of lesbianism, which provoked curiosity and titillation. Hollywood marketed the suggestion of lesbians, not because it intentionally sought to address lesbian audiences, but because it sought to address male voyeuristic interest in lesbianism” [italics in original] (“Lesbian Looks” 286). In the 1980s, depictions of lesbian sexuality were typically found in pornography. According to Becker, et al., “the most explicit vision of lesbianism has been left to pornography, where
the lesbian loses her menace and becomes a turn-on” (27). The changing terms of popular expressions of lesbianism also change the terms of traditional heterosexual interpretations. Informed by Sedgwick’s analysis that the heterosexual mainstream needs lesbian and gay images to self-define, Jenny Harding suggests that the narrative device of lesbianism might not only make heterosexuality safe, but also more exciting. When the dominant heterosexual narrative structure was interrupted in the 1980s, entering points for lesbian readings were also entering points for “new” (and desiring) heterosexual readings. Although in the above research queer theory has been applied only to texts, I will extend these insights through application to a lesbian social community and social audience as mediating sites for the Northampton queer crossover.

**Lesbian Spectatorship and Queer Readings**

A number of analyses of lesbian popular culture incorporate the insights of queer popular culture. Common themes include: lesbian readings of classic Hollywood films, stars, and directors (Arzner; Mayne, “A Parallax”, “Lesbian”; Andrea Weiss, “A Queer”); interpretive strategies that “misread” gender codes (Barale; Straayer, "Will”; and Wilcox); oppositional pleasures in female homosociability (Griggers; Mayne, “Lesbian”; Stacey, “Desperately”; Straayer, “Hypothetical”); against-the-grain readings of the codes of deviancy (Coffman; Hanson; Rich; Vickers; White, ”Female”); and lesbian usage of the ironies of camp (Andrea Weiss, “A Queer”; Henderson, “Justify”; Robertson; McKenna, “The Queer”). Using the frameworks of psychoanalytic and ideological analyses, these studies provide useful background models for my examination of a lesbian social audience partially constituted through shared identifications and interpretive practices.
Andrea Weiss considers how lesbian readings of classic Hollywood stars such as Marlene Dietrich or Greta Garbo, and films such as Joseph Von Sternberg’s *Morocco* (1930) or Reuben Mamoulian’s *Queen Christina* (1933) might be constructed through interpretive strategies and extratextual discourses (*Vampires*). Historical work such as Weiss’ or Judith Mayne’s discussion of lesbian director Dorothy Arzner hinges on the potential for an ambivalent reading of films through queer re-readings of same sex bonding and ironic camp. For example, Mayne, in an engagement with the concept of the gaze, suggests that looks between female characters in Arzner’s films create a textual slippage that might be read as lesbian, regardless of whether or not the director intended it as such. Although Mayne contends that “relations between women and communities of women have a privileged status in Arzner’s films” (118), the reading of lesbianism is present only through the eroticization of codes such as female looking and female bonding.

Similar to the queer insight that male bonding can be re-read as gay, research on lesbian queer readings emphasizes friendship between female characters. In Mayne’s words, “female friendship acquires a resistant function in the way that it exerts a pressure against the supposed ‘natural’ laws of heterosexual romance” (118). Although the female friendship may still fit into the classic narrative theme of hetero-romance, there is an “erotically charged” presence that becomes manifest through a lesbian queer reading. Even when the lesbian relationship is explicit as in Robert Towne’s *Personal Best* (1982) or John Sayles’ *Lianna* (1982), there is frequently a narrative resolution of heterosexual romance. Pointing to films such as Ridley Scott’s *Thelma and Louise* (1992) Chris Straayer writes, “often female bonding has stood in for lesbian content” 57). Seeing
female bonding as a stand in or understudy for lesbian relationships on the screen is a good example of queering or reading against the grain of heteronormativity. Judith Mayne affirms that in films such as Diane Kurys’ *Entré Nous* (1983), “the allusion of lesbianism occurred within the securely defined boundaries of female bonding and friendship” (“A Parallax”, 173).

Other research on lesbian readings makes additional use of the insights of queer theory through the lesbian appropriation of the irony of camp typically associated with gay males. Camp is typically acknowledged to be a historical way for gay men to experience and to negotiate mass culture through the use of an ironic humor in, for instance, a film such as Victor Fleming’s *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). Creekmur and Doty elaborate: “for gay men camp has traditionally been an ‘insider’s’ attitude and knowledge, a means not only of disturbing dominant cultural values but also of disseminating information” (2). In addition, the conventions of drag performance and cross-dressing as a form of camp have been closely allied with disrupting, enlarging upon, or making visible the mechanisms of gender or sexual codes. As Al LaValley discusses, gay audiences have traditionally read traits such as bitchiness in Bette Davis films or sexual aggressiveness in Mae West films as campy. Camp was and continues to be a way to communicate information about gay life with a hipness or an edge.

Several researchers discuss the construction of a lesbian camp through queer readings of cross-dressing stars such as Dietrich or Garbo (Andrea Weiss, “A Queer”), the cultural icon, Madonna (Henderson, “Justify”; Robertson), Mae West (Robertson), and the excess of the television program, *Ally McBeal* (McKenna, “The Queer”). For lesbian viewers, Natif writes, “the pleasure is in the liberation from what was possible
before and its fixed limits and the proliferation of subject positions” (60). These studies continue the focus on how lesbians construct pleasurable identifications through a distancing from the presumably intended heteronormative meaning. What is shared with understandings of gay male textual readings is the deliberate misreading and queering of gender or sexual codes and categories. Natif further contends, “it is an interdiscursive articulation with the text in a new mode, a way of describing the space of possibilities opened up by the queer thrill or shock that gives a glimpse beyond borders as we know them and allows these borders to be crossed” (60). Such textual slippages might follow from misreading deviancy (Stacey, “Desperately”), butch behavior (Barale), the erotic codes of butch-femme (McKenna, “The Queer”), or aggressiveness and killing (Rich; White, ”Female”) as lesbian.

Along with the queering of heteronormativity, the model of lesbian identificatory stability can be disrupted through the inclusion of subtextual codings that might be read against the grain as lesbian as well as through portrayals of out lesbianism or explicitly lesbian sexual behaviors. Numerous text-based studies discuss changing expressions in filmic lesbianism in the 1980s and 1990s including Cathy Griggers’ conceptualization of Thelma and Louise (1991) as a butch-femme couple; B. Ruby Rich’s discussion of various films depicting women who kill together in films including Thelma and Louise; Ellis Hanson’s research into against-the-grain readings of lesbians as vampires in films such as Tony Scott’s The Hunger (1983); three separate studies on the British Broadcasting Corporation’s Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit (1990) by Hilary Hinds, Marshment and Hallam, and Susana Onega; discussions by both Judith Mayne (“L.A.”) and Rosanne Kenneday of a bisexual kiss between two female characters on the
television program, *L.A. Law* (1986-1994); and Jackie Stacey’s (“If You”) analysis of Donna Deitch’s *Desert Hearts* (1985). The commonality among these text-based analyses was the tenacious and imaginative ways that hypothesized lesbian spectators made use of the symbolic materials of film for pleasure, desire, and identity. Such text-based analyses of the multiplicity of lesbians in films offer a contrast to the static notion of lesbians as a representationally invisible subculture that can only imagine lesbianism through reading against the grain of heteronormativity. Terry Castle’s book *The Apparitional Lesbian* is especially relevant as a model outlining how lesbian readings of popular culture activate the static relations of invisibility. Castle elaborates upon Foucault’s contention that eruptions of sexual speech and mechanisms of sexual silencing are part of the same system: what is described as a repressive state is instead in constant proliferation within other discursive forms. A subject, such as lesbianism, which may be perceived as repressed, as invisible, is always in proliferation as contained within a system of knowledge about sexuality that constitutes such cultural representations as gender identity, desire, romance, sexual acts and behavior, and procreation only in terms of heterosexuality.

Research into lesbian audiences and interpretive strategies in the 2000s continued with the overwhelming emphasis on textual analysis. Kelly Hankin employed a traditional psychoanalytic approach to films depicting lesbian bar space, as did Christine Coffman in her consideration of films with characters in the historical lesbian subtextual stereotype of disturbed murderess including Paul Verhoeven’s *Basic Instinct* (1992) and Barbet Schroeder’s *Single White Female* (1992). Additional lesbian subject positions were theorized in Lisa Dresner’s discussion of the lesbian detective novel; Lisa
Henderson’s (“Simple”) discussion of the organization of a lesbian interpretive community in Rose Troche’s *Go Fish* (1994); and Tricia Jenkins’ analysis of heterosexual recuperation in the teen girl-on-girl kisses that began to appear regularly in the 1990s on television teen melodramas such as *The O.C.* (2003-07). A number of authors focused on the various comings out of Ellen DeGeneres both on television and in everyday life (Dow, “Ellen”; Hubert; Shugart; Yescavage and Alexander). There were additional inquiries into film or televisual texts that further disturbed stable models of identity including three studies by Brenda Cooper, Chris Straayer (“Will”), and Annabelle Wilcox on the gendered portrayal of Brandon Teena in Kimberly Peirce’s *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999).

In contrast to studies of lesbian communities, research focusing on actual audience members has been missing. The lack of studies of lesbian reception based on interviews with actual viewers is well illustrated in the 2008 anthology, edited by Rebecca Beirne, *Televising Queer Women*. The anthology, while encompassing the remarkable range of portrayals in television programming that emerged in the 2000s, including shows that either portrayed lesbian characters such as *ER*, *Sex and the City*, *Queer as Folk*, and *The L Word*, or provided the subtextual codes for against-the-grain interpretations such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, does not offer any reception studies of actual lesbian viewers. Exceptions to the paucity of audience-based inquiries into lesbian viewing experiences are Chris Straayer’s 1984 collection of anecdotal evidence to discuss constructions of both pleasurable and critical responses to Robert Towne’s *Personal Best*, Marshment and Hallam’s 1995 informal interviews on *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*, and Cheryl Dobinson and Kevin Young’s 1996 interviews with lesbian film viewers on
interpretive strategies. Other approaches, including Elizabeth Ellsworth’s discussion of how feminist responses to *Personal Best* constituted an interpretive community and Lu Vickers’ analysis of Jon Avnet’s *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1991), made use of film reviews to support their analyses of against-the-grain readings. In addition, Tiffany Muller’s interviews with lesbian basketball fans added to my consideration of the constitution of lesbian spatiality in a public place that was shared with heterosexuals. My research will also be influenced by Jacqueline Bobo’s study of the role of film in the coalescing of a black female community, along with the analyses of historical female film audiences undertaken by Annette Kuhn (*Dreaming*), Jackie Stacey (*Stargazing*), and Andrea Walsh.

Last, I wish to briefly touch upon several areas that will add depth to my study. Previous research into the interrelations of visuality and identity as well as media and migration have knitted together the various dimensions of seeing *lesbian* in the contexts of both a social community and a social audience. I have examined work on visuality and space by Janet Wolff, Elizabeth Grosz, and Sally Munt on, respectively, gendered space and visuality (*Feminine; “Invisible”*), city space and corporeality (“Bodies”), and queer space and identity (*Heroic*). Wolff’s discussion of the *flâneuse*, a woman who moves through the city streets unseen and protected by gender conventions was extended by Munt’s notion of a lesbian *flâneuse*. In addition, Gail Mason’s original research into the interrelations of visuality and gendered violence will be of important to my conceptualization of the interactions between visibility and identity.

Inquires into the interactions between media and migration take into account the potential for the impact of media portrayals upon the coalescing of community. Kath Weston’s research into what she terms the “Great Gay Migration” to San Francisco in the
early 1980s investigated the migratory impulse to move to a specific area in order to see other gay people. In response to Michael Bronski’s argument that gay politics must "emphasize the power of the sexual” in considering the interactions of queer visibility and identity (Pleasure 67), Weston articulates the migratory impulse with the sexual imaginary. In Weston’s discussion, the sexual imaginary is constituted through becoming conscious of one’s own queerness in simultaneity with becoming conscious of other queer individuals. Specific studies on the interactions between media and migration theorize how a sense of isolation or displacement can articulate affirming portrayals with the desire for community as part of a broader migratory impulse (Gillespie; King and Wood; Morley, “Belongings”). I intend to consider the connections between migration and media portrayals as individuals go in search of community after experiencing the intensity of seeing images that speak to the basic desire for symbolic materials, including erotic portrayals, through which to imagine self and others.

**Chapter Outline**

This dissertation will be structured through five chapters. Chapter One, the introductory chapter, provides an overview of the purpose and significance of the study, the spatio-temporal context, and the research questions. I consider the key theories and methodologies that inform my research and continue with an overview of the method and research design. The chapter concludes with a literature review focused on two areas of related inquiry: previous studies of lesbian communities with a consideration of queer approaches to conceptualizing space and community, and analyses of lesbian audiences and spectatorship with attention to queer approaches to examining film and popular culture.
Chapter Two is a prefiguring chapter and I first discuss recollections of pre-1980s film viewing experiences, with a focus on isolated and individualistic film viewing in the 1960s as well as feminist critiques and rejections of patriarchal media in the 1970s. I then explore the emergence of a 1970s subcultural lesbian community in the Northampton region with a specific section on the mutually productive interactions between community formation and defining lesbian authenticity. I emphasize the implication of feminism in the constitution of 1970s lesbian community and in foreshadowing the significance of feminism to both 1980s social community and social audience. This chapter provides context for the queer crossover from a 1980s subcultural separatist community to a 1990s partially assimilated mainstream engagement.

Chapter Three examines the emergence into public visibility of a lesbian social community in Northampton in the 1980s. I explore the dissemination of the national visibility of feminist and gay liberatory politics in this localized context alongside the 1980s lesbian migration and downtown revitalization. The involvement of the lesbian population in both the economic and cultural trajectories of the downtown are important to this discussion and I consider that involvement alongside the anti-lesbian backlash that occurred simultaneously with the increased visibility of the lesbian population in the 1980s.

Chapter Four is an investigation into the geographic- and gender-specificity of social audience in the context of 1980s Northampton. I situate the social audience within the context of the interlocking factors that mobilized the lesbian social community into engagement with the mainstream heterosexual city culture. I examine how lesbians constructed space through watching films in a communal setting and consider the
extension of the social dimensions of film viewing beyond the space of the theater. I stress the centrality of four 1980s films – Personal Best, Lianna, Entré Nous, and Desert Hearts – to the emergence of a lesbian representational space in the 1980s that provided an additional site for investigating the interactions between subculture and dominant culture. Last, I discuss the appearance of a tentative lesbian consumer acknowledgement in the 1980s. That consumer acknowledgment, I propose, was concurrent with the new subject position of lesbian film consumer as part of the broader implication of the lesbian population in downtown Northampton.

In the concluding chapter I discuss the mutually productive themes of lesbian visibility and identity that mobilized the coalescing of a lesbian social community and social audience in interaction with the heterosexual city culture in 1980s Northampton. I examine the 1980s queer crossover from a subcultural separatist community to a partially assimilated communal formation, a mitigated cultural assimilation. Important to this discussion is the disturbance of heterosexuality and homosexuality. I situate the movement from fixed subcultural separatism to mitigated assimilation in the broader context of debates about queer visibility and the efficacy of cultural assimilation for LGBT people.
CHAPTER II
THE TRANSITION FROM 1960S ISOLATION TO 1970S SUBCULTURAL SEPARATISM

In this chapter I examine the movement from lesbian isolation in the 1960s to the emergence of a subcultural and separatist social community in the Northampton region in the 1970s. Participant recollections of the 1960s and the 1970s provide an abbreviated backdrop for examining the emergence into public visibility of a lesbian social community and social audience that was in interaction with the broader culture of the city in 1980s Northampton.

Lesbian Isolation in the Northampton Region in the 1960s

Previous studies have characterized lesbian formations prior to the 1970s as either isolated individuals in non-coherent populations or as closeted groups that came together in social networks (Baker; Brooks; Drit; Faderman; Kennedy and Davis; Krieger; McCoy and Hicks; Lockard; Pearlman; Ponse). Such social networks have been understood as groups of women who interacted with one another in bars, on softball teams, or as friends in each other’s homes. In 1960s Northampton, women who identified as lesbian or who were involved with other women found each other through individual relationships or in informal social networks of friends. Jeanne recalled:

You were out there on your own. That was true especially if you were single. The bars were one place to meet others, but the bars were better in the cities. The big thing was these groups of friends. I’m not sure how we found one another. You used to ask: “Is she a member of our church?” Some of these women I’m still friends with today. We still get together.

Respondents’ descriptions of the difficulty in finding other lesbians illustrated the isolation of living as a lesbian pre-1970s Northampton. Jeanne recalled:
It was depressing then. It was just hard to feel like the only one. I don’t know how I survived it when I look back. Something about that position of being an outlaw. It gives you strength. It’s like being in a pressure cooker. You could either kill yourself or you can make something else happen. But we found a way to make it something else.

The urgency of wanting to find others for recognition, identification, and desire in the 1960s evoked the significance of seeing the sexual as part of the constitution of a lesbian sexual imaginary which is formed partially through becoming conscious of one’s own sexual identity in conjunction with recognizing other individuals. As we shall see, the desire to seek out others for recognition and connection in pre-1970s lesbian social life in the Northampton region was in correspondence with the desire to see film portrayals of self and others in film viewing. The interrelations of media and migration in the 1980s were prefigured in these individualistic recollections of seeking out others for identification and connection.

In the pre-1970s era, feeling “like the only one” was partially mitigated through finding informal social networks frequently through bar culture. Jill recollected:

I remember the first time I came up here, somebody took me to the Stanchion. You had to have a club card. It was one of these knock on the door and they looked at you, and sort of a bouncer let you in. A butch woman. I wasn’t sure if I was part of that, but it was like totally cool that it was there. Then, we used to just all go to the back rooms of straight bars and drink and play pool.

And Mary noted:

There was that place under the bridge [the back room of the Gala Cafe, now The Del Raye Lounge on Bridge Street]. I also used to go to the Water Hole on Pleasant Street [Ye Olde Watering Hole]. We’d drink and sometimes dance and the men would stand around and watch us. Usually they'd just leave us alone, but it wasn’t the best situation. Sometimes it was dangerous, I suppose, but what choice did we have? I look back and we were so young and so much wanted to be somewhere and meet others.
For these respondents, the desire to go to a bar to seek out other lesbians even if that meant putting oneself in the potentially dangerous position of being surveyed by heterosexual men was partially offset by the “totally cool” aspect of finding other lesbians. Bets offered another dimension to the negotiations involved in seeking out other lesbians:

What you have to think about is that the reason that the women were going to the bar is that most of us were drunks to begin with. Because we didn’t fit in the world and that’s the only place we could go. The only community we had. You also had to worry about who might see you if you went to those places.

Bets’ reference, “most of us were drunks to begin with,” underscores the challenges of being an isolated lesbian in pre-1970s Northampton. Problems with alcohol as well as drugs have not been unusual in the history of sexual minorities; several studies have focused on the lesbian bar scene as the locus of early communal formations (Hankin; Kennedy and Davis). Marian recollected:

I left my family at that age [seventeen] and somehow I had the wherewithal to find a gay bar. And it was very out of my family’s life, I really left my whole sort of culture. I left my class. I had to leave everything to do that. It was very traumatic. Not without it’s sacrifices. There wasn’t like gay lib or like feminism. I remember like sitting in the bars, there were lots of, a lot of women, there was like a lot of physical fighting, the butches. I remember there were a lot of like drug addicts and a lot of them were prostitutes, and a lot of the butches were pimps. It was just like a really different scene. There was a lot of like really, really serious drinking and drug use.

These recollections well illustrate the back and forth arbitrations between the need to find others who might share similar identifications and the need to feel safe in public contexts such as bar going or film viewing. Bets’ commentary was especially striking because it referenced the idea of bar going as community, albeit through a contemporary understanding of lesbian community.
The interrelations of seeking out others for recognition and connection were fraught with tension. One participant Bets further described the harassment she and other butch-identified lesbians experienced during that pre-1970s time period:

Some of us could pass, some not. Like Leslie Feinberg in Stone Butch Blues. They [men] would yell faggot to at us [butches]. Bullyoke or something, just one or two words from their cars. I wouldn’t even acknowledge it. I would just keep my eyes ahead, just keep on going. It had to do with whether or not you could pass [as straight]. Really what you looked like and what you wore.

By invoking Feinberg’s memoir of experiencing sexual assault as a butch woman, Bets illustrated how the markers of phenotype and clothing, in this case the markers of both sexual and gender identities, put individuals at risk. Bets’ compelling remembrance offered a window into the negotiations between constructing identification and being identifiable by others in public contexts, and, moreover, between isolation and unsafety as mitigated through the desire to see self and others. Participant descriptions of their lives in 1960s Northampton demonstrate an isolation alongside a desire to seek out others for identification and desire in spite of the risk-taking associated with endeavors such as bar going, and, in some cases, even just walking down the street as a visible, recognizable lesbian. These contradictory negotiations were paralleled in recollections of film viewing during this time period.

Participant regularly referenced three specific films in memories of 1960s film experiences – William Wyler’s The Children’s Hour (1962), Mark Rydell’s The Fox (1968), and Robert Aldrich’s The Killing of Sister George (1968). The Children’s Hour depicted an implicit lesbian relationship between two women, played by Shirley MacLaine and Audrey Hepburn, who run a girls’ boarding school. When the women’s relationship is discovered and exposed by a vindictive student, the more masculinized
MacLaine character commits suicide, while the more feminized Hepburn is almost rescued by her fiancé. *The Fox* portrayed lesbian lovers, played by Sandy Dennis and Anne Heywood, whose relationship ends when Heywood leaves the more dominant Dennis for a man, played by Keir Dullea. The conventional heterosexual narrative resolutions of *The Children’s Hour* and *The Fox* were tweaked by *The Killing of Sister George* in which the childlike lover, Susannah York, leaves the masculinized older female, Beryl Reid, for another woman. “George,” who is nicknamed for the nun character she plays on a popular British soap opera, is left alone, ruined, and embittered. These three films were significant as emblematic of the negotiations between the desire to seek out film portrayals of lesbianism and the experience of isolated or unsafe film viewing experiences.  

Through detailed memories, more than a few participants shared their recollections of going to a movie with portrayals of lesbianism in the 1960s. Jeanne relayed:

> It was an old movie, *The Children’s Hour*, the one with two women. I remember seeing that when it came out. In a theater. I lived in Montana. I went and saw it with my parents. I didn’t know what it was. I guess I was in my teens. And that was probably my first movie that had anything about lesbians in it. I don’t think I knew the word lesbian, but I could see something was up. . . . I didn’t talk to them [parents] about it, but I had enormous feelings. I remember when I was watching it -all of the rage was inside me. It just felt an intense emotion. . . . just the two women together, very beautiful, very emotional.

Jeanne expressed a strong rage at the narrative resolution of *The Children’s Hour* coupled with a first time profound, yet isolated, lesbian self-identification. Respondents were clear that they were closeted in the 1960s and did not really have anybody to talk with about the films. While one participant described an urban lesbian bar culture where the participants talked with one another about *The Killing of Sister George*, for the most part
interviewees described individualistic film viewing. Others shared Jeanne’s emotionally powerful remembrance of film viewing in the 1960s. Consider Mary’s experience of repeatedly going to see The Fox:

Because what it was sort of like was the equivalent of Radclyffe Hall, Well of Loneliness. I mean, all you wanted to do after you saw this movie was go commit suicide. It was about your only choice. Saw it in a theater four or five times. Absolutely, absolutely, I went to see it. I was just coming out myself in my twenties, this was the late sixties. I saw it in the Amherst Cinema. And then I went down to see it. It was showing somewhere in West Springfield, and I even went down there. That was a big deal to go down to West Springfield to see it. This was in one of the small theaters in West Springfield. You know the Valley was not as mobile as it is now. And it was a big deal to leave here.

Mary’s description pointed toward the geographic-specificity of seeing films such as The Children’s Hour, The Fox, and The Killing of Sister George in the Northampton area in the 1960s. As Mary cautioned, such film viewing excursions could be fraught with tension:

You had to be fairly careful. Amherst, was, has always been, fairly liberal, and seemed a fairly safe environment. Going down to West Springfield was, you know, a little more risky because I practice taught down there. Oh, sure, but I was scared when I went to Amherst. Those were the days when you got fired for that kind of thing. You didn’t want anyone else to see you. . . . Yeah, can we say in the closet? Because the minute they saw you were gay, you were unemployed.

Consequently, Mary’s strong desire to repeatedly see such films as The Fox was offset by the personal risk involved in going to see film portrayals of lesbianism in the 1960s. Similar to the lack of safety described in other public contexts such as bar going, respondents reported feeling of personal unsafety and even physical danger in being publicly identified as a lesbian. Mary’s recollection expressed the very valid concern that she might be seen and identified as a lesbian by someone from her job as a teacher, while attending these films that she so strongly desired to see.
Although Mary’s fears about loss of employment if seen viewing a questionable film were accompanied by a lengthy discussion of the experience of being closeted in the 1960s, Mary also described a resistive practice that transformed the terms of unsafe visibility. As a high school theater and speech teacher, Mary was in the position to begin to teach a film class in order to provide a bona fide reason for the repetitive viewing of films with lesbian content at local theaters: “By then [the 1968 release of *The Killing of Sister George*] I had the thing that I was teaching film, so I had to go see movies. Oh what a wonderful cover.” Mary’s clever strategic responses to the fear of being “outed” on the job was a good example of how underrepresented individuals and groups find ways to consciously resist and transform the symbolic materials and material circumstances available during a given time period. While in this case the resistance was individualistic, resistance was an important aspect of the constitution of lesbian subcultural community in the 1970s. Nonetheless, Mary’s description of her strategic response to unsafety was mitigated by her report of a 1960s teaching colleague who “was fired because she looked like a dyke.” Risking job security through film viewing paralleled risking personal safety through behaviors such as bar going. Moreover, these back and forth arbitrations in everyday life might be seen as symbolically analogous to the negotiations of the desire to see oneself in a film with lesbian characters even if that film evoked feelings of depression or anger.

Participants recollected contradictory responses to distasteful or upsetting aspects of film depictions including pathological stereotyping and heterosexual narrative recuperation. For instance, although Jeanne felt rage in response to the heterosexual narrative resolution of *The Children’s Hour*, in contradiction she also experienced an
intense reaction to what she characterized as a “very beautiful” lesbian relationship in a film. Jill further explained:

There were two things at once. On the one hand it was this incredible experience — it was! — and on the other it was depressing. It was depressing as hell. We so wanted to see them [the movies]. At least it was something. When you’re dealing with a void, something that fills a void is a good thing.

Jill’s account of “two things at once” well illustrates the contradictions of a viewing experience that was “incredible,” yet, simultaneously, “depressing as hell.” Another individual, Marian, felt “disgusted” at aspects of the plot of The Killing of Sister George. She was disturbed by the infamous scene in which the masculinized George punishes the highly feminized Childie by requiring her to fall to her knees and eat George’s cigar butt. Yet, Marian also recognized as familiar the butch-femme visuals and behaviors displayed by the characters. Distinctly different responses to the same film were precursors of the negotiation of pleasurable versus critical responses that have been so prevalent in discussions of lesbian spectatorship (Mayne, “Lesbian”; Nataf; Straayer, “Personal”; Andrea Weiss, “A Queer”).

Participants were very aware of feelings of difference, isolation, depression, rage, and unsafety in going to a theater to see films with portrayals of lesbianism in the 1960s. Nonetheless, respondents were also conversant and savvy in making use of the symbolic materials at hand in constructing film identifications and desires. Jill recollected:

I think who I tended to identify with as characters were just strong female characters. So, people like Ingrid Bergman, Barbara Stanwyk, you know I’m old. You kind of wish for it. You know you want her or you want to be her, but I just found them completely compelling, but also strong, thoughtful. The ones who acted characters that were strong, you know, had some guts to them.

Jill’s account validates historical work on lesbian against-the-grain readings that suggest there is the potential for an ambiguous reading of films, whether intentional or not,
through the eroticization of codes such as female strength and female bonding (Mayne, “Lesbian”; Andrea Weiss, “A Queer”). As Judith Mayne hypothesized, “female friendship acquires a resistant function in the way that it exerts a pressure against the supposed ‘natural’ laws of heterosexual romance” (118). In addition, it is probable that the intentionality was there on the part of at least some filmmakers especially when more overt subtextual encoding might be regarded as an Hollywood insider joke (Mayne, “Lesbian”; Creekmur and Doty; Natif; Russo; Andrea Weiss, “A Queer”). In another variation on reading against the grain, participants, such as Mary, transformed both the subtextual codes of masculinized clothing and the behaviors of the male characters in Hollywood films into vehicles for the projection of identity and desire:

> Whoever the male lead was, if he was gallant. Cary Grant, Marlon Brando. Never the evil one, but always the gallant one. I used to go around for a long time, I picked up little mannerisms that the men would have, a little clicking, a little head toss. Just kind of pick up tips on how to be butch is what it would come down to. Tips on how to be butch by gallant leading men. No attraction to them, no attraction to them whatsoever. It’s like, I just want to watch them so that I can figure out how to catch her [the female lead].

Mary, along with other participants, recalled instances of copying or mimicking male characters while they concurrently read against the grain of heterosexual romance in desiring the female lead through a sexualized butch-identification. Such recollections support studies that have largely conjectured how hypothetical lesbian viewers might use codes such as masculinized clothing, female bonding female strength, and female violence for constructing identifications of self and for desire (Mayne, “Lesbian”; Natif; Rich; Straayer, “Personal”; Andrea Weiss, “A Queer”).

Interviewees demonstrated a tenacious creativity in their interactions with, and resistance to, the symbolic resources and material circumstances available to them in the
1960s. Although respondents did not indicate any awareness of a shared consciousness of other lesbians’ viewing identifications and interpretive practices during this time period, there was a non-conscious collectivity that interconnected the individualistic, private level of these recollections, and that foreshadowed the broader lesbian imaginary. Interactions between everyday social lives and film viewing experiences in the 1960s constituted the building blocks of a broader lesbian cultural imaginary. The lesbian cultural imaginary, which is a symbolic expression of lesbian culture, was the symbolic fulcrum of the lesbian communal formations that coalesced in the 1970s and 1980s. Taken as a whole, this summary of recollections of social isolation as well as memories of film viewing in the 1960s pointed toward the emergence of a lesbian subcultural community in Northampton in the 1970s.

The fledgling forms of resistance in the 1960s brought together the subversive aspects and survival strategies of lesbian social lives with the conventional against-the-grain readings associated with feminist and queer film interpretations. Participants were aware of the challenges of seeking out other lesbians for connections as well as the challenges of looking for affirming film portrayals. Descriptions of unsafety and isolation in everyday lives were in correspondence with recollections of unsafety and isolation in viewing experiences. The desire to see self and to be present as a full social being in the public realm was coupled with the desire to see self and be safe in a viewing context. As we shall see, lesbian resistive strategies in the 1960s in the Northampton region prefigured the constitution of a lesbian subcultural community in the 1970s, and, in turn, the constitution of a lesbian social community and a lesbian social audience in the 1980s.
The Constitution of a Subcultural Separatist Lesbian Community in the 1970s

Lesbian community has traditionally been defined as distinct from the designations of lesbian population and lesbian social network (Baker; Brooks; Dritt; Krieger; McCoy and Hicks; Lockard; Pearlman; Ponse). Lesbian populations basically include any women who identified themselves as lesbians, not just sexually (as in the habitual usage), but also in response to feelings and psychological responses about other women. Social networks have been understood as groups of women who interacted socially with one another in bars, on softball teams, or as friends in each other’s homes. In the 1970s, a number of lesbian communities emerged in cities, university towns, and rural areas in the 1970s (Baker; Brooks; Dritt; Krieger; McCoy and Hicks; Lockard; Newton; Pearlman; Ponse; Taylor, et al; Whittier). The emergence of these communal formations was partially in response to the surfacing of lesbian cultural networks, and, in turn, to an emerging lesbian cultural imaginary. As will be detailed in Chapter Three, these developments can be partially attributed to the beginning movement into national visibility of gay liberation (Bawer; Bronski; D’Emilio, Sexual; Lacayo; Vaid) and the feminist movement (Echols; Evans; Ferree and Hess; Gerhard; Katzenstein; Whelehan).

Studies of lesbian subcultural communities during the 1970s (Krieger; Lockard; Ponse) and 1980s (Franzen; Green; Whittier) have stressed the centrality of feminist theory and values in community formations. Writing in 1984, Joan Cocks’ stated:

[Feminist theories] permeate the ways women make sense of themselves and attempt to live out their lives, and ordinarily they show up through their lives rather nakedly as doctrinal tenets. (“Wordless Emotions” 29)

In the 1970s Northampton region, the feminist movement was the catalytic driving force in the coming together of a lesbian subcultural community. As a convergence of the
1960s sexual revolution and the 1970s movements of women’s and gay liberation, lesbian feminism transformed both through the extension of radical feminism into subcultural separatism. The regional 1970s subcultural and separatist lesbian community coalesced in this context. Moreover, as Denise Lockard has stressed, lesbian communities were also shaped by environment factors such as the geographic- and gender-specificities of the Northampton locale. The Northampton area, with its unique combination of academic, rural, and urban cultural blend, had many of the elements in place for the coalescing of a lesbian community. In addition, the area also had the requisite academic and socio-political institutional bases that would prove fertile for the burgeoning feminist movement.

Until the early 1970s the Northampton lesbian population came together only through bar going, informal social networks, and isolated individual relationships. The emergence of the subcultural community was closely allied with the late 1960s/early 1970s advent of women’s liberation and the feminist movement that escalating in the region. Early 1970s area feminist organizations such as Amherst Women’s Liberation gave rise to consciousness raising groups that were spaces for discussing feminist values, and, for many, spaces to come out as lesbians. As the Daily Hampshire Gazette reported in a 1983 front page story, “Homosexuality . . . Assessing Its Growing Impact on Northampton”: Northampton was a small example of what happened everywhere there was feminist activity” (Fitzgerald 9). As emblematic of the presence of feminism in the Valley, the Everywoman’s Center, a resource center that provided institutional support for feminism, and offered a space for meetings along with services including feminist consciousness raising groups, opened at University of Massachusetts Amherst in 1970.
Moreover, respondents such as Mary saw the Center as emblematic of the surfacing lesbian subcultural community:

For me, I felt a sense of community here in the late ‘70s, early ‘80s, and most of that was more for me about being at UMass. Because of the Everywoman’s Center. Some of us were volunteering there; there were all these support groups. It was a UMass feminist lesbian community then and then it extended to Northampton, maybe in the ‘80s.

One woman quoted in the Gazette had this to say about the alliance of feminism with the developing regional lesbian community:

There was an incredible amount of criticism of social relationships . . . The sense of crisis of the female relationship, of women seeking bonds with other women contributed to the growth of lesbian relationships here and around the country. (9)

The concept of “women seeking bonds with other women” was put into practice in feminist consciousness raising groups where women talked about their lives and their concerns. Consciousness raising groups were held in private homes, church basements and university classrooms spaces and were integral to the coalescing of a subcultural community in the 1970s.

Consciousness raising groups provided pedagogical space for developing an understanding of feminism as well as an awareness of the budding subcultural lesbian community, and, moreover, provided an opportunity for participants to come out lesbians. As Arlene Stein established in her ethnography of lesbian community and identity, “consciousness-raising groups often became coming out groups in which individuals were socialized into the lesbian world” (“Becoming” 83). Andrea noted:

That was what we did. We got together and talked about being lesbians. Everything was about lesbian, lesbian, lesbian. Lesbian was the beginning and the ending point of it all. My focus was on women and other lesbians and everything I did was for that. It was a time of empowerment. You knew there were women all over the country doing the same thing. There’s really been nothing else like it in my life . . . a group of us from then was always talking about lesbians.
Consciousness raising groups illustrated the significance of seeing the sexual in the constitution of the lesbian imaginary through the interrelations between coming out as a lesbian and becoming aware of other lesbians. Replacing the profound sense of isolation described by participants prior to the 1970s was a collective awareness of others who might share similar identifications and experiences, at both the level of the broader lesbian imaginary and of the fledgling regional subcultural community. As one individual remembered: “There was something really validating about being with others and talking about this.” Another recalled, “It was good to talk with others when you had been so alone. I suppose you might say that was empowering.” That awareness of others, whether imagined or actual, extended into the awareness of shared feminist values.

Consciousness raising also created a shared consciousness of early feminist critiques of media forms such as films, television programming, and advertising. As a founding block of the subcultural community, consciousness raising was food and fodder for participants such as Sid who were beginning to engage in critiquing and resisting what was viewed as a patriarchal society:

We were angry and there was every reason to be angry. We talked about it all. When you walked down the street and someone whistled or made a comment, we talked about what to do. How to fight back. We were brave. Something else we were angry about had to do with men, violence against women, harassment on jobs. We were very offended by commercials. . . . it was terrible discrimination and when we first talked about this, I almost died, it was like I can't believe this. That kind of sexism was everywhere.

As an extension of against-the-grain readings as well as the construction of simultaneous pleasurable versus critiquing interpretations, these early media analyses were the founding blocks of feminist political actions such as picketing stores that sold pornography of marching against violence against women. Laura recalled:
We were in these sort of consciousness raising type groups and one of the things that came up was a strong criticism of women in ads and movies, really just everything about how women had been seen. . . . Reading Betty Friedan, someone brought in a copy of Simone de Beauvoir. There was supposed to be this sexual revolution [in the 1970s], but all it meant was that women were objectified and that there was more porn and violence. Or they were little girls or total morons. Tight clothes, too much make-up, big boobs, just ridiculously negative, nothing positive.

Participants described anger about sexism including sexism, including sexism in media portrayals. Yet, they also described affirmation in the collective experience of developing shared feminist analyses. Participants such as Andrea discussed how taking classes in feminism at the Women’s Studies Programs that were surfacing at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and other area colleges became an extension of consciousness raising groups, contributing to their developing anger and frustration with how women were portrayed:

It was in a class at UMass where I first started looking at ads, movies. Part of that was about how bad everything was in advertising. There was a big problem with the objectification of women. We didn’t like that, and we wanted to do something about it. The feminist community was very caring about how women were viewed and perceived. Because it’s a very blatant, actual tangible form of sexism. . . . Then there was all this violence, and there were always women involved. Who wants to go to a movie and see that? Who wants to see a woman being raped?

Respondents felt empowered and validated by the feminist resistance inherent in talking about common experiences including experiences of sexism. The feminist values and beliefs that were developed in and disseminated through 1970s consciousness raising groups contributed to a shared awareness of the surfacing lesbian imaginary. Through the extension of consciousness raising into other venues such as the feminist classroom, these groups were implicitly interrelated with the coalescing of the subcultural community.

The interactions of feminism with lesbianism were further stressed by a number of respondents, when they looked back on how lesbian community and identity were
constituted through feminism in the conversion from lesbian social networks to lesbian subcultural community in the 1970s. Laura recollected:

> We valued women; we valued women’s contributions. We wanted to encourage women. It was about valuing women, about more than a definition of who you were sleeping with. Feminism to me is about the empowerment of women. We were building a women’s community. For me it also had to do with recognizing the oppression of women and the power of that in women’s lives individually.

The feminist emphasis on women was central to the constitution of lesbian community in the 1970s, and, moreover, to the constitution of lesbian feminist identity. Andrea described a strong investment in feminist politics as part of a lesbian identification during this time period:

> I was a radical feminist then. Still am. Probably a counter-cultural, radical coming out on the traditional spectrum. We saw ourselves as being part of a movement dedicated to winning power for women, more power for women, equality and fairness. There were powers that men would need to give up, you know, the power to abuse and the power to aggress and things like that.

And Bets recalled the significance of patriarchal resistance and transformation in various aspects of community building:

> I lived here then [in the late 1970s] based on the assumption that there were women getting together and making shit happen. It was where women intended to build women owned space or have lesbian owned space, and that’s why we all come together, to do something for lesbians. Like when that store was selling porn, we felt it was an outrage. If people saw violence against women, if men got the shit kicked out of them, it would stop. Because you know, that’s like a tragedy and a reason why we would come together.

In these recollections can be found the intertwining of feminist beliefs with lesbian identifications along with the strong implication of lesbian feminism in the emergence of a subcultural separatist lesbian community. There was an understanding that the Northampton regional lesbian community in the 1970s was a subcultural separatist community produced and maintained through shared feminist values. As the *Gazette*
explained: “Over the past thirteen years, lesbians have built a private society here as a world within a world complete with many institutions” (Fitzgerald, “Homosexuality . . . Assessing” 9).

The presumption of shared feminist beliefs was central to a lesbian subcultural community, and, in turn, to lesbian identity. The coalescing of a lesbian community hinged on feminist tenets including, resisting and transforming the institutions and structures of the patriarchy through feminist grassroots actions, and through everyday practices such as intimate relationships and sexual behaviors. Moreover, as part of the transformation of the patriarchy, participants who were involved in 1970s lesbian community formation emphasized the need for building a lesbian separatist culture. One individual, Laura, maintained the importance of a separatist position in fighting the feminist cause:

Separatism was a phase we all went through although I suppose you might say we all know some women who still care about being anti-male. . . . not having anything to do with men was part of coming out as a lesbian feminist. Men were the oppressors, women were the oppressed. We were responsible for looking out for all women and trying to do something about that oppression. . . . certainly work on actions that cared about doing something about violence against women.

Separatism from gay males was for many part of the building of a lesbian separatist community in the 1970s. While the regional gay male and lesbian populations coexisted side-by-side in the Valley in the 1980s, there was a history of tension that reflected lesbian separatist tensions with men in general. Kirkey and Forsyth indicated “The legacy of lesbian separatism in the Valley from the 1970s and early 1980s caused some division” (422). Respondents such as Andrea commented upon the tension between gay men and lesbians, which, at times, veered into the venomous:
We had nothing to do with them [gay males]. No use for them. Separatists avoid having anything to do with men. I don’t want to put my energy into men. I still can’t see them as feminist no matter what their politics are. On one level, it’s plain old misogyny, the overall sense of misogyny that still prevails, maybe not as blatantly as it was before, but it’s still very strong.

In addition to staying not putting “energy into men,” the lesbian separatist focus on separatism manifested in providing space for women- and lesbian-only events and organizations, and ultimately, through creating a safe space for lesbians. Mary recollected:

See, there was a whole separatist period here where literally, men were not allowed in a lesbian house. I did totally respect and understand that some women needed totally non-male space. I was a very quiet, non-activist kind of soul. Mostly concerned with doing the right thing, earning a living, trying to be a good community member.

Mary’s recollection underscores the awareness that supporting the need for separatist safety in women- or lesbian-only space was part of supporting the community and of supporting lesbian feminist politics. Feminist psychotherapist, Sally Crawford, affirms that one of the functions of lesbian subcultural community was to offer safety in shared feminist values and practices:

To provide a place to define and reinforce lesbian identity, to learn common values that are feminist in origin, to share a group identity that is supported by an institutional base of political and social activity, and ultimately to provide a sense of “coming home”. (214)

Many participants who recalled the 1980s reified the model of safety in a model of community partially constituted through shared feminist beliefs systems including beliefs about the interrelations of feminism and lesbianism. Greta recalled:

You would go to one of those meetings and there would be others like you. Struggling in the world, in your job. . . . I remember feeling that I could finally breathe. A safe haven. . . . There was a real family feeling of acceptance.
The knowledge that certain places and events were primarily for women, in some cases separatist for women or for lesbians only, was central to understandings of community and feelings of safety. Similar to reading against the grain of film codes of female strength or friendship as lesbian, so was any function with woman or women in the title read against the grain as a lesbian function. Moreover, any space with a lesbian function could be read against the grain as a lesbian space.

As part of the coalescing of subcultural community consciousness raising groups gave rise to additional lesbian organizations in the 1970s. The Amherst Women’s Liberation entered into alliance in with the Gay Women's Caucus at the University of Massachusetts and that caucus mutated into the University Lesbian Union. In 1972 Amherst Women’s Liberation (AWL) rented a space above Pierce’s Art Store on Northampton's Main Street and was renamed the Valley Women’s Center, transitioning from an informal consciousness-raising group to a more formalized service organization providing abortion counseling and referrals as well as educational programs for women. By 1975 the Valley Women’s Center had become a lesbian-only organization, Lesbian Gardens, also located in Northampton. As the Gazette noted, many of the 1970s informal lesbian services and organizations that were institutionalized in the private practices of lesbian service-providers in the 1980s evolved out of the transitional history of these 1970s (Fitzgerald, “Lesbians” 9). Moreover, the movement from the Amherst focus on the Everywoman’s Center to the emergence of lesbian permanent spaces in Northampton foreshadowed the emphasis on Northampton as the center of the regional lesbian community.
The processes of seeking out other lesbians for recognition, both for identification and for desire, disrupted the presumption of heteronormativity that has been conventionally associated with most public places. As Jean-Ulrick Desert has theorized, lesbian presences “lend an inflected turn of meaning” to places such as the Everywoman’s Center, which several participants characterized as a lesbian space in the 1970s. That inflection of meaning also temporarily activated as lesbian spaces rooms rented for lesbian events or meetings and bars or restaurants rented for dances. Bets noted:

There were lesbian spaces. . . . There were dances and there was like the Lesbian Home show. You knew that these were places to find other women. I felt much more in the hub, in the mix. . . . There were just well known places to be.

Bets’ recollection demonstrated both the discursivity of lesbian space, and, in turn, of lesbian community. Another respondent, Greta, articulated the activation of specific places and events as lesbian spaces with feminist theory and practice:

I was involved with working on domestic violence at the Everywoman's Center and helped organize the Take Back the Night Rally that used to be held every year at UMass. It was great. Wherever you went there were posters and other women who were involved too. Mostly lesbians. Some straight. This is how I remember our community.

While Greta’s recollection included “some straight” women in her definition of “our community,” there was an explicit knowledge that the Everywoman's Center and the Take Back the Night event\textsuperscript{xvi} were both discursive lesbian spaces. Feminist politics, along with the presumption about the intertwining of lesbian identity with feminist identity, permeated the taxonomy of regional woman- and lesbian-identified events, meetings, political actions, and organizations in the 1970s.
As lesbians came together in the region, various organizations, political rallies, social networks, and cultural events were also discursively activated as lesbian spaces. In the Pioneer Valley region were there were a women’s karate school, the Nutcracker Suite; a lesbian coop garage, the Greasy Gorgon; and lesbian theater groups, the Wicked Women’s Theater and the Valley Women’s Theater. Lesbian spaces were designated across a range of sites and venues varying from dances to softball games to volunteer work. Participants reiterated the centrality of feminist politics to the coming together of 1970s subcultural community through descriptions of working or volunteering at specific organizations devoted to feminist issues such as abortion and birth control education, violence against women prevention, and rape hotline counseling. Jill recollected:

When I worked at Neccessidas [Necessities/Neccessidas, a shelter for women] for many years, there were always constant new batches of volunteers. And anyone who was coming in to volunteer at Neccessidas, well, even if they weren't lesbians, they sounded like a lesbian feminist because this was the early seventies and they’re getting it somewhere. Maybe at work, other places. It was all everywhere.

The establishing and participation in lesbian organizations, businesses, and services for women and lesbians reinforced the separatist goal of creating safe places for women-only as part of working against the patriarchy. Interviewees, such as Jeanne stressed the centrality of feminist politics to her recollections of the developing service-providing dimensions of subcultural community in the 1970s:

Well, I spend most of my time with women. It’s because I lived here then that I was trained in feminist theory. There was a group of us that met and worked together, and then there was the group of us that worked together [feminist therapy collective]. I take that approach in my work as a therapist; I work with and for women as much as possible. So it's hard to separate out from being a lesbian and I certainly understand that there are lesbians who aren't feminists, but to me they're so entwined that it's hard to separate. I mean in terms of what, how I spend my time and energy, my beliefs. Well, I think I take a feminist perspective
on things, you know, and look at anything that happens in terms of what does this mean for women and especially for other lesbians.

Feminist politics were central to the social, professional, political, and economic networks that coalesced into a Northampton lesbian regional community in the 1970s, and these politics prefigured the formalizing of lesbian businesses and service-providers in Northampton in the 1980s.

Relatedly, the taxonomies of lesbian spatial contexts encompassed an enormous variety of support groups for the potential clients of lesbian service-providers. These included group for incest survivors, lesbians coming out, partners of disabled women, and a lesbian Alcoholics Anonymous. Bets recalled:

The lesbian AA used to be on Wednesday nights and it was always at that Church on Center Street. It was an alternative to the bar scene, but it was just as much of a pickup place as any bar. At least you met other sober dykes there.

Presumptions about feminist politics, as part of lesbian identity, were the central thematic ingredients of the activation of various physical places and events through the designation as lesbian subcultural and separatist safe spaces. Thus, the church was activated as a lesbian space on Wednesdays through the communal knowledge of finding and recognizing other lesbians.

An additional form of lesbian spatiality was constituted through the separatist directive to resist the patriarchy through creating a separatist lesbian culture that emphasized “something that was made by lesbians for lesbians only.” As Bets recalled:

We were building our own businesses and spaces. . . . Separatist? I guess we were. If you weren’t a separatist you were seen as not being for lesbians. There were more lesbian spaces too. There was the bookstore, the sort-of lesbian bars. We had dances and art shows. There were like, places that we were creating together by women and for women. We had to survive.
Beginning in the 1970s, a profusion of lesbian-produced cultural forms were disseminated through the lesbian subcultural networks of the Northampton region. These included a Women’s Media project at the University, as well as an International Women’s Day program on a local radio station. A lesbian band, the Deadly Nightshades, was formed and they played at a number of dances and dance-benefits for feminist organizations. There was also a lesbian theater group, the Magical Lesbians Playgroup, and a singing group, the Valley Women’s Chorus. A number of mostly lesbian-oriented publications were launched in the 1970s: Full Moon, Women’s Guide to Northampton-Amherst, Old Maid, Dyke Doings and The Valley Women’s Voice. These publications served an important communication function not only for the calendars of events that most contained, but also for the political and social commentaries about the feminist issues that were so central to the constitution of community.

Multiple artistic configurations and venues provided the framework for a separatist lesbian lexicon in the 1970s through which basic feminist values about representing women, in general, and lesbians in particular, were communicated and shared. Early feminist media analyses rejected mass media forms as patriarchal tools, censured pornography (Dworkin; Brownmiller), and challenged sexual objectification and the male gaze (Becker, et al.). Instead, there was an emphasis on the documenting of lesbian lives along with the production of positive or true images combined with separatist art that was made for women's eyes only (Grover). Separatist artifacts were to be made by lesbians, for lesbians, and frequently, to be viewed by lesbians only. The separatist directives were manifested in the 1970s through lesbian art shows, theater performances, poetry readings, and women’s music. Esther emphasized:
Back then we were making our art. We were working hard at recording what had happened before. We had the Lesbian Artists' Group and the Lesbian Slide Show. You know, and they were trying to start the archives. And we were all working at coming up with something that was made by lesbians for lesbians only.

As participants recalled, there was always a concert, an art show, a poetry reading, a dance, a theater performance, or another lesbian cultural event during this time period.

Marian recalled:

I was in a poetry group of women. Some of us were mothers who had come out from our marriages with children. That was what I wrote about then, those experiences, about the reality of women’s lives. We had a few readings. Some of us still meet.

The goal in the 1970s was for lesbians to produce lesbian culture for lesbians-only using forms and language different from the patriarchal tools that had so long imaged women, and particularly, the female body, through negative stereotypes and codes of sexual objectification. Jill affirmed:

That was when I began my art. Some of us got together and had a Lesbian Art Slide Show, but mostly I was selling at the festivals [music] and the bookstore. . . . well, I used the labyris and sometimes the women’s symbols. I started making the sculptures then [goddess]. Part of what I was doing was trying to make something different that would show that I valued women’s bodies.

Lesbian separatist culture reflected the basic feminist goal of resisting the patriarchal, sexist culture. Furthermore, the separatist cultural lexicon was an important part of transforming patriarchy through creating safety and privacy in representations of women and lesbians. The events and artifacts of lesbian separatist culture contributed to the shared consciousness of a lesbian cultural imaginary built upon the collective feminist values that were so integral to the emergence of a 1970s subcultural community. Moreover, supporting separatist culture economically was part of being a community member in the 1970s.
Lesbian feminism stressed not lonely producing separatist art, but also using lesbian money for purchasing women’s art. These communal tenets manifested in boycotts of sexist media forms products that exploited women. Feminist principles were inherent in the reputation of lesbians as “anti-consumers” (Allen; Chasin; Douglas). Bets recollected:

We didn’t want to give our money to the patriarchy anymore or to capitalism. I try to spend my money on women’s art and writing, the women’s bookstore, the restaurant. It’s not so easy anymore, but we were trying to come up with something that was for us. Putting my money into the community.

Along with a number of respondents, Bets stressed the significance of making political choices about consuming practices. However, it was necessary for members of the subcultural lesbian community to participate in some aspects of the patriarchal culture in order to survive economically. The rejection of patriarchal consumption had to be mediated through the need to participate in consuming practices. Jeffner Allen has this to say about separatist economics in the 1970s:

Although we choose to live as lesbians, we are obliged . . . to stand in relation to the patriarchal economy . . . We are obliged to stand in relation to men, especially to secure food, water, shelter, clothing, and frequently, for the goods and money that must be exchanged for such commodities. (40)

The necessity for consumer participation was illustrated in the negotiations between the political directive to support separatist culture and the desire for viewing mainstream films. Empowered by a shared feminist consciousness in their daily lives, respondents moved solidly into a condemnation of media formations that they deemed offensive in a expansion of the pleasure/critique model seen previously in recollections from the 1960s.
Lesbian Film Viewing and Feminist Media Critiques in the 1970s

As we shall see in Chapter Four’s discussion of the coalescing of a lesbian social audience in the 1980s, film viewing was important to the constitution of lesbian community as well as identity formations. Respondents who shared the ideological framework of feminist media critiques generally condemned a number of 1970s films.

Respondents cited the era of the 1970s, in one woman’s words, “for just a profusion of boy movies.” This characterization intersected with the slew of disaster, war, action, and horror movies that were released during this decade, some of them by film auteurs who rose to prominence including Frances Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, and Sylvester Stallone. Films were criticized not only for the misogyny of the male characters and stars, but also for the “insipidness” and “lack-of-depth” to be found in the female characters. However, several films centering on female protagonists figured in participant recollections: Martin Scorsese’s Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore (1974), Robert Altman’s Three Women (1977), Paul Mazursky’s An Unmarried Woman (1978), and Martin Ritt’s Norma Rae (1979). These were cited for their “positive and strong” female protagonists and “woman-centered” plotlines which were viewed as “somewhat realistic” in their depictions of women’s lives.

As a whole, however, 1970s films and characters were critiqued through the shared condemnation of what one individual called, “the tools of the patriarchy.” Several texts were cited as especially “sexist” or “misogynist.” Of note was the disturbing resonance attributed to Stanley Kubrick’s A Clockwork Orange (1971), which was referenced by more than a few respondents as “disgusting” and “extremely distasteful.”
In fact, two interviewees stated that viewing this film was the reason they stopped going to see movie in theaters. Laura stated:

There was a point I reached when I would not longer go to see movies with violence against women. I saw it [Clockwork Orange] locally and the rape scene was so disturbing because it was treated as a joke. People in the audience were laughing, someone cheered, someone sang along. I was disgusted. I still get upset when I think about it to this day.

Similar to Laura, another participant, Andrea, explicitly evoked the contribution of A Clockwork Orange to changes in her movie viewing habits:

I've seen a vast number of movies. Sometimes I've seen as many as three movies in a theatre in a day, and I've watched as many as five on TV in a day. I used to be a movie addict and then when I got my feminist consciousness I stopped seeing movies almost totally. . . . I just couldn't stand them, they were just too horribly misogynist. I really like seeing movies on the big screen and that's what I regret about it [separatist boycotting].

Although these responses are similar to some of the feelings of unsafety and discomfort attributed to 1960s isolated viewing experiences, both respondents explicitly evoked feminism in making choices about movie going. What is dissimilar is the collective resistance inherent in boycotting movies that were deemed unacceptable, as well as the feminist media critiques brought to bear upon film consumption. Laura articulated a feminist critique of media production with a feminist commitment:

Men make these movies, period. So of course there’s a real investment in their point of view being one that dovetails with the patriarchy. I really have a hard time with graphic violence in images. Because for a woman it's a greater physical risk of abuse and violence.

Empowered by a collective sense of feminism, these respondents, as well as others, reported that they were beginning to make choices in film consumption: “not wanting to give money to the patriarchy for more bad images of women” and “not spending money on movies with sexism and violence.”
Here is an example, propelled by feminist media analyses, of the connections between life decisions about consumer spending habits and choices about film viewing. That extension effectively knitted together the feminism of the subcultural community in the 1970s with the prefiguring of a social audience in the 1980s. Replacing the profound sense of isolation of the viewing experiences 1960s was a collective awareness of others who might share similar desires and interpretations at the level of both viewing and everyday social experiences. Through the ideological frameworks of feminism, participants read against the grain of Hollywood sexism to construct pleasurable interpretations through the symbolic materials at hand. While participants continued to re-read as lesbian significant female stars such as Jane Fonda and Vanessa Redgrave who portrayed close friends in Fred Zinnemann’s *Julia* (1977), there was a heightened pleasure in the subcultural knowledge that others were sharing those identifications. One interviewee, Marian, who recalled viewing Robert Wise’s *The Sound of Music* (1965) “ten or twelve times,” expressed satisfaction in the awareness that “several of my friends were also hot for Julie Andrews.” There was a communal sense of others who were also searching the materials through which to construct identifications of self and desire. One individual, Gina, described this eroticized re-reading of televised Hollywood films during this time period:

Thelma Ritter, in *All About Eve*. You know, they always have the butchy down to earth sexually repressed, sexuality in check. You just knew that Thelma Ritter was a lesbian in those films. If you had to pick a lesbian who would you pick? Thelma Ritter [laughing], not Clark Gable. The truth is I love to go and watch women on screen who seem lesbian. But, I don’t have to always play the Clark Gable character, I can play the other woman in the film. I can play the butch in the film. Thelma Ritter. I guess I identify with the butchy girls. Because I want to be fantasizing about the sexy girl, the blonde, the Grace Kelley type.
Gina’s butch identification with the Thelma Ritter character in Joseph Mankiewicz’s *All About Eve* (1954) was intratextually coupled with an identificatory desire for the feminized Grace Kelly characters in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* (1954), and, furthermore, articulated socially with the awareness that other lesbian viewers were sharing their interpretations of the identificatory potential to be found in these characters.

Replacing the profound sense of isolation of film viewing in the 1960s was a collective awareness of other lesbian viewers. Mary, who earlier shared her 1960s fears of being identified as a lesbian at the Amherst Cinema, and hence, losing her teaching position, linked her experiences of 1960s film viewing to her experiences of 1970s consciousness raising:

Some of the stories I tell you now, I have obviously told before. It’s similar to talking about your coming out saga. Everybody has a coming out story and those stories were the big topic of conversation when we first started finding one another [in the 1970s]. We also talked about those films [1960s films] and where and when we saw them and what we thought about them. . . . It wasn’t that different from what I am telling you about today. It was depressing and lonely [prior to the 1970s]. You did want to kill yourself.

Another respondent, Jeanne remembered:

My first girlfriend loved going to the movies. We had both seen some of these really just horrible movies where they killed themselves; they went off with the man. It was just *The Well of Loneliness* over and over. . . . that was one of the ways we bonded. We came out together and I suppose you could say we came out to each other also because we had these movies in common. . . . Watching films together could be arousing, perhaps a prelude to something else?

The shared awareness of other viewers foreshadowed the interactions of a lesbian social community and a lesbian social audience in Northampton in the 1980s. Moreover, that collective consciousness was put into practice in the 1970s in consciousness raising groups and personal relationships that reinforced these constitution of the regional lesbian subcultural community as well as the broader lesbian imaginary.
Respondents demonstrated rich imagination in seeking out films or characters that might have some semblance of queerness, gayness, or lesbianism. For instance, individual participants made references to what some saw as the more available gay male visibility in films such as William Friedkin’s *Boys in the Band* (1975). Several films were cited for transitioning expressions of lesbianism or queerness including Bob Fosse’s *Cabaret* (1972), for “the first queerness I ever saw”; Claudia Weill’s *Girlfriends* (1978), for carrying cultural currency as a “sort of lesbian movie”; Ridley Scott’s *Alien* (1979), for an against-the-grain reading of the female strength of Sigourney Weaver; and John Badham’s *Saturday Night Fever* (1979), for a butch male identification with John Travolta. As a prefiguring of the queering of stable models of sexual and gender identities in the 1980s, in constructing these identifications participants were reading against the grain of not only female strength and friendship, but also of gay male sexuality and bisexuality.

While I will return to this point in the Chapter Four discussion of film consumption in the 1980s, recollections of film consuming choices and film viewing experiences in the 1970s prefigured the coalescing of a lesbian social audience in Northampton in the 1980s. Films were important to community formation for the sociability of film viewing as well as the symbolic materials used in constructing lesbian subjectivity which included eroticized as well as alternative sexual and gender subjectivities. What was key in respondents’ characterizations of film viewing in both the 1960s and the 1970s was the collectivity, whether conscious or not, of seeking out film texts and characters for constructing lesbian subjectivities. Participants characterized this collective consciousness as an empowering bridge between film viewing and other social
experiences that was constituted through sharing feminist media critiques in
consciousness raising groups or through coming out by talking with other lesbians about
films. Importantly, this collective consciousness was produced through the shared
seeking out of representations of lesbian authenticity for both identification and desire.

**The Constitution of Lesbian Feminist Identity in the 1970s**

The 1960s absence of a vocabulary for lesbian – “had no words, no words for it”
– proliferated in the 1970s into a surfacing lesbian vernacular – “Everything was about
lesbian, lesbian, lesbian” – that was propelled partially by the respondent emphasis on the
association of lesbianism with feminism: “It's [feminism] hard to separate out from being
a lesbian.” These excerpts from participant recollections illustrate the coalescing of a
collective lesbian cultural imaginary. That lesbian imaginary manifested in the 1970s
through the resistive practices and survival strategies that constituted the subcultural and
separatist lesbian community in the Northampton region. The burgeoning definitional
negotiations of what counted as a lesbian authenticity were key to a communal
constitution that was contingent upon stable models of lesbian identity and communal
continuity.

Numerous authors, both popular and academic, have discussed the constitution of
lesbian identity (Esterberg, *Lesbian*; Franzen; Green; Levin; Newton; Phelan, *Identity*;
Whittier; Zita). Academic research has examined lesbian identity as a
psychodevelopmental process (Sally Crawford; Ponse) and lesbian identity as a central
component of subcultural community formation (Faderman; Franzen; Green; Kennedy
and Davis; Levin; Krieger; Newton; Whittier). The latter is exemplified in this quote
from *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, Kennedy and Davis’s well-known history of a
lesbian community in Buffalo, New York from the 1930s to the 1960s: “The focus on community rather than the individual is based upon our assumption that community is key to the development of twentieth-century lesbian identity and consciousness” (3). Additional studies have been concerned with the impact of multiple identificatory trajectories on understandings of lesbian subjectivity (Anzaldúa; Esterberg, Lesbian; Franzen; Green; McKenna, “The Queer”; Rothblum; Stein, “Sisters”; Phelan, Identity; Rothblum; Stein, Sex; Summerhawk and Gagehabib; Jillian T. Weiss; Whittier).

Early studies of lesbian identity emphasized an essentialist stable category of identity as central to subcultural community formation and politics (Sally Crawford; Krieger; Ponse; Whittier). Essentialism, as defined by Diana Fuss, “is most commonly understood as a belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the ‘whatness’ of a given entity” (xi). Hence, the definition of essential lesbian authenticity hinged on a universal model of identity, based on some essential, perhaps biological difference between men and women. This model of stable and homogenous lesbian identity hinged also on the radical feminist understanding of patriarchy as oppressive of women. The ideologies of an essentialized lesbian identity and a patriarchal model of power reflected the pivotal role of feminism in the continuity of pre-1990s social and interpretive communal formations. Moreover, the naturalization of the connection between feminism and lesbianism was the central feature of a stable, authentic model of lesbian identity.

The conjoining of feminism with lesbian authenticity was deeply implicated in the constitution of a 1970s lesbian subcultural community. A feminist identification was central to a lesbian identification, “it's hard to separate out from being a lesbian”; and
moreover, for some, from a separatist identification: “If you weren’t a separatist you were seen as not being for lesbians.” Jill described the intertwining of feminist beliefs with lesbian identifications in the 1970s:

A feminist is something I learned about when I went to college [Mount Holyoke in the late 1970s]. It’s a way of looking at the world. That was my first introduction to lesbians. The first time maybe that I even heard the word [lesbian] was in a classroom. My first introduction to lesbians really had to do with the feminist movement. So that’s how I came out . . . We learned about advocating a variety of different positions to change the position of women in society. It probably means I behave and act in a certain way and see the world in a certain way.

The articulation of a lesbian identity with a feminist identity was the key to ideological conformity in the 1970s lesbian community in the Northampton region. As Arleen Stein writes about this time period, “the former [lesbian] was assumed to grow naturally out of the latter [feminist]” (“Sisters” 379). Presumptions about the articulation of a lesbian identity with a feminist identity were manifested in ideological conformity as part of communal socialization. Moreover, in emphasizing a stable model of lesbian feminist identity that was constituted through shared beliefs, values, and practices, the lesbian community provided a collective safety in conformity that was expressed through the rituals, events, artifacts, actions, and organizations of the separatist culture.

Identificatory sameness were expressed through beliefs, rituals, and codes about what counted as authentic lesbianism, or, in the phrase used repeatedly by respondents, as a “real lesbian,” that were implicitly understood as part of the coming together of a lesbian subcultural community (Esterberg, Lesbian; Faderman; Walker). The signification of dress and style has been central in presenting self and in recognizing others in ways that, as Reina Lewis notes, are “rarely experienced by heterosexuals” (94). Lesbian feminist identity in the 1970s implicitly linked the codes of appearance with the
codes of behavior, and in turn, explicitly linked both, to political ideologies. The codes of lesbian feminism constituted everyday communal practices of performing what was perceived as a homogeneous identity that was crucial to communal continuity. As Jacqueline Zita noted about this time period, “Is it any wonder that the definition of lesbian is vital to our survival as lesbians?” (175).

Similar to other reports on 1970s lesbian subcultural communities, the Northampton lesbian community had specific types of dress and rituals that were seen as important in forming a collective identity (Atkins; Carr; Esterberg, “A Certain”; Eves; Reina Lewis; Nicholas; Walker). Certainly not all lesbians look or act the same, but, according to respondents, in Northampton during this time period the women who were seen as “politically correct” dressed and behaved in a mode that was assembled to reject the patriarchal definition of what a woman should be. Sid recalled:

Everybody looked the same. That’s how you knew. It was one of the main things, walking down the street. What a real lesbian looked like. Sometimes it was confusing because this was a rural area in the 1980s we're talking about here. I mean someone might be a straight woman workin’ on a farm who had on the “dyke uniform.” . . . flannel shirt, jeans, short hair, the boots. But if she was eyeing you on the street or showing up at a meeting or the Bookstore, then it was a safe bet.

And Gina noted:

Just walking around town. You’d go, “who’s that new dyke in town?” The haircut, short for sure, little things, we all had the tie-dye balloon pants with the shirts with the slogans. Another thing was how they moved their bodies. Were they checking me out? You could tell if someone was a lesbian.

Respondents described the codes of what, in one woman’s words, “a real lesbian looks like,” as an interaction between the dual trajectories of seeing: of the physiological act of seeing, or being seen, and the epistemological act of identifying, or being identified.

What several variously termed the “lesbian dress code” or the “dyke uniform” was
categorized through a series of presumptions of sameness about how “real lesbians”
looked and dressed. The authentic lesbian style was characterized by flannel shirts, jeans,
work boots, short cropped hair, unshaved body and facial hair, no make-up, tee shirts and
buttons with political slogans, multi-pierced ears, labyrises, interlinked women’s signs
worn as necklaces and rings, crystal jewelry, purple clothes, and Birkenstock sandals.
The “lesbian dress code” was a central component of recognizing other lesbians, but also
of maintaining a communal continuity that hinged upon identificatory conformity in the
1970s. Zita further stressed, “The stability and continuity of one’s lesbian identity rest
upon community regard and respect” (176).

The codes of authentic lesbian appearance reflected feminism beliefs about
consumer culture and the female body under the patriarchy that manifested in feminist
practices of consumer resistance and separatist economics (Allen; Chasin; Douglas).
While, respondents related how they were sometimes accused in a mainstream fashion
lexicon of “looking like men,” they viewed this lesbian style as an appropriation and
redefinition of comfortable, utilitarian clothing that was part of the collective resistance
of the patriarchy. Laura described:

We were trying to change things then in terms of what we wore, how we dressed.
At first it didn’t have a political aspect to it, in the way we think of political, it
was all about being comfortable. But in other ways it was all about a way to
validate each other. And as we came to know about feminism, you know, the
personal is political. The way we looked was more than just knowing someone
was a lesbian.

Constructing an anti-consumerist lesbian dress code was part of a community
socialization that reflected basic feminist tenets as disseminated through the frameworks
of the subcultural community. Moreover, the subversive politicizing of a communal
“lesbian dress code” or “dyke uniform” was also part of the constitution of a communal safety in lesbian space that extended to the space of lesbian bodies. Ruth remembered:

I found my voice at Michigan [Womyn’s Music Festival]. We were all these naked women together and it didn’t matter if I was fat or whatever. I felt free in my body. It was the first time. I felt really accepted. I found myself back then. You would go to a dance and, I realize this sounds, I guess utopian, but we would all dance together in a circle. There was an acceptance of my body that I never felt growing up.

Informed by shared feminist media analyses that critiqued the constructedness of femaleness through the beauty ideals and body norms of the patriarchy, respondents described a goal of body autonomy in the 1970s that was part of the separatist directive for women- or lesbian-only space.

The politicized aesthetic of the “lesbian dress code” or “dyke uniform,” Arlene Stein writes, configured an “anti-style” that symbolized “a rejection of American capitalism and a refusal to use the female body in subservient ways” (qtd. in Esterberg, “A Certain” 275). Further underscoring the articulation between lesbian and feminist, assumptions about ideological conformity through feminism were conflated with assumptions about identification conformity through lesbian authenticity. Another respondent, Mary, recalled:

I cut my hair and wore men’s pants that didn’t really fit my body, but I was not going to support the patriarchy in how I dressed. This was something that we all did. When I look back on it, I remember going to those meetings and we would all be wearing those pants and the work boots and the tee shirts with the slogans – like, ‘a woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle.’ We all had the bowl cuts. We were working to be outside of that system where women buy clothes and makeup and dress their bodies for men and the patriarchy.

Accordingly, this characteristic lesbian style was viewed as part of a feminist ideology that underscored the feminist opposition to the patriarchy through opposing consumer culture, not giving money to the patriarchy, and when possible, supporting separatist...
culture financially. Thus, the omnipresent lesbian uniform – flannel shirts, men’s pants, work boots, cropped hair and no make-up – was coupled with a feminist rejection of patriarchy, capitalism, and consumerism.

In addition to the politicized aesthetic of the lesbian feminist anti-style, lesbian authenticity rested upon communal conformity in behavioral codes and belief systems. Joel described the self-monitoring of the subcultural separatist community:

There was this idea that all lesbians were the same. We danced with our shirts off under the moon [laughs] and did astrology. Everybody was changing their last names to their mother’s maiden name. You had to attend all the lesbian events, especially the softball games. It was a big joke about going through lesbian adolescence and how when you come out there are certain things you have to go through to be part of everything. Kind of like an initiation if you look back at it.

Communal self-monitoring was manifested through shared beliefs about what counted as authentic lesbianism as expressed in both the codes of appearance and behavior.

According to respondents, the rituals of lesbian culture were expressed through being spiritual, being athletic (specifically playing softball), wanting to go back to the land, listening to women’s music, being a vegetarian, changing one’s name to not reflect the patriarchy, being “chem free,” hating men, meditating, being in therapy, and not being racist, sexist, ageist, classist, lookist, ableist, and fatophobic. There was a relationship between feminist theory and self-monitoring in ongoing community continuity that validated previous studies on other lesbian subcultural and separatist communal formations (Esterberg, Lesbian; Ferguson; Franzen; Green; Phelan, Identity; Ponse; Whittier; Zita).

While a subcultural community that depended upon the codes of lesbian authenticity constructed a “safe haven” and a pedagogical space for communal socialization in the 1970s, the maintaining of a lesbian feminist identity was fraught with
tension. Jacquelyn Zita, who wrote the following in 1982, validated the potential for communal discontinuity through the collective self-monitoring of genuine lesbianism:

Enter the Lesbian Olympics, where competing lesbians are ranked, categorized, accepted, and rejected. . . . Winners of the Olympics are named the real lesbians; runners-up, lesser lesbians; and losers remain losers – immoral, inauthentic, and politically corrupt. (173)

There was general agreement among respondents about what constituted a homogenous lesbian feminist identity in the 1970s and several individuals even voiced a good-old-day nostalgia about the hegemony of lesbian authenticity. Nevertheless, there were dissenting opinions. Gina, who had a different type of experience in the 1970s, stated:

It was rigid. Kinda weird. Because there was supposed to be all this freedom. But it was the same as any high school where if you didn’t fit in or do it the right way, you were ostracized. If you dressed different from the lesbian dress code you were seen as buying into the patriarchy. You weren’t supposed to dress up. You had to be one of the jocks or a woods-woman.

Another participant, Pam, offered a subtle description of the dissonance between experiences of difference and presumptions of sameness.

I wasn’t a jock and even though softball wasn’t my thing I joined a team because my roommate did. This was the greatest thing that ever happened to me. It linked me up to all other kinds of lesbians. We had potlucks, we did political work, and we just had fun. . . . As a short Japanese woman I wasn't much of a softball player. Just did it to find a place to relax, to be myself.

While Pam was invested in the seeking out other lesbians through joining a softball team, this investment was somewhat in contradiction to her non-investment in athletics.

Moreover, the desire for self-recognition with other lesbians was in contradiction to her desire for making connections with “all other kinds of lesbians,” since, as she explained later, she was hoping those would include non-white lesbians. Moreover, in further, yet equally strong contradiction, was Pam’s investment in an ideology of authentic self-hood; the desire “to be myself.” Alongside the investment in an authentic self-hood, which
might differ from the 1970s ideological conformity of authentic lesbianism, the contradictory negotiations of Pam’s commentary recognized a constructedness of subjectivity held together through the basic need to see other lesbians for self-identification.

The coming together of community in the 1970s was partially through the definitional negotiations of a stable model of lesbian authenticity that constructed for many a “safe haven” where “there would be others like you.” For other participants that safety and familiarity in seeing other lesbians was accompanied by a dissonance between presumptions of identificatory homogeneity and experiences of identificatory dissonance. That dissonance was evidenced through several ideological frameworks that converged in the 1970s articulation of lesbian identity with feminist identity. Gina, who came out in the late 1960s prior to the advent of women’s liberation, noted:

In the early 70s. I went to one of the first lesbian community meetings. Thought that was kind of weird. I remember there were these women there at the meeting who were talking about they didn’t like the gay men. And we were all really upset about that. We thought they were our brothers, that’s what we called them. I remember there were women in this group saying, ‘we’re going to go build houses and do all this stuff,’ and I thought they were really weird. And why don’t they shave under their arms! They were early feminists. I just thought they were weird.

For some, the codes of lesbian authenticity created the perception of a high degree of conformity and acceptance through communal monitoring: “It was rigid” and “if you didn’t fit in or do it the right way, you were ostracized.” Brandy agreed:

This is a small town and everybody wanted to be the same. Being the same makes you ordinary, boring . . . I don’t understand how that makes us radical. I don’t get it. I get embarrassed when lesbians or any other, you know, movement type group gets into that social conformity thing.
Although there was general consensus about the intertwining of lesbianism with feminism, among interviewees who recollected this time period, there was some dissension, particularly about the separatist aspects of that articulated identity. Lucy recalled:

Separatism never worked for me. I had male friends. If you had men in your life you were out. There were apartments you couldn’t rent [as a roommate] because they didn't want men. Even your father or your brothers couldn’t visit. Certainly not gay men. Just all men were seen as the oppressors.

The heavy-handed communal monitoring of communal homogeneity in the 1970s validated previous studies on other lesbian subcultural separatist communities (Esterberg, Lesbian; Franzen; Green; Ponse; Whittier). Although there were burgeoning ruptures in the ideological conformity of a stable, homogenous model of lesbian identity in the 1970s, a lesbian feminist identity was central to subcultural safety and separatist privacy. As Zita stressed, “It seems more than obvious that one reason we want a definition of lesbian is to regulate and control passage into and out of the lesbian community” (175).

The beliefs and practices associated with communal regulation were most present in feminist ideologies about lesbian sexuality.

Although there was a belief that “any woman could be a lesbian” perhaps the most important code of genuine lesbianism was the separatist code of not being involved with men. Although participants self-defined in relation to their involvement with other women through a combination of sexual, emotional, social, and political trajectories, the separatist feminist tenet that “real lesbians” do not sleep with men was a definitional principle in community formation that ran throughout the interviews. Andrea recollected:

Back then it totally came down to that. It still does. Whether or not you slept with men. A real lesbian was a woman who physically loves another woman. Whether she is able to actualize it or not. And I would add emotional love to that. But, a
definition of a lesbian is really someone who sleeps with another woman. So, basically I think it comes down to sexual practice, and that’s where a lot of the arguing happened.

Lesbian sexuality in the 1970s became part of the political project of rejecting the patriarchy through having autonomy over the female body as distinct from what was viewed as male sexual oppression. Writing in 1984, feminist philosopher Ann Ferguson explained:

Heterosexual sexual relations generally are characterized by an ideology of sexual objectification (men as subjects/masters; women as objects/slaves) that supports male sexual violence against women. (108)

Making lesbian a political rather than a sexual choice effectively disarticulated the sexual from a lesbian feminist identity in the 1970s. Writing in 1982, Jacqueline Zita clarified that lesbian feminism must be defined “as it exists under patriarchy as part of a politics of woman-centered resistance, in contrast to the liberal issues of sex preference of lifestyle choices” (181). Instead of a focus on sexual freedom, lesbian feminist politics in the 1970s stressed patriarchal resistance and transformation.

A stable model of lesbian feminist identity hinged upon transforming patriarchal modes of sexuality, and upon the understanding that women were predisposed through some essentialized difference to preferring more emotive form of sexuality variously characterized as “vanilla sex” or “soft sex” (Echols; Ferguson; Stein, “Sisters”). That gendered distinction was exemplified in this comment from Jeanne:

Women are much more emotional and aren’t really interested in seeing sex, or they’re not as sexual, not really sexualized. I think women are just more into the emotion of it and men are about looking. We as lesbians are different in how we have sex. We’re looking to forge a real connection through emotion with another woman. It’s not just about sex. It’s certainly not about objectifying or just getting off. Women are much more emotional in general.
Jeanne’s recollection illustrated an essentialized gender sexual behavioral distinction that was inherent in the lesbian feminist emphasis on developing new forms of female sexuality. Alice Echols, writing in 1983, illuminated this perspective:

By contrast, women's sexuality is assumed to be more spiritual than sexual, and considerably less central to their lives than is sexuality to men's. . . . They define lesbianism as identification and bonding with women rather than sexual attraction to or sexual involvement with women. (47-48)

Creating new forms of lesbian sexuality included an acknowledgement of the system of sexual objectification, voyeurism, and the male gaze. Greta had this to say about the distinctions of lesbian sexuality from gay male sexual behaviors:

Gay men have always been all about how someone looks. I have always found gay male sex distasteful because it seems the furthest reach of the patriarchal exploitation of women’s bodies. We’re much more interested in intimacy than in how someone looks. . . . the whole public sex, the baths, the pickups. Dykes don’t do that, at least not the ones I know. Perhaps when they’re young and just coming out . . . but let’s face it gay men will never be able to keep their penises in their pants.

Lesbian sexuality did not include practices such as penetration and butch femme role-playing that were associated with male sexuality (Echols; Ferguson; Stein, Sex, “Sisters”). Instead the emphasis was on the emotive, intimate aspects of lesbian relationships. Moreover, heterosexuality was linked to pornography and violence against women in the 1970s. The feminist directive to transform female sexuality was part of the broader goal of transforming the patriarchy. Arleen Stein detailed, “Somewhere in the midst of designating sexuality as male, and lesbianism as a blow against patriarchy, the specificity of lesbian existence as a sexual identity seemed to get lost” (Sex 124).

The disarticulation of sexuality from lesbian feminism reinforced the basic 1970s definition of lesbian, as excerpted from Barbara Ponse’s previously cited comment: “a woman who relates sexually and emotionally to other women” (36). That definition was
vastly complicated by differences in individuals and in individual experiences. As one interviewee elaborated, “Well, there’s sexual and there’s sexual. Sexual tension is erotic and it can take all sorts of forms.” Gina had this to say about the disarticulation of certain sexual identities and behaviors from lesbian feminist identity:

That stuff about monitoring what people do in bed doesn’t work for me. I’ll tell you why: you can’t watch what people do in their bedrooms. I have this association that there was this lesbian feminist political project going on to make everybody the same and that was going to happen through sex.

The lesbian feminist model of lesbian sexuality vilified specific sexual practices and identities as associated with the patriarchal domination of heterosexuality including sadomasochism along with butch and femme and other role-playing. Joel had this to say about the disarticulation of sexuality from lesbian identity:

I guess making sexuality not be an issue, so it’s funny where that takes you. I guess a lot of people don’t really see their lesbian sexuality as primary. If it’s not an issue, then why live here? [Feminism] dilutes sex. Heterosexuals become just the same as you and me. Nothing would be different if lesbians are not having sex, so it would be just the same [as heterosexuals]. That’s the visibility; the sex makes it different.

Ultimately, the 1970s lesbian subcultural and separatist community was an eroticized lesbian community with multiple dimensions of lesbian identity that prefigured the 1980s queering of a stable model of lesbian identity. The community was eroticized through “seeing the sexual” as part of the everyday practices of seeking out other lesbians for self- and desiring-identifications. As Kristin Esterberg relays, lesbians have traditionally defined themselves and others in relation to their involvement with other women (Lesbian 32). However, that involvement included sexuality. Whether constituted through dancing under the moon shirtless, watching films, attending meetings to dismantle
sexism, or marching to prevent violence against women, lesbian spaces were eroticized spaces. Bets commented:

So, you went to the meetings to do your political work, but you also went to look into who was there, who was new in town. You wanted them to check you out at the same time. Let’s face it. We’d go to those meetings and do political work, but it was also a place to look for sex. Everybody was hooking up with everybody else. It was also about looking for sex. I remember I was dating this one woman and her roommate and everybody got mad and we had to process it at a meeting. But, that’s what made us come together, pun intended. It might not have been a bar scene, but everybody was getting it together in those days.

Although the interactive process of seeing other lesbians could be erotized in ways that went against central feminist tenets about objectifying women, the regional 1970s lesbian subcultural community was constituted through lesbian sexual identities and practices. In these definitional negotiations of lesbian feminist identity and sexuality in the 1970s can be found a foreshadowing of what became known as the lesbian or feminist sex wars in the 1980s (Bensinger; Burstyn; Echols; Franzen; Green; Hemmings; Phelan; Stein, Sex; Jillian T. Weiss). Alice Echols elucidates:

The debate around lesbianism and feminism was, to a large extent responsible for promoting the assumptions which underlie cultural feminism. The struggle for lesbian visibility and recognition in the early 1970s was extremely important because it forced feminists to acknowledge that sexuality is socially constructed. But the homophobia and, to a lesser extent, the anti-sex attitudes within certain elements of the movement precluded lesbian feminists from promoting ‘lesbianism as a sexual rather than a political choice’. (40)

The tensions between the defining of lesbian sexual identities and practices prefigured communal discontinuities that were to erupt into full-blown communal fragmentation in the Northampton region in the late 1980s and the early 1990s (Forsyth; Hemmings; Phelan; Stein, Sex).

In Chapter Four the definitional negotiations of lesbian identity and sexual practices will be developed further through the investigation into the coalescing of social
audience in Northampton in the 1980s. Here I emphasize the 1970s prefiguring of the 1980s disruption of lesbian identity and subcultural community. Not surprisingly, presumptions about the homogeneity of lesbian feminist identity were also evidenced in film viewing. Feminist belief systems about what constituted genuine lesbianism were in close alliance with what constituted an authentic lesbian film or lesbian character. Through the emergence of additional lesbian subjectivities in the 1980s, stable models of lesbian identity and subcultural continuity were queered through the disarticulation of some aspects of feminism from lesbianism, and the rearticulation of sexuality with lesbian identity. These articulative movements will be examined as well in the Chapter Three discussion of the transition from a 1970s lesbian subcultural separatism to a 1980s lesbian social community that was in engagement with the mainstream Northampton city culture.
CHAPTER III

THE 1980S TRANSITION FROM SUBCULTURAL SEPARATISM TO SOCIAL COMMUNITY

In Chapter Three I examine the crossover transition from a subcultural and separatist lesbian community, which hinged upon a model of stable identity and communal continuity, to a 1980s lesbian social community, which was in visible engagement with the mainstream culture of Northampton, Massachusetts. I make use of the powerful trope of the closet to illustrate a series of 1980s communal comings out into interaction with the public mainstream through coming out as a social community, and, in turn, through coming out as a social audience. These communal coming out processes were negotiated through changes in media and social lesbian visibilities at both local and national levels. Through a series of interlocking dimensions, the rapidly increasing lesbian population in the Pioneer Valley took on an activated presence in the mainstream heterosexual regional imaginary. The processes of coming out by way of different communal formations sustained community while concurrently opening up cracks in the boundaries of subcultural separatism as the more public and discursive formations of the 1980s lesbian social community emerged.

The coming out of the Northampton 1980s lesbian social community into the public realm occurred through a series of visibility mobilizations: through the visibility of the area lesbian population in national and local publications; through the visibility of the increasingly formalized lesbian feminist community in concurrence with the revitalization of downtown Northampton; through the visibility of coalitions with progressive groups including gay males; and through the visibility of the local backlash
against the lesbian population, which reflected the broader conservative anti-gay and anti-feminist backlashes. These mobilizations placed the uniquely concentrated regional lesbian population in the consciousness of the city’s heterosexual mainstream. Accordingly, the coming out of the Northampton lesbian social community in the 1980s was a site for the negotiation of the boundaries between subcultural separatism and the cultural mainstream, and the broader negotiations between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Moreover, these visibility mobilizations provide the context for the Chapter Four examination of the coming out of the 1980s lesbian social audience as a mediating site for the interactions between the lesbian population and the broader heterosexual city.

Given the disturbance of the basic tenets of lesbian subcultural community – separatist privacy, communal continuity, and stable identity – how can we account for the movement from subcultural separatism to a public and discursive social community in the 1980s? Given the threat to the lesbian population from external backlash, how can we explain the relative mainstream acceptance of the local lesbian population by the end of the decade? In this study, I investigate these questions of community transformation. Through the interlocking processes of coming out, the boundaries of both the subcultural separatist and heterosexual mainstream formations were disturbed. That disturbance resulted in a shifting of the boundaries on both sides allowing for the emergence of different forms of community and subjectivity by the end of the decade.

This chapter is organized into four sections that investigate the transition from subcultural separatism to lesbian social community:
The first section, “Coming Out in the 1980s – National Context,” provides an overview of the early 1980s national local and political contexts. I examine the changing awareness of gay liberation and feminism within the national political culture. I briefly consider that changing awareness in negotiation with the 1980s surfacing of conservative backlash and “Reaganomics.”

In the second section, “Coming Out in the 1980s – Northampton, Massachusetts,” I examine the city of Northampton as a desirable destination for a range of migrations including a lesbian migration in the 1980s. I also investigate the rapid gentrification of Northampton during this time period and consider the origins of tensions between the conservative politics of “old-timers” and the migration of the more affluent and, frequently politically progressive, “newcomers.”

The third section, “Coming Out as a Lesbian Social Community,” focuses on the growth of the regional lesbian population in the 1980s. I consider how the profusion of feminist events, spaces, and businesses produced and sustained a lesbian social community in the early 1980s. Stimulated by the flourishing subcultural and emerging mainstream reputation of Northampton as a “lesbian mecca,” a lesbian migration to the Northampton region began during this time and that continued into the 2000s. In turn, that public visibility stimulated awareness in the heterosexual population of the uniquely concentrated lesbian population. The visibility of the lesbian population increased considerably through the implication of lesbians in the 1980s Northampton revitalization. In addition, the lesbian population formed alliances with other progressive organizations including gay males in the Pioneer Valley.
Last, in “Coming Out Through Pride, Coming Out Through Backlash,” I consider how the terms of the private lesbian community were reconfigured through a series of external threats that disturbed the boundaries of subcultural separatism in the 1980s. I examine how the broader forces of a combination of the national conservative anti-gay and anti-feminist backlashes intersected with the downtown revitalization and the surfacing public visibility of the lesbian community. I explore the contradictions between appearances of acceptance and equality and the experiences of discrimination and difference in 1980s Northampton through examining recollections and media coverage of first the 1982 Northampton Lesbian and Gay Pride March, and of the subsequent 1983 anti-lesbian backlash.

**Coming Out into the 1980s – National Context**

**Gay Political Visibility**

As a central political strategy of gay liberation, the belief that visibility, both social and media, will result in socio-political gains has been central to the narrative of coming out (Bernstein and Reimann; Rand, “Passionate”; Vaid). In the 1980s there was a coming out into the broader cultural imaginary through social-political changes that set a context for the mutually productive and interactive series of communal comings out in Northampton. Through a series of “firsts,” the previous social and political scarcity of gay and lesbian people in the public realm was transformed through this visibility strategy. The 1973 removal of homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-II) of the American Psychiatric Association changed the definitional hegemony of homosexuality as a medicalized disorder. That highly symbolic de-pathologization set the context for political “firsts” that have become iconic in gay
historical timelines (Bawer; Bronski; D’Emilio, Sexual; Lacayo; Vaid). The endorsement of homosexual rights at the 1980s Democratic National Convention brought gay politics to the attention of the national political landscape. The 1983 coming out of Massachusetts Representative Gerry Studds demonstrated the importance of coming out socially and politically as an activist strategy: visibility equaled political change.

The formalization of gay activism through the surfacing of major gay political organizations ensured political visibility: in 1980, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) worked on lobbying legislators, electing gay-supportive candidates, and educating the public about gay people and gay rights; in 1983, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF), another activist organization founded in 1974 with the mission of promoting civil rights, organizing gay activism, and promoting changes in policy and legislation was included for the first time in coalition with the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights; and in 1985, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), was founded to promote positive visibility and counter negative images of gay and lesbian people in the media. The formalization of gay activism through these nationally visible gay political organizations was in concert with the formalization of coalitions with other groups supporting civil rights and feminist politics.

The entrance of gay politics into the national political climate was implemented further by a proliferation of gay pride parades and marches that began in the late 1970s in several major U. S. cities and became annual occurrences by the late 1980s in many large and small cities, including Northampton (Herrell). In the 1970s gay activist groups such as the Gay Liberation Front initiated gay parades, which were frequently called “Gay Liberation” or “Gay Rights” marches, with the focus on the political activism that
was central to these movements (Herdt, *Gay*; Kates and Belk; McDarrah and McDarrah). 1980s pride marches were a form of “resistance to social marginalization” that moved gay men and lesbians into public visibility through communal solidarity (Kates and Belk 404). The previous scarcity of gay and lesbian people as citizens with political clout began to be assuaged through these political “firsts” providing openings in the mainstream heterosexual imaginary for the coming out of the Northampton lesbian social community in the 1980s. In accompaniment, these “firsts” provided fuel for the demonizing of gay and lesbian people through the conservative political movements that surfaced in the late 1970s.

Before continuing with the discussion of the national feminist movement, it is important to mention several aspects of lesbianism that were distinct from the gay male sensibilities that informed the politics of visibility during this time period. Several were most obvious: the distinctions in terms of public life, economics, and sexual belief systems. Gendered distinctions between men and women in terms of access to, safety within, and presence in the public realm impacted upon the potential for the expression of lesbian identity in the 1980s. The ability of lesbians to move freely in urban spaces was impacted by factors including codes of proper feminine behavior, especially sexual behaviors, fears about sexual violence and safety, and access to economic resources and professional opportunities. John D’Emilio notes:

Cultural definitions of female sexuality, prescriptions about women’s proper place in society, and limits upon their opportunities to earn a livelihood profoundly affected the evolution of a lesbian identity and molded the contours of the subculture in which some lesbians moved. (*Sexual* 93)

Lesbian bars, neighborhoods, and businesses were typically located in less affluent urban sections than their gay male counterparts (D’Emilio, *Sexual*; Kennedy and Davis, *Boots*;
Kennedy and Davis, “‘I Could’). Shirley Willer, a delegate to a 1966 leftist conference explained, “The lesbian is discriminated against not only because she is a lesbian, but because she is a woman” (qtd. in D’Emilio, Sexual 228). This comment reflects the sexist as well as the heterosexist dimensions of discrimination against lesbians, and it also indicates an economic discrimination (Badgett, Money; Klawitter and Flatt). The economic disparities between lesbian women and gay males have been strongly noted as a gender-specificity that speaks to the larger wage disparities between men and women. While as men, gay males as a whole made more money than lesbians, gay men were also able to move more easily in professional circles.

The most significant difference between gay males and lesbians in the 1980s that had real impact on questions about sexual visibility and strategies for changing society revolved around sexual belief systems and behaviors. Lesbians have been widely regarded as having fewer sexual partners, being less promiscuous, and sustaining more long term relationships than gay males (Bensinger; Burstyn; D’Emilio, Sexual; Franzen; Green). Beliefs about the distinctions between lesbian and gay male sexuality followed from broader belief systems between female and male sexuality (Echols; Ferguson; Zita). Lesbian feminism hinged on resistance to men’s control over women and women’s bodies, and, in turn, to the development of a different and separate women’s sexuality. Lesbian sexuality was viewed as distinct from a male-driven patriarchal model of sexuality that was also associated with sexual violence against women (Ferguson; Stein, “Sisters”). Alice Echols, writing in 1983, illuminated this perspective:

By contrast, women's sexuality is assumed to be more spiritual than sexual, and considerably less central to their lives than is sexuality to men's. . . . They define
lesbianism as identification and bonding with women rather than sexual attraction to or sexual involvement with women. (47-48)

This essentializing perspective characterizes all women as inclined toward an emotional or relational connection through sexuality. Relatedly, the emergence of AIDS into the public imaginary in the early 1980s reinforced the divide between beliefs about lesbian and gay male sexual behavior and strengthened the history of pathologizing homosexuality and homosexual behaviors through an association of gay males with disease (Epstein, *Impure*).xxv

For many lesbians in the 1980s, the politics of the feminist movement were more germane to their personal lives than the broader gay liberation movement. As activist Shirley Willer, stated in 1966, “Lesbian interest is more closely linked with the women’s civil rights movement than with the homosexual civil liberties movement” (qtd. in D’Emilio, *Sexual* 228). Overall, the male-specificity of defining what counted as gayness and gay politics meant, for the most part, less social and political visibility for lesbians.

**1980s Feminist Visibility**

Germane to the convergence of factors that constituted a supportive context for the 1980s Northampton communal comings out was the burgeoning national presence of second-wave feminism.xxvi Second-wave feminism was commonly acknowledged as beginning in the early 1960s as part of the Civil Rights Movement and continuing until approximately the early 1990s. The politics of second-wave feminism focused on equality for women in such contexts as the workplace, family, education, and reproductive rights (Echols; Katzenstein) through fighting against ways in which women were institutionally oppressed (Evans; Ferree and Hess; Gerhard; Whelehan). The dramatic transformations in social beliefs about normative gender roles, female sexuality,
and models of family and childcare that had emerged by the early 1980s were accompanied by changes in legislation concerning divorce, reproductive rights including abortion, and educational and workplace discrimination.

To paraphrase John D’Emilio’s discussion of changes in gender roles in the 1920s, there was also potential for a type of “break” in gender roles in the 1980s that was relevant to the constellation of factors that constituted that cultural moment (D’Emilio, Sexual 228-30). Gendered breaks in access to economics were facilitated by shifts from a focus on female domesticity to the surfacing of educational and professional opportunities and, hence, the surfacing of a female “professional class.” In addition, breaks in beliefs about women’s sexuality contributed to dramatic transformations during this time period. Prior to the emergence of the sexual revolution movement in the 1960s and second-wave feminism in the 1970s, female sexuality was considered nonexistent if separate from male sexuality. Women’s control over sexuality was a central founding principle of second-wave feminist politics. During this time period:

Second-wave feminists of all stripes – radical and cultural – argued that the psychology of male domination had sunk its roots deep into women’s sense of their sexuality. Such entanglements eradicated traditional accounts of privacy or individuality. It rendered what was ‘private’ social and political. (Gerhard 194)

Gaining knowledge about women’s sexuality was intricately allied in feminism with gaining control over women’s bodies (Gerhard; Greer; Jong; Millet). The focus was often on grassroots sex-education as illustrated by the influential book, Our Bodies, Ourselves, published by the Boston Women’s Health Collective in 1973. Sex education worked in concert with legislative change in reproductive rights, birth control, and abortion in the 1970s and 1980s. Jane Gerhard affirms, “Second-wave feminists . . . saw sexuality as the most salient component of women’s identity” (194-5).
These powerful transformations in gender, economic, professional, and sexual roles resulted in shifts in the participation of women in the 1980s that amounted to a series of “firsts” similar to the visibility of gay political “firsts” during the same time period. The 1966 founding of the National Organization for Women (NOW) gave feminism a national political presence and voice but with a distancing from more radical feminist groups including radical lesbian feminists. As a civil rights organization NOW had the potential for coalitions with other national civil rights movements. In addition, feminism was an emerging presence at the 1980 Democratic National Convention as candidates began to look to women as a potentially influential demographic. In 1968, Shirley Chisholm became the first African American woman elected to Congress, and, in 1981, Sandra Day O'Connor was the first woman appointed to the United States Supreme Court. The feminist presence in the national political scene was manifested in the legislation that impacted changing societal beliefs about women’s roles. As one of the distinctive hallmarks of second-wave feminism, grassroots organizing and activism worked against male domination and also contributed to changes in visibility.

Grassroots feminism began in the 1970s and proliferated into the 1980s. A focus on rape and violence against women was manifested in the establishment of the first battered women’s shelters. Demonstrations against pornography became part of the feminist fight to end the oppression of women and women’s bodies (Brownmiller, Against; Evans; Ferree and Hess; Gerhard; Whelehan). In 1978 the first United States “Take Back the Night” march was held in San Francisco. These protests against violence against women linked together the physical violence of rape, battering, and murder with what was seen as the symbolic violence of pornography. In accord with the second-wave
feminist goals of challenging male oppression on the personal, structural, and institutional levels, these acts of violence against women were linked to broader social and institutional structures that were interconnected with the sexual and sexualized oppression of women. Feminist women and their allies marched together in grassroots demonstrations carrying candles to protest violence against women and women’s inability to move freely at night. By the end of the 1980s these demonstrations proliferated across the United States on multiple college campuses (Brownmiller, In Our Time 301-302). Feminist activism made feminism visible on a grassroots level, and resulted in the building of coalitions with other grassroots organizations. Moreover, grassroots actions were cornerstones of the radical feminism that was so central to the constitution of lesbian feminist separatist communities.

According to historians such as John D’Emilio, the emergence of historical lesbian identities was contingent on multiple factors (Sexual). The changes in gendered economic, professional, familial, reproductive, and erotic lives that second-wave feminism brought to the 1970s and 1980s were integral to this materialization of identity. The emergence of lesbian identity, and, in turn, of lesbian community hinged on these transforming factors. The lesbian group The Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), established in the 1950s, had a sensibility that aligned with “women’s lib.” The convergence in the late 1960s of the coming out of Gay Liberation via Stonewall with the surfacing of Women’s Lib was a catalyst for the emergence of lesbianism. A radical lesbian feminist movement emerged in the 1970s as a subset of the broader second-wave feminist movement through the formation of 1970s groups such as Radicalesbians in New York City, the Furies collective in Washington D.C., and Gay Women’s Liberation in San Francisco (Evans;
Ferree and Hess; Gerhard; Whelehan). As detailed in Chapter Two, the radical feminism upon which lesbian feminism hinged was organized around the dual components of rejecting patriarchy and emphasizing separatism through a focus on women (Daly; Dworkin; Frye; Jeffries; Stein “Sisters”).

Lesbian feminism was a contested subset of the broader 1980s feminist movement in that many believed the presence of lesbianism would work against more mainstream political and legislative goals of a national feminist presence (Evans; Ferree and Hess; Gerhard; Whelehan). The perception of the Women’s Movement as a “breeding ground” for lesbianism contributed to the tensions with heterosexual feminists. Nevertheless, lesbian feminism forged a connection between the Women’s and Gay Liberation movements in the 1980s and that connection resulted in greater social and political visibility for both (D’Emilio, Sexual; Sheila Jeffreys, Unpacking). Although there were tensions with the homophobia of the more mainstream second-wave feminism and the misogyny of some gay liberationists, lesbian feminism brought different dimensions and visibilities that strengthened both women’s and gay politics.

Gay and lesbian politics, along with feminism, were part of a national context through which the Northampton regional lesbian community was able to enter into a different type of public visibility. Along with these progressive political movements, the emergence of the national conservative climate and “Reganomics” impacted the changing terms of lesbian visibility in Northampton in the 1980s. Both the progressive and the conservative movements reflected a broader political negotiation that provided a context for bringing the lesbian community to the attention of the city’s heterosexual mainstream.
Conservatism and “Reaganomics”

The increased awareness of gay liberation and feminism was concurrent with the emergence of the conservative and feminist backlashes alongside “Reaganomics.” The social transformations in sexual identities and gender roles coupled with the visibility of the politics of gay rights and feminism gave rise to a conservative backlash against both gay people and feminists in the 1980s. Both the anti-gay and anti-feminist backlashes developed as significant aspects of the political platform that facilitated the burgeoning strength of Christian conservatism in the Republican Party. Homosexuality, along with issues associated with feminism, such as reproductive and abortion rights, became the designated targets of the religious right (Adam; Bronski; Bull and Gallagher; Herman; Liebman, et al.). In the context of Northampton in the 1980s, the conservative backlash against gay people and the backlash against feminists became intertwined with the backlash against the lesbian population.

The conservative agenda of the 1981-1989 Ronald Reagan presidency set the tone for an emerging conservative backlash. The Reagan presidency was strongly associated with an emphasis on a return to “family values” or “traditional values” that purposefully worked against gay political goals of social and political acceptance. Beginning in the late 1970s, conservative Christian groups such as the 700 Club, Focus on Family, and the Christian coalition developed venues for lobbying, fundraising, and grassroots actions that actively antagonist toward gay rights. These organizations were strongly aligned with the growth of Christian conservatism within the Republican Party (Herman; Herman; Liebman, Wuthnow, and Guth). Suzanna Danuta Walters clarified, “Opposition to gay rights is proving to be a litmus text for Christian ‘family values’ in electoral politics, . . .
For the right wing, gay rights have emerged as the proverbial line in the sand, ... making anti-gay legislation top priority” (All, 9). In general, an anti-gay conservative political agenda opposed any legislation granting rights such as marriage, adoption, and freedom from violence or discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. The conservative backlash was fueled by a hyperbolic rhetoric with slogans purposefully designed to inflame cultural fears about gay people – that the goal of gay liberation was to “recruit” children, a recruitment that was frequently accompanied by fears that equated gay males’ sexual behaviors with pedophilia. Any support of homosexuality, even anti-discrimination legislation, was viewed as leading down a slippery slope toward the disintegration of family and marriage. Many scholars believe that the conservative backlash has led to increased incidents of prejudice, retribution, discrimination, and violence against queer individuals and groups (Bawer; Andrew Sullivan; Vaid; Walters, All). In addition, the early-1980s recognition of the AIDS virus tied into a conservative-fueled homophobia that was bolstered by the targeting of homosexuality as a severe danger to social values (Bronski).

Women’s rights issues such as reproductive and abortion rights and the ERA (Equal Rights Amendment) were on the legislative table in the 1980s, and conservatives also targeted these. Suzanna Danuta Walters makes a structural connection between expansion of the anti-gay backlash in the 1990s and the prevalence of the feminist backlash in the 1980s through reference to Susan’s Faludi’s widely cited bestseller, Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women, “Susan Faludi brilliantly documents the anti-feminist backlash of the 1980s, and her general analysis of the backlash impetus can be applied in this case as well” (All, 46). Writing about the 1980s,
Faludi described a "backlash of feminism" that blamed feminism for the economic, professional, and personal challenges that women faced in workplace and family (206). Faludi argues that while it appears that there were changes for women in terms of employment, educational opportunities, and legal rights in the 1980s, women continued to be seriously discriminated against in all of these institutionalized public spheres. Indeed, in spite of well-publicized claims that women had made real gains, statistics demonstrated that this was true for only a small group of women (208-9). Sexual harassment more than doubled in the 1980s (Faludi, 208-9) and violence against women increased (Faludi; Hackett).

Faludi made the case that what appeared to be advances in women's rights were instead well publicized myths: "The difference between misogyny as usual and a backlash is that backlash is a response [italics in original]. It is triggered by the perception, accurate or not, that women are making great strides " (209). The inflammatory hyperbole of the anti-gay Christian conservative rhetoric also accompanied the feminist backlash with declarations announcing, for instance, that the passage of the ERA would cause a breakdown in gender roles and family values (Mansbridge).

Following from Walters’ suggestion that the 1980s feminist backlash was in structural correlation with the ever-intensifying 1990s anti-gay backlash, I propose both backlashes were intertwined in the unique geographically-specific context of 1980s Northampton through a displacement of particular elements of the anti-gay backlash including economic displacement under “Reaganomics” onto the lesbian population.

The conservative economic agenda of “Reaganomics,” which focused on cutting government spending and tax rates for the affluent at the expense of social programs for
the disenfranchised, was also germane to the coming out of the Northampton lesbian social community in the 1980s. Reagan’s economic agenda appealed to the fears of some voters who were negatively impacted after the high unemployment rates and much publicized bank failures of the early 1980s recession. In a study of the economics of the 1980s, The Politics of Rich and Poor, Kevin P. Phillips demonstrated how the concept of “the rich get richer” was confirmed under Reaganomics: “By the middle of Reagan's second term, official data had begun to show that America's broadly defined 'rich' - the top half of 1% of the US population - had never been richer” (9). Phillips expanded his thesis to state that the income of the top 40 percent of the population in the United States had increased relative to the income of the bottom 60 percent by the late 1980s. Those who benefited the most strongly were in the top 5 percent. Under Reaganomics, Phillips continued, economic policy gave preference to the prosperous:

Most of the Reagan decade, to put it mildly, was a heyday for unearned income as rents, dividends, capital gains and interest gained relative to wages and salaries as a source of wealth, increasing economic inequality. A situation that was put down (quite rightly) to Reaganomics. (11)

Following the capitalistic principle that increases in demand produces supply, Reaganomics theorized that intensified supply would also create demand. Thus, an increased production on the part of industry through money from tax cuts would simulate business and increase consumption. The theory was that those who were already prospering would expand production, and, in turn, energize the overall economy through increasing consumption, producing additional employment opportunities, and, in turn, energizing the economy which would result in more money for all. The Reaganomics rationale of more money for the poor through giving to the already rich was widely known as the “trickle down effect” (Phillips 9-11). However, critics of Reaganomics
argue that the idea of giving to the rich to help the poor only resulted in making the “rich get richer and the poor get poorer” (Demott; Lekachman; Phillips).

**Coming Out into 1980s Northampton**

In the 1980s, the city of Northampton went through an economic as well as a cultural transition that was shaped by two interactive factors: first, the rapid revitalization of the downtown, and second, the implication of the increasingly visible lesbian population in that revitalization. The interactive components of the downtown revitalization as well as the growing density of the lesbian population reflected broader changes in the national political and economic climate including the mainstream visibilities of the gay and feminist movements. The changing terms of what constituted Northampton provided a context for the transitional movements from a subcultural and separatist lesbian community that had emerged in the 1970s to a 1980s lesbian social community that was in engagement with the mainstream city culture.

Founded in 1653, incorporated as a town in 1654, and as a city in 1883, Northampton celebrated its 350th anniversary in 2004. Over the past 350 plus years, the meanings of *Northampton* have been constructed through a series of definitional movements – from Nonotuck to Northampton to Paradise to Hamp to Happy Valley to NoHo to Lesbianville. The Native American Nonotuck changed to Northampton after purchase from the Nonotuck Indian Tribe in 1654 and further transformed after the mythologized 1852 visit by famed soprano Jenny Lind who crowned Northampton, “The Paradise of America.” The affectionate “Hamp” still reflects the nickname given to the city in the 1950s by the area’s old-time more working class residents, while Happy Valley reflected the region’s reputation for acceptance of alternative lifestyles and
progressive politics. In the 1980s, Hamp and Happy Valley gave way to the city’s reputation as an urban-type cultural locale nicknamed “NoHo” after New York City’s artsy SoHo area. In the 1990s, NoHo was forever coupled with The National Enquirer’s 1993 designation of Northampton as “Lesbianville” in sensationalized tabloid coverage of the city’s uniquely concentrated lesbian population.

A small city of 30,000, Northampton is situated in the area of western Massachusetts designated as the Pioneer Valley, also known as The Connecticut Valley or affectionately as just “The Valley,” and enjoys the strategic location of a central accessibility from Boston, Hartford, New York City, Albany, and the Berkshires. The Pioneer Valley, which stretches along Interstate 91 from Greenfield to Northampton to Springfield, passes through Franklin, Hampshire, and Hampden counties. This strategic location has made Northampton desirable destination for the disparate migrators who traveled to the region to behold, as Northampton promotional materials recurringly recount, the breathtaking spectacle of the “transcendent valley.” Northampton’s geographically specific pedigree as an area ripe with resplendent beauty and abundant prosperity, as well as a charming historical lineage and a rich cultural sophistication, is enhanced by the city’s reputation for educational credentials, alternative politics, and social diversity.

In the 1970s Northampton was a small working class city whose previous industrial and cultural claims to fame were no longer visible except through the presence of Smith College, whose main gates were one block from the city’s Main Street. The Gazette recollected in 1983:

Once upon a time there was a weary little downtown called Northampton. Not many people wanted to live there and lots of stores were closing their doors. . . .
the word on the street was that the hub of this little city was dying. (Fitzgerald, “Business” 11)

The 1950s style downtown appealed to the largely blue-collar city demographic of a dying mill town with traditional chains such as Woolworth’s and locally owned practical businesses such as a pharmacy and hardware store renting the relatively inexpensive storefronts that had empty apartments and office spaces above. The downtown face of Northampton’s 1970s “ghost town” was similar to other small town or city downtowns to be found in the no longer prospering industrial regions of the Northeast. However, there were a number of factors that figured into the potential for the rapid downtown revitalization that occurred in 1980s (Fitzgerald, “Business”; Fitzgerald, “The Buying”). While some of the downtown storefronts and many of the apartments above were empty, the beautiful historic architecture of the Main Street buildings suggested potential, and money was available during this time period for real estate ventures and renovation. Coupled with the 1970s expansion of the University of Massachusetts Amherst was the 1970s building of Interstate 91 which enhanced the city’s strategic location. The city was available for development, as Sam Goldman, a downtown developer who also taught at the University, stated in a 1983 interview in the Gazette: “here was this jewel of city” with the implication that the “jewel” was ripe for plucking (Fitzgerald, “Business” 11).

Of note, an exception to the pre-1980s revitalization “ghosting” of the city was the cultural and alternative aesthetics attached to two of the three downtown movie theaters. The Calvin Theater on King Street advertised dollar nights for the out-of-date feature films screened in a large, damp, rundown dinosaur that recalled the Hollywood film heyday of the 1940s and 1950s and was part of the general disintegration of the downtown façade. In contrast, the 1971 revitalization of the previously condemned Main
Street’s Academy of Music, which screened first-run Hollywood features along with a smattering of art films, and the 1976 opening of the Pleasant Street Theater which specialized in art and foreign films, contributed to the perception that Northampton was a hidden “jewel of a city.” As we shall see in the Chapter Four discussion of the coming out of the 1980s lesbian social audience, the Academy and the Pleasant Street Theater were key players in the geographic-specificity of Northampton.

In the 1980s, the interactive factors of revitalization and migration converged in the aestheticization of the downtown into an upscale shopping and dining mecca with multiple cultural events and shopping and dining venues as the urbanized NoHo superceded Northampton’s Hamp moniker. In a 1979 item, “Five More Businesses Opening at Thorne’s,” the Daily Hampshire Gazette announced the catalytic centerpiece of the 1980s revitalization of Northampton’s downtown area. Formerly a department store, the rejuvenated four-storied Thorne’s Marketplace building located halfway down the town’s Main Street, was home to a new aesthetic of Northampton businesses. Beginning in the 1980s the crafts stores and food vendors catering to a demographic with potential discretionary income, such as Smith College students, five-college affiliated employees, and local members of the local professional middle class, transformed into the more upscale aesthetics of fancy home items, upscale artisan jewelry, and expensive clothing boutiques that populated Thorne’s Marketplace by the end of the decade.

Precipitated by the 1979 development of Thorne’s, the restaurants, bookstores, boutiques, galleries, and night clubs that sprang up on Northampton's Main Street and immediate environs rapidly changed the perception of Hamp as a sleepy little ghost town as the buildings that housed the previously empty storefronts were bought and sold for
prices that were unfathomable in the 1970s. One downtown building sold in 1983 for $108,000, three times the 1976 $24,000 purchase price, and another building sold for $130,000, over six times the $20,000 1974 purchase price (Fitzgerald, “The Buying” 1; Fitzgerald, “Business” 11). In reflection of the broader national economy, low interest rates made downtown development available to those who had access to bank loans. As the Gazette noted in 1983:

[The downtown revitalization was] part of an unprecedented boom in downtown real estate, a phenomenon that had turned Main Street into giant Monopoly board with out-of-town developers, young entrepreneurs, and home-grown landlords all paying and the buying-and-selling game. (Fitzgerald, “The Buying” 1)

The downtown developers not only saw opportunities for economic growth, but also were able to come up with the funds to back their vision. “Creative individuals,” the Gazette continued, “had the savvy to see the potential, the courage to take risks, the money to back up their ideas” (Fitzgerald, “Business” 11).

Here we can see capitalism at work: while the “young entrepreneurs” were able to see the convergence of factors that constituted the potential for the revitalization of downtown Northampton – the empty buildings with the historic architecture, the changing demographics and consumer aesthetics of the more educated and sometimes more prosperous migrators, the expansion of the nearby University along with the newly built Interstate – the constellation of factors hinged upon the availability of money for development. The revitalization entrepreneurs and developers were predominantly white males in professions – attorneys, realtors, University professors, and already established contractors – and access to the low interest rates available during this time period were provided to those who qualified (Fitzgerald, “The Buying”; Robert Robinson).xxix Here can also be seen “Reaganomics” at work: the Gazette further detailed in 1980:
While many economists are predicting difficult times ahead, merchants in Northampton's downtown area are optimistic that 1980 will be a relatively good period for them, and . . . the downtown business area – which was in decline in recent years – has stabilized as a shopping area and is enjoying a significant revival. (Fitzgerald, “The Buying” 10)

Patrick M. Goggins, realtor and real estate developer affirmed in a 1983 Gazette interview:

It’s the free enterprise system at work, . . . People are paying more than a building is worth because they are confident they will be able to go out and get those higher rents and I’m sure they will. (qtd. in “The Buying” 10)

Along with the dramatic increases in the downtown building purchase prices were great increases in rents for downtown offices and apartments, many of which had been vacant prior to the 1980s downtown “revival.” Gene Bunnell, Northampton city planner during this time period stated for the Gazette, “It’s supply and demand, . . . There are only so many buildings on Main Street, and there are a lot of people who want them” (qtd. in “The Buying” 10).

The geographic-specificity of Northampton’s location, the available money for renovation, and the academic and progressive migrating populations, and all converged in the 1980s to provide context for the coming out of the Northampton lesbian population. The Pioneer Valley has been and continues to be a destination for migrations of differentiated and intersecting origins such as artistic, educational, economic, virtual, religious, political, age, race, ethnic, sexual, and gender. The migrations of more educated, sometimes more affluent, and frequently politically progressive newcomers in the 1980s, were partially due to the Northampton area’s combination of rural environment, educational opportunities, urban culture, and progressive politics. Between 1980 and 2000, in conjunction with the rapid transformation of the city’s economic
infrastructures, Northampton’s demographic, which has held steady at 30,000 since the 1950s, changed dramatically. The alternative lifestyles of recently migrated Valley residents, including lesbians, factored into the cultural aspects of the potential for downtown revitalization in the 1980s.

The regional migration that contributed to the changing demographic diversity that was so necessary to downtown development propelled the already progressive presence of the city’s political scene into the city’s agenda. Northampton came to nineteenth-century prominence as a philanthropic and educational center, notably the home to Smith College for women, and as a radical political mecca for anti-slavery, women’s rights, and utopians. The city’s nineteenth-century reputation for educational opportunity is enhanced by the present-day inventory of the five colleges in the Northampton region – Smith, Amherst, Hampshire, Mount Holyoke, and the University of Massachusetts Amherst. The city’s repute for political progressiveness is maintained through present-day official Northampton citations of a “rich diversity” and a “remarkable social atmosphere.”

Moreover, Northampton’s demographic mix was enhanced by the prevalence in the early 1980s of alternative lifestyles with “Happy Valley” services such as food co-ops, alternative bookstores, alternative health bodyworkers, and therapies augmented by the presence of activist organizations and intensified by the presence of cultural venues such as the Pleasant Street Theater. Many of the galleries, theaters, and nightclubs offer additional venues for alternative art, theater, films, and music. Moreover, the professionals on Main Street include therapists, body workers, and non-profit organizations that co-exist with the vigorous city street life populated by multi-pierced
and tattooed individuals, street musicians, goth high-schoolers, and homeless panhandlers. This mix includes gay males, queers, trans-identified persons, and lesbians. The Valley’s residents, the Gazette reported in the 1980s, “are the image of diversity” (Young, “Coming” 14). The city’s contemporary progressive reputation for progressive politics, alternative lifestyles, and diverse demographic has been supplemented on a national level through commentaries such as Utne Reader’s 1997 citation of Northampton as a runner-up in “America’s 10 Most Enlightened Towns” (Kraker and Walljasper).

Although in many ways the political climate of Northampton became more liberal and the population more diverse in the 1980s, the city continued to number many moderate and conservative residents among its population. Over the course of the 1980s the make-up of Northampton’s population, as well as the city’s economic and cultural infrastructures, changed dramatically, manifesting in economic and cultural tensions between the long-time blue-collar residents and the constituents of the city’s more recent migrations; the former viewed the latter as newcomer usurpers of a way of life. These “real” residents have traditionally come together under the affectionate nickname “Hamp” which stands in stark opposition to the label “NoHo.” A 2001 article in the Boston Globe looked at the back at the 1980s origins of these tensions:

> The conventional wisdom is that Northampton is actually two places. ‘Hamp’ is the old Northampton, a town of mostly working- and middle-class families who have lived here for generations. "NoHo" is the city of first-generation residents, symbolized by the downtown whose 1980s revitalization led to a common complaint among the Hamp contingent: that, as [one resident] put it, “You can't buy a wrench downtown.” (Maloof B4)

The inability to “buy a wrench downtown” was a symbol of displacement among the long-term residents that intertwined an experience of economic displacement with a more inflammatory cultural displacement. The more politically conservative long-term
residents were increasingly aware that their sleepy blue collar mill town was perceived “a weary little downtown” ripe for mutating into a “jewel of a city” that, while retaining some aspects of Hamp, was becoming, on the surface at least, an entirely different city.

Complex factors contributed to economic displacement through downtown development in Northampton in the 1980s. The city’s economic growth greatly extended the national economic trends of Reaganomics with developers becoming more affluent while others were economically challenged during this time period. Enormous profits were made through the selling and re-selling of the downtown properties: in assessments of downtown properties across the time period of 1980 to 1990, buildings increased to six times the original 1980 value (Forsyth, “NoHo” 637-638). In order to sustain the increased mortgages for the resale prices and the costs of developing downtown properties, rents rose for the Main street store fronts as well as the offices and apartments located above. This resulted in a housing displacement for many local renters. The Gazette reported in the early 1980s that City Planner Gene Bunnell believed “the escalating real estate and rents will limit the types of businesses that can succeed downtown” (Fitzgerald, “The Buying” 10). Consequently, the downtown revitalization contributed to a housing shortage for homebuyers and apartment renters in both downtown and residential areas. According to the Gazette in a 1983 extensive overview titled, “The Buying and Selling of Downtown,” “rents are skyrocketing” (Fitzgerald 10).

The tensions developing in Northampton between the more conservative long-term residents and the new migrators, who were perceived as taking over the city, ignored the fact that most of the downtown developers, the largely male professionals who were already established enough to obtain financing, were established Northampton residents.
Moreover, along with business and housing displacement, the lack of industry in the Pioneer Valley factored into the availability of regional employment opportunities. While the 1980s downtown revival meant affluence for real estate developers, for many, that revival, while improving the lifestyle elements that attracted many individuals to the Valley, also limited employment opportunities, and, thus, under- and un-employment contributed to larger tensions in the region (Freeman 10). Moreover, tensions over economic change were intertwined with cultural change as the upscale aestheticization of downtown Main Street’s stores geared toward a more urbanized demographic that displaced the previous downtown shopping culture.

In addition, the visibility of progressive politics, which included the transforming visibility of the lesbian feminist population, was another powerful symbol of cultural displacement. The changing cultural face of the city as well as the economic revitalization, impacted strongly on tensions between NoHo and Hamp. While I will revisit these tensions in my discussion of the 1980s anti-lesbian backlash, here I underscore the interactions of the parallel economic and cultural downtown revitalization trajectories. These interactions facilitated the movement from a subcultural separatist lesbian community that coalesced in the 1970s to a 1980s lesbian social community that was in engagement with the mainstream city culture.

**Coming Out as Lesbian Social Community**

**Lesbian Visibility and Lesbian Migration**

By the early-1980s, Northampton had developed a reputation among national lesbian subcultural communication networks as having a large women’s community that was unique in its combined rural and urban environment, and that the gay community was
predominantly women. Kirkey and Forsyth’s research acknowledges the widely reported unusual demographic mix of Northampton’s gay and lesbian populations in national and regional publications:

The Valley was and still is unusual in that in its lesbian and gay population, lesbians were both highly visible and dominant numerically. However, gay men have been living in the Valley even if as a low-profile minority among lesbians. . . available data indicated that lesbians (and women who identified as queer or gay) outnumbered gay men in the Valley more than two to one, a ratio that was nearly opposite that found nationally and in the more well known, large urban gay neighborhoods in North America. (421-422)

As the visibility of national feminist and gay politics increased and became more institutionalized, the unique concentration of the lesbian population in Northampton was discussed in both local and national publications. Two national magazines, Harper’s and Rolling Stone, published overviews on lesbians: the 1981 Harper’s, “What Do Women Want?” along with the 1982, Rolling Stone, “America’s Gay Women,” emphasized Northampton’s unique lesbian population in what they reported as a new and trendy proliferation of lesbianism in the United States (Harrison; Van Gelder). As Rolling Stone stressed, “The five-college area around Northampton, Massachusetts is becoming a veritable lesbian Ellis Island” (Van Gelder 13). By 1992, the Boston Globe reiterated that characterization of Northampton as the migratory gateway to lesbianism, “Northampton, a two-hour drive from Boston, is the San Francisco of the lesbian community - or the Ellis Island, since according to local lore all gay women are thought to pass through here at least once” (Carton 36).

As Northampton’s lesbian subcultural reputation became of national interest, articles concurrently appeared in the Valley’s weekly alternative newspaper, Valley Advocate and in Northampton’s Daily Hampshire Gazette. The December 1981
Advocate cover essay, “Lesbian Chorus,” documented the regional lesbian community’s history, existence, and its profuse growth, and, moreover, the significance of the feminist movement to that growth. In eight pages with photos along with interviews with several anonymous lesbians, the Advocate described the profusion of area lesbian organizations, businesses, and resources. All-in-all the “Lesbian Chorus” revealed what many regional residents perhaps were unaware of: the size of the population and the influence of lesbians on the social, political, and economic dimensions of the Pioneer Valley (Axelson).

Beginning with a brief report of the first pride march in May 1982, which was followed by what became a predictable set of anti-gay letters to the editor, the Gazette provided ongoing coverage of annual gay pride marches in the 1980s. Adding to the visibility of lesbians in mainstream Valley consciousness, an article titled “Homosexual March Here Attracts 500” reported that “Northampton . . . has gained a reputation for its sizable lesbian community” (Bradley, 1). In 1983, the Gazette ran a series of comprehensive front page articles with a variety of titles offering multiple perspectives on lesbianism in the region and on homosexuality in general: “Homosexuality . . . Assessing Its Growing Impact on Northampton,” and “Lesbians: Finding One Another,” “Homosexuality: Why Gay?”, and “Homosexuality: The Church View.” Northampton had become, the Gazette reported, “A comfortable niche for lesbians here which has earned Northampton a national reputation as a mecca for women who love women” (Fitzgerald, “Homosexuality . . . Assessing” 1). Moreover, the Gazette explained, “Over the past thirteen years, lesbians have built a private society here as a world within a world complete with many institutions” (9). Although “homosexual” was the word of choice in
the Gazette during this time period, the focus was largely on the Northampton area’s lesbian population with only occasional references to the local gay male population (Bradley; Fitzgerald).

These first media coverages of Northampton as a center for a gender-specific sexual migration began to make explicit the presence of lesbians in the city and the region. As the lesbian presence emerged into public consciousness, the terms of what had been a largely separatist and subcultural community began to be altered. These national and local reportings not only made heterossexuals more conscious of the Northampton lesbian community, but also made lesbians more conscious of the vast array of community spaces, resources, social networks, and feminist organizations. Moreover, the deepening visibility of the Northampton region as a lesbian mecca became more noticeable to lesbians who lived in the area as well as to out-of-town lesbians who might potentially become part of the regional migration.

Although the 1980s revitalization of downtown Northampton and the influx of migrators who would transform the city’s demographic may seem similar to the changes in other desirable places to live there was a difference. What was unique about Northampton was the gender-specificity of the migration. The Northampton lesbian population increased in density and concentration in the 1980s. The Gazette noted in a 1983 article:

Hampshire County’s population of 138,000 would mean that there are roughly 14,000 gay men and lesbians here. While it is impossible to document the numbers of either gay men or lesbians here there have been a number of indications of the growing size and significance in the Northampton area which has been noted in magazines such as Harper’s, Rolling Stone and Newsweek [not underlined in original]. For instance, the 1980 federal census showed a 98 percent increase in the numbers of 25-to-34 year-old women in Northampton during the 1970s. When the figures were released, a city planner predicted a baby boom,
giving some lesbians a laugh for they attributed the surge to their growing numbers. (Fitzgerald, “Homosexuality . . . Assessing” 9)

The Gazette referenced research about this homosexual population density through the oft-cited statistic that “ten percent of the population is homosexual.” Given that the small city of Northampton has a population that has hovered around 30,000 for the past three decades, Gazette 1980s estimates of “homosexuals” in the city hovered around 3,000. In contrast, a feminist publication such as the Valley Women’s Voice gave a much higher estimate in 1983:

There are thousands of women-feminists, activists, lesbians, radicals within a 25-mile radius. We are creating a community of a sort that has never been created before . . . a strong wonderful beautiful community of women-identified-women [italics in original], we need to start thinking of ourselves as a group, and to start supporting ourselves as part of a group. . . . [focus] on the real work to be done – i.e. creating a loving supporting community of sisters. (Dyke 3)

Virtually every reference to homosexuality in the local press made some note of the large numbers of “homosexuals” in the area. The lesbian-specificity of the region was intermittently recognized in that media obsession with categorizing through counting. That lesbian-specificity can be seen in this excerpt from Valley Advocate’s description of the first Northampton Pride March in 1982: “Another unique fact about this event was that it may well have been the first mixed gay male and lesbian march anywhere in the world where women outnumbered the men” (Young 12). The Northampton lesbian migration, through adding both a rural and a gendered twist, illustrated and extended previous discussions about gay male migrations to urban gay meccas such as New York or San Francisco (Chauncey; Weston).

For lesbians, the new visibility of the Northampton community provided informational access to knowledge about lesbian spaces whether or not these were
physical permanent places such as the separatist Womonfyre Books in Northampton or temporary places such as the city streets that were activated as lesbian spaces through the presence of lesbians. Community formations in the 1980s, lesbian researcher Susan Krieger noted, were theorized from the perspective of "how lesbians have managed to have identity, . . . in a largely hostile world" (95). Important to a sense of subcultural community was a sense of safe space. As the Valley Advocate’s 1981 “Lesbian Chorus” self-identified heterosexual reporter noted about Northampton’s streets:

The mere fact that you can walk downtown and see dozens of relaxed, confident, capable women says a great deal about the Valley and the women who live here. (Axelson 12)

Respondents, such as Jill, underscored the significance of numbers and population density to the experience of lesbian community in the 1980s:

We were creating our own safe network, there’s safety in numbers and there weren’t as many numbers. Today, there’s so many numbers, that need to create it [community] isn’t as demanding. I am very very thankful that I was out in the early eighties, and got to be a lesbian in the eighties, because I think it was a very exciting time. Because we created a lot, we learned a lot about advocating for women. I don’t know whether it’s a beast or not, but we created that so you can feel safe in Northampton.

And, another interviewee, Pam recalled:

But in the eighties, there was more of a need for lesbians to be a community because there weren’t as many of us. So, in order to feel protected, in order to meet each other and be social, we gathered. There still weren’t a lot, so we came together, and when together you create a sense of community. As a person of color I’m used to being in a community where there’s not as many. . . . There were places to go to see one another, to have those relationships as a way to validate each other.

Because of social scarcity, the feeling of safety in the surety of seeing other lesbians due to the increasing regional population density sometimes trumped
other aspects of community formation such as political work or feminist values.

As Sid remembered:

I feel like Northampton’s sort of coincidental and we all came here because there were more of us than in most places. And that’s very comforting in Northampton; it’s a city where it’s comfortable to be as lesbian. You knew you were going to see a lot of lesbians if you were out wandering the streets. But we didn’t come here for anything else, except to see each other often and to walk down the street and not get hassled.

Participants spelled out those feelings of safety in community as they continued to stress the importance of seeing other lesbians in the formation of community. The sense of community itself hinged on “seeing lesbians.” There was a commonsensical understanding of a community, a “Lestopia,” that is partially constructed around a “safe seeing.” Danielle stated:

I’m in Northampton because I see other lesbians on the street. There’s a certain level of protection. I can walk down the street and not have to be afraid.

Respondents linked these experiences of personal safety in a public space, the streets of Northampton, to the experience of seeing other lesbians on the city’s streets. Consequently, participants expressed a need not only for seeing and identifying other lesbians through social visibility, but also for a personal safety that was articulated to those experiences of what I term “safe seeing.”

Belief systems about defining what constituted a homogenous lesbian feminist identity were implicit in these interactions of seeing and identifying others as lesbians. Another individual, Andrea, confirmed the importance of recognizing other lesbians on the streets through the codes of 1980s lesbian authenticity:

I moved here in early seventies to go to college at UMass. I was in and out of school awhile and then I finished up in Women’s Studies. Have traveled all over the country and this is where I want to live. I have been to other lesbian
communities, but this is where I want to be for the rest of my life. I walk through
town and see my type of people and I see why I call Northampton home.

Seeing other lesbians as part of the public visibility of Northampton everyday street life
was associated with the process of self-identification through self-recognition. Another
individual, Ruth, was of the same mind:

I came here so that I would be able to see others like me, other lesbians, out in
public when I walked down the street. Here you would see women. Women that
you would know were dykes. There were the clothes, the haircuts, the way of
strutting down the street. There was the way someone would catch your eye
nobody pays that kind of attention today. It’s just not a big deal. . . . You could
pick them out and they were noticing you too.

The ability to recognize other lesbians through the signifiers of dyke identification
in the 1980s – the ubiquitous “dyke uniform” that signified lesbian authenticity
along with the exchanging of looks – was an important part of walking down the
street and feeling safe in seeing other lesbians.

Moreover, many respondents underscored that desire to see and be seen by
other lesbians through a sexualized looking that emphasized the erotic dimensions
of recognition as a significant aspect of their experience of the 1980s

Northampton lesbian social community. Bets indicated:

It was very seductive to me, to be here surrounded by lesbians. That was the
community too. I loved having lots of lesbians around. I wanted to live
somewhere where women being affectionate, being sexual together, women
loving women, was okay. It’s very liberating to be able to touch your lover in
public. It’s definitely the type of thing hets don’t have to think about. I loved
seeing them everywhere I went.

And Gina commented,

Downtown is not exactly what you would call a cruising scene. But I make a
regular round checking out who’s there, who’s new in town. Just catching their
eye, just looking them over. Seeing what’s up. Who’s around, who’s available.
Participants described the personal resonance of seeing lesbians on the streets of Northampton. The interactions of seeing and recognizing self and others as a form of social visibility, which included a sexualized visibility, were central to respondents’ decisions to live in the region. Lucy reiterated:

When we first came here we just stood on the street corner at Pleasant Street and Main Street waiting for the light and said, “Look at all of them. Look at all the lesbians.” It seemed like everywhere we looked, there they were. It was very exciting and frankly a real turn on because we were newly involved and it felt like a honeymoon period.

Accordingly, the interactions of seeing and identifying were central to the 1980s migration of lesbians to the Northampton region, and, in turn, to strengthening some aspects of the subcultural separatist formation. However, seeing lesbian authenticity through the recognition of others for self- and desiring- identifications occurred in conjunction with the changing visibility of the city’s lesbian population in the national and local press. Even as the emerging reputation of Northampton, as home to a uniquely concentrated lesbian population, moved into mainstream visibility that movement also created additional types of openings for constructing lesbian subjectivity. The potential for different types of lesbian subjectivities was part of the transition from a subcultural separatist community that had emerged in the region in the 1970s to a 1980s lesbian social community that entered into engagement with the mainstream city culture.

While many factors, including the changes in women’s personal and professional lives through feminism during this time period, impacted on the lesbian regional migration, researchers studying the interrelations of media and migration offers the suggestion that the search for community is in reciprocity with media portrayals (Gillespie; King and Wood; Morley “Belongings”; Weston Long, Slow). Weston contends that queer people seek out sexual communities in various geographic locales,
typically urban, partially in response to the power of what Bronski has termed, “the power of seeing the sexual” (67). Weston’s concept can be expanded through examining the interrelations between the 1980s lesbian migratory impulse and the emerging subcultural reputation of Northampton as a desirable destination for lesbian migrants.

A number of the Valley’s self-identified lesbians who participated in this study described their experiences of migrating to Northampton in the 1980s based on the area’s subcultural repute as a mecca for lesbians, or, a “Lestopia.” Several interviewees recalled their experiences of learning about the lesbian presence in the Northampton region: “We heard about it in California,” while others took notice of Northampton's reputation for having “lots of women with good politics.” Others affirmed, “It was like this Mayberry for lesbians,” and, moreover, “Northampton was a brand name for lesbians.” To repeat the Gazette’s confirmation, “Northampton . . . has gained a reputation for its sizable lesbian community” (Bradley, “Homosexual” 1). One respondent, Andrea, verified the impact of the press coverage on the local lesbian migration:

We read about it somewhere, maybe Off Our Backs? Or was it some gay guide for travelers? It was just something we all knew about . . . there were lots of women with good politics. It was a good place for feminists. We heard it was a good place to make community.

Northampton’s subcultural repute as a “lesbian mecca” was extended in the 1980s through the emerging national and local visibility of the city’s lesbian population in national publications such as Rolling Stone and Harper’s. As the subcultural Lestopic renown migrated into the mainstream cultural imaginary, in both national and local media, many respondents described how Northampton’s lesbian visibility was a factor in their initial consideration of regional relocation. Greta commented:

It’s just commonly known that there are lots of lesbians in this area. Even my mother saw it [media coverage]. We were thinking about living somewhere else
before we had the baby. When we came here on vacation we found a lesbian realtor right away and one thing led to another. We were real excited when we visited and saw how many women were actually here. It made us think we could have a home here for our child.

In addition to Northampton's reputation for a uniquely concentrated lesbian population, the city’s other assets factored into the 1980s lesbian migratory impulse. Basic questions about why participants moved to the Northampton area reflected the constellation of factors that comprised the geographic- and gender-specificities of the city, and, thus, expanded upon the lesbian migratory impulse.

Participants such as Pam stressed the region’s scenic vistas and access to the outdoors in their reasons for moving to, living in, and staying in the Northampton area:

We’re athletes. We bike, we hike all over, we hike up Mount Tom. We hike in the Berkshires. We came here for the outdoors: the mountains, the river, the fields. That’s why there’s so many of us here in the Valley. This is a women-centered place. The mountains look like women’s bodies, with shapes of breasts and hips.

Others, such as Lucy, reiterated the economic and cultural changes of the 1980s downtown revitalization through catalogings of Northampton’s museums and galleries, as well as upscale restaurants and shopping venues, as reasons for living in or near the city:

I suppose you could call us ‘foodies.’ We go out to dinner at least once a week, we cook something special together every night. It was part of our courtship. It made Northampton very special to us because we kind of grew up along with the city when the different restaurants changed and began to become more gourmet. That variety of restaurants made it okay to live somewhere that was perhaps more provincial than I would have preferred. [The area] was certainly more natural foods-oriented than I would choose.

Respondents also emphasized Northampton’s reputation for a diversity that was to be found not only in the city’s dining and shopping opportunities, but also in the diverse population. Laura stressed:

Part of what makes it okay to be here is that there are other people like us who are not necessarily lesbians... some of them are artists and this is what gives it a funky feeling that I didn’t find other places. The neighborhood I live in is near a
bunch of old factories with studios and other types of funky spaces and it just feels like someone I could be. I guess I mean I can be a part of this.

Laura’s accent on the “funky feeling” in a neighborhood that seemed like a community evoked a personal comfort in a quality of life that was enhanced by the potential for connection with Northampton residents outside of the lesbian community. The appreciation of aspects of the city, besides seeing lesbians on the street, pointed toward the potential for the breaking down of the subcultural separatist boundary that was already in process in the 1980s.

Respondents also noted the region’s prominence as an educational center in their reasons for coming to and staying in the Valley. The gender-specificity of the two women’s colleges, Mount Holyoke and Smith College, along with the institutionalization of the Women’s Studies Program and the Everywoman’s Center at the University of Massachusetts, implicated feminism in the transition from subcultural separatism to social community as well as in the movement of the lesbian community into public view.

As Jeanne recollected:

I came to Smith to study psychology and took a class on women and psychology and I right away met my first girlfriend. We went to many of the feminist spaces in town, you know, Womonfyre for meetings. We started doing political work with other lesbians in the Valley.

In the 1980s, Mount Holyoke and especially Smith developed reputations for having a large lesbian presence among the student body, which Ann Forsyth characterized as “a thriving social experiment on its own terms: a place where the benefits of a single-sex education have been extended to single-sex life” (“NoHo” 633). Relatedly, Northampton’s progressive reputation for tolerance was also a strong presence in participant replies to the question, “Why are you here?” As Mary stated:
I always knew I wanted to stay here because I was really interested in the uniqueness of the area. The types of people that were here. I was interested in the politics that seemed to mesh with my increased radicalism and feminism and also there seemed to be a sense of community. I like the history and the people that have been here. I like the feeling of being downtown.

This population mix was important to respondents. In comments about the desire to “fit in somewhere,” many also noted the non-commercialized accent on a diverse Northampton, the personal significance of “seeing a range of types,” and the importance of how “the different types of people make it safe to be different.” Participants stressed the variety of people and belief systems that comprised the alternative lifestyles and progressive political scenes to be found in Northampton in the 1980s. Jill reiterated:

I wanted to walk down the streets that Sojourner Truth walked down. I came here for the politics. When I moved here to go to college Mary Daly and Adrienne Rich lived here. *Sinister Wisdom* was published here for a while. There was Womonfyre [the women’s bookstore]. Smith. Mount Holyoke. There’s the Lesbian Calendar.

And Laura explained:

It’s not just about being a lesbian or a woman. I have other political things that are important to me. The activism and simple things like the fact that everybody recycles and there are lots of vegetarians and the food coops. I’m an old lefty and the earthy crunchy thing appeals to me. It’s all here.

Commentaries about “radicalism and feminism” as well as the self-acknowledged “old-lefty” identification all pointed toward an emphasis on the politicized meanings of Northampton’s reputation for diversity. Increased visibility through the formalizing of feminist events and organizations in Northampton created openings for coalitions between lesbian feminists and other progressives including heterosexual as well as gay men who were feminist allies. That coalition building brought factions of the community to the attention of the city mainstream as part of the fabric of the broader city landscape and further illustrated the disruption of subcultural separatism in the 1980s.
Formalizing Feminism and Coalition Building

The 1980s visibility of feminist politics provided a context for strengthening the regional lesbian social community as well as a vehicle for moving that subcultural separatist formation into different types of public visibility. The same social, political, and economic conditions that created openings for feminism—changing gender and sexual roles that contributed to economic and professional opportunities for women—coupled with the visibility of gay liberatory politics sustained aspects of the lesbian community in the 1980s. As lesbian individuals and organizations moved into mainstream awareness in Northampton’s economic and cultural structures, the boundaries of the subcultural separatist formation began to unravel. There were several “firsts” during this time period that reflected broader movements in feminist as well as gay politics: in 1978, the first Western Massachusetts Take Back the Night March and, in 1982, the first Northampton Lesbian and Gay Pride March. That both marches were held in Northampton illustrated the significance of Northampton to lesbian politics. The political impact of national feminism was further reflected in 1984 when Geraldine Ferraro, the first female vice presidential candidate, spoke to a crowd of 20,000 at the University. In fact, the Advocate’s 1981 “Lesbian Chorus” bore the subtitle, “The Valley has become a locus for lesbian-feminist activity and with it has come a new consciousness” (Axelson 1).

The mobilization into public visibility of a lesbian feminist community through feminist activism was a significant dimension of the transition from subcultural separatism to a social community that was becoming more interactive with the broader city culture. The informal lesbian and lesbian feminist networks, newsletters, and
organizations that emerged in the 1970s became more formalized, and, in some cases, institutionalized in the 1980s. The Valley Women’s Voice took up permanent residence in a rented Northampton office. The 1980s approval of the University of Massachusetts Women’s Studies Department was significant to women who came out together in the classroom through their feminist politics. The 1970s consciousness-raising groups, social events and activist meetings transitioned into formal organizations that reflected feminist concerns about women’s lives in the 1980s. The University’s Everywoman’s Center, along with area feminist therapists, sponsored regular support groups for a variety of concerns including coming out, eating disorders, stress, lesbian couples, and motherhood. Sexual violence was addressed through workshops on rape, sexual abuse, and violence, mirroring the growing feminist grassroots focus on violence against women. Moreover, these feminist and lesbian support groups were widely acknowledged as good places to find other lesbians with shared beliefs. Joel recalled:

The support group scene was sort of like Northampton's dyke bar scene. Even though you might be talking about sexual abuse, it was a place to find a girlfriend. At least in one of those groups you could count on somebody being a feminist . . . having good politics.

There was a process of reciprocity between the lesbian population and the downtown revitalization. Support groups formed the basis for the service-providing businesses that cropped up in Northampton as part of the downtown revitalization in the 1980s. This recollection from Joel reflects that reciprocity:

The first therapist I went to as part of my coming out was at the Everywoman’s Center. She went into private practice fairly soon after that with an office in Northampton, up above Bart’s [ice cream parlor], maybe even part of one of those collectives?

Feminist beliefs and values permutated the lesbian networks through a range of resources that increasingly formalized the goal of working against the patriarchy. The networks
became more public when these support groups were institutionalized as lesbian feminist businesses that provided services for the community and therefore, needed to advertise in order to obtain clients. When lesbian service-oriented businesses took up residence in rented spaces, this additional interaction with the city's mainstream resulted in other types of lesbian visibility.

The separatist media forms that emerged in the 1970s were more broadly disseminated through the more formalized 1980s lesbian feminist networks. In addition, separatist representational space tapped into national lesbian cultural networks through events such as the multiple visits of JEB whose “Lesbian Images in Photography Slide Show” was an influential example of the feminist emphasis on positive imaging. Concerts with the founding figures of what became known as “Women’s Music” regularly took place at various Valley locations and became intermittent sources of income for the lesbian entrepreneurs who organized these events. Laura corroborated:

The women who produced something like the Music Festival [Wendell Country Women's Music Festival] xxxvi were not exactly raking in the dough. This was hard work that was taken up by individual lesbians so they could produce women’s culture for our community. The goal was to provide a space for listening to music by women that was produced for women only. Some of the big names came, I think maybe even Meg Christian, definitely Alix Dobkin. It was pretty wild.

In the 1980s local events, such as the Lesbian Arts and Crafts Show first held in 1979 in Northampton, became institutionalized annual events offering goods and services from lesbian artisans and crafts people. Ongoing projects such as the Women's Media Project expanded to become the Women's Media Network and served as a wider women’s resource center for other feminist media outlets. The relocating of the New Alexandria Lesbian Library, lesbian historical archives, to the village of Florence, in the northwestern part of Northampton, underscored the burgeoning collecting and
documenting of lesbian feminist “herstory.” Establishing lesbian businesses with permanent spaces, publicity, and income reinforced the separatist goal of creating safe places for women-only as part of working against the patriarchy. However, in ironic contradiction, that separatist strengthening was simultaneously disrupted through the movement of lesbian businesses into the public everyday city environment. Lesbian businesses created different forms of lesbian economic subject positions including lesbian service-provider, entrepreneur, and business owner. These emerging subject positions expanded the parameters of the central communal tenet of identificatory conformity, and, thus, ran parallel to the transforming boundaries of the subcultural separatist formation.

Separatist boundaries were further disturbed as feminist cultural events that were open to the general public became more institutionalized at the University of Massachusetts and other area colleges. A proliferation of feminist iconic figures visited the Valley including feminist philosophy icons Joan Cocks and Mary Daly as well as the feminist writers Toni Cade Bambara, Audre Lorde, and Adrienne Rich. Feminist documentary films, such as *Women in Arms*, were shown in the area along with films by lesbian filmmakers, Barbara Hammer and Jan Oxenberg, as part of a 1982 “Lesbian Film Series” sponsored by the Smith College Lesbian Alliance (SCLA). Mariele remembered:

“You did try to go to everything, especially at Smith because they had such great lesbian events. That was our social life. There was a sense of imperativeness and urgency attached to going to these events.

Such events further underscored the regional visibility of the lesbian population as feminism became of further interest to the heterosexual city mainstream in the 1980s. The awareness that these events were open to the general both contributed to and simultaneously disrupted the sense of separatist security.
Moreover, the public interest in lesbian events expanded as the lesbian population began to pay attention to broader national issues such as nuclear disarmament. Of note was the emerging focus on questions about feminism and racism with workshops on dismantling racism and the subsequent local lesbian participation in a 1986 national “March Against Racism.” Esther had strong opinions about that diversifying of feminist politics in the 1980s:

Feminism seemed open to diversity and was a fit for me. Northampton seemed very open to everything about diversity for a place without that much diversity. People who don’t know me can be unfriendly. Even certain stores in town were bad, following you around and such. After awhile I found other POCs [people of color]. I stayed here because I could be the two Xs and that’s the color and the female.

While Esther affirmed the inclusion of raced politics in feminist politics, this recollection also reflected the negotiation between the appearance of acceptance in Northampton and experiences of difference through the additional dimension of raced difference.xxxvii

Nevertheless, this individual also recalled in detail the visits to the Valley in the 1980s of well-known feminist women of color such as June Jordan, Sonia Sanchez, and Angela Davis.

Additionally, the engagement of lesbian feminist politics with the broader city culture expanded through incorporating the possibility of lesbian motherhood into the ongoing feminist emphasis on women’s reproductive health and issues associated with childcare. There were forums for lesbians who were interested in becoming parents like the “Lesbians Considering Children” workshop held at Smith in 1984. Greta recollected that event:

We already knew one couple who had the requisite turkey baster baby. They told us about it because they were presenting. They had used a gay friend as the donor and it had worked out well. For another couple, not so well. The guy wanted his family to be more involved and one thing led to another so it wasn’t working out.
We wanted a girl, of course, and one of the presenters talked about a ritual for the insemination that was supposed to help that along. . . . This was pre-sperm bank days, you had to find your own donor, and you had to be careful if you wanted legal rights. It was eye-opening indeed.

Although Greta’s commentary underscored issues such as the desire for a girl child that reinforced lesbian separatism and further disturbed the subcultural boundary. The necessity of using gay or heterosexual men as sperm donors led to different forms of lesbian connections as did the potential for other types of associations with heterosexuals through parenting.

Additional dimensions of feminism mobilized the lesbian social community into various types of interaction with the area mainstream. Events that were increasingly open to the general public created the potential for other forms of coalition building with individuals and groups who were not part of the lesbian population. Although sometimes, especially in the 1970s, feminist events were designated as for women- or lesbians-only, in the 1980s, as part of the coalition building that began to occur, many events were open to heterosexual men, women as well as gay male allies. These events were advertised in newspapers geared toward the general public such as the Gazette or the Advocate. The Valley Women’s Voice and the Lesbian Connection, both offering a calendar of events with advertisements for lesbian services along with feminist editorials, were distributed all over the Valley in groceries, bookstores, and coffee shops.

It is ironic that the feminist model of structural changes in the patriarchy through grassroots communal activism meant an increased visibility in the public realm that disrupted the boundaries of subcultural separatism. Nowhere was the irony of increased visibility greater than in the political coalitions that developed around violence against women. Valley lesbian feminists were deeply involved in organizing and maintaining
regional organizations devoted to working to end violence against women. In the 1980s, concerns about violence against women were institutionalized through organized escort services for female students, hotlines, counseling, shelters, and other support services for battered women. Lesbian feminist organizations were actively developing formal partnerships with other area progressive groups to work on feminist concerns about rape, sexual abuse, violence, and pornography. A primary concentration was on the interconnections between pornography and violence against women. The marches and rallies protesting violence against women, beginning with the first Take Back the Night March held in Northampton in 1978, were significant to the coalition building. Such events brought together lesbian feminists with heterosexuals and gay male allies in a ritualistic event that had historical significance to the feminist movement on an international level. Joel described:

Those marches [Take Back the Night] were empowering for us as a group. Many, many women, many lesbians, and some men, all marching as the community. There was the sense that we were the Valley. We were in this time and place and that was the most important thing we could be doing with our lives. It felt like life or death for all women, all of us. We were all in this as a community.

Being “all in this as a community” took on new meaning as the institutionalization of feminist grassroots activism moved into other types of public visibility which included feminist coalitions with other political individuals and organizations.

As lesbians began to work with gay males on political goals, the previously disconnected regional populations began to move into alliance. Partnering on the organization of the first Northampton Gay and Lesbian Pride March in May 1982 strengthened the lesbian and gay male alliances further. Structured alliances between gay males and lesbians began with the 1982 founding of the Gay and Lesbian Activists (GALA) which sponsored the first Northampton Lesbian and Gay Pride March in May
1982. Other events in the 1980s included potlucks, shared sports and political events, workshops on issues such as racism. Lesbian visibility increased as a result of the formalizing of gay and lesbian alliances. Although the parameters of lesbian separatism were further disturbed through building alliances with gay males, feminism was an ironic emollient in building these alliances.

Coalitions with individuals and groups who supported feminist politics and causes associated with feminism expanded to include partnerships with a range of progressive groups and organizations in the 1980s. The Gazette made note of this movement from political separatism to progressive coalition building:

The split gradually closed, mostly as heterosexual feminists and lesbians rejoined to tackle issues such as rape awareness and battered women. (Fitzgerald, “Lesbians” 9)

And, one interviewee, Andrea recalled:

Separatism was based on anger and it was necessary to have a time period where we could just be on our own. That worked for a lot of us. . . . Separatism can also be very isolating. You find you need connections and alliances with gay men and straights. We found we had to work as a community to build something safer and more progressive for our city.

The changing public visibility through feminist coalition building with other progressive groups did make things safer and better for lesbians in 1980s Northampton. One individual, Arlene, distinguished the 1980s Northampton feminist activity from feminism in other cities:

The only difference in Northampton was that we were really, really organized and that was because of the lesbians and the other similar minded people who lived here. A tradeoff, I suppose, with being a lesbian separatist, a tradeoff with living separate from men. It meant you might have to have men in your private space, even in your house.

The formalizing of feminist politics was an facilitator in the transition from lesbian subcultural separatism to a social community that was involved with some aspects of the
city’s mainstream culture. The founding of additional feminist organizations that resided in more permanent spaces along with developing grassroots activism and coalition building strengthened the subcultural formation. The awareness of numerous lesbians with similar feminist political beliefs created a sense of safety in lesbian space. However, the boundaries of subcultural separatism were disturbed by the mobilization through feminism of the lesbian population into public visibility. Moreover, the emergence of the additional lesbian subject positions of service-provider, parent, and political ally created the potential for the disruption of the basic communal tenets of identificatory sameness. At the same time, worries about losing subcultural identity through visibility were offset by the desire for social acceptance through increased visibility, which was in negotiation with the fear of backlash. Consequently, communal boundaries were disturbed though the movement into public visibility even as that movement resulted in social gains on the local level. Another site for such disturbances was to be found in the parallel trajectories of the economic and cultural revitalization of downtown Northampton in the 1980s.

**Parallel Economic and Cultural Revitalization**

Ann Forsyth in her research into the interrelations of the growth of the lesbian population and the revitalization of Northampton argues, “In terms of redevelopment, Northampton would have been revitalized without the lesbian population, but its character would have been different” (“NoHo” 644). Factors, such as the diversity, brought to the city by the mere presence of the concentrated lesbian community as well as the coalition building with other progressive groups impacted the cultural revitalization in concurrence with the movement of the economics of separatism into engagement with the city’s infrastructure. At different points the mutually productive
trajectories of cultural and economic revitalization benefited the lesbian population, while at other points, the 1980s downtown development had a less-than-positive and sometimes detrimental impact.

As feminist organizations in the region became more formalized and public, the 1970s feminist meetings and consciousness-raising groups that had been held in private homes, church basements and university classrooms were institutionalized through the renting of permanent spaces in the 1980s. This institutionalization of feminism provided a permanence that developed into small lesbian businesses such as the feminist therapy or female bodywork that offered services specifically geared toward the lesbian community. As part of the economics of downtown revitalization, lesbian service-providers rented the previously vacant second-floor spaces as downtown offices. Concurrently, the Main Street spaces created more visibility for these service-oriented businesses, as did the advertising necessary to attract lesbian and other clients, thus further contributing to the cultural and economic revitalization of the city. The emphasis on lesbian businesses as more service-orientated, Ann Forsyth indicates, reinforced the reputation of Northampton as a major center for lesbians (“NoHo” 630):

Lesbian services and organizations have increasingly clustered in Northampton in the past decades [late-1970s to mid-1990s], attracting lesbians as visitors as well as residents. Lesbians have contributed to the wide set of cultural changes in Northampton’s downtown, and, as a group, lesbians can be seen as benefiting from creating a sense of lesbian territory in the area. (“NoHo” 623)

One participant, Ruth, verified the emergence of the lesbian service-providing business in 1980s Northampton:

The thing to do if you wanted to work with women, if you didn’t want to work with hets was to be a therapist. There was good money to be made because everybody needed to see a therapist. . . . Talking about coming out; doing couples therapy; that’s what lesbians did. It was one of the ways you could tell if someone was a lesbian. You couldn’t go to a straight therapist because they wouldn’t know
anything about being a lesbian. Everybody had a crush on the therapist. There was a whole lesbian feminist subcultural thing going on in the eighties. They all had offices on Main Street. They all went to the same school. They all hung out together. If you went to a dance, there they were.

Lesbians established businesses in the revitalizing city providing services for women with an emphasis on lesbian-only services. According to Forsyth’s data and verified by interviewee recollections, in 1980s Northampton most lesbian businesses were focused on providing services for other lesbians in line with the feminist community tenet of separatism (“NoHo” 639). However, the lesbian entrance into the city’s commercial scene placed separatist economics into negotiation with the goals of revitalization. While lesbian business decisions were based partially on separatist tenets, there was also the need to make an income in order to maintain a business. Although, as Forsyth continues, separatist goals frequently overrode economic gain (“Nonconformist” 351), lesbian business owners had to expand their services to heterosexual clients in order to pay the increasingly escalating downtown rents.

Economic transitions from subcultural separatism to social community created new lesbian subject positions as business owners, taxpayers, and professional colleagues who interfaced with heterosexuals as part of the city’s transitioning environment. Further disturbing the boundaries of subcultural separatism as well as the communal tenet of lesbian authenticity, was the beginning of a more visible class system within the lesbian population. Joel indicated:

It was hard to make money if you were a separatist. There were serious limits in what you could do and not work with men. So working at the bookstore or the restaurant or the newspaper were prime slots in the lesbian employment field . . . but there wasn’t really any money to be made there. The lucky ones already had jobs as professors or lawyers and could just become professional lesbians.
Individual lesbians had varying levels of education and access to professionalism along with varied familial backgrounds and/or familial money. Class differences became more apparent through lesbian involvement in the downtown revitalization further disturbing the boundaries of a subcultural community that was deeply invested in the presumption of identificatory homogeneity. As Northampton became the center of the lesbian community in the 1980s, the disruption of separatist economics became more visible as part of the broader transitions to a social community that was also in transitional interaction with the city’s mainstream.

The Everywoman’s Center at the University of Massachusetts continued to be important to the lesbian population in the 1980s. However, the founding of two separatist lesbian-owned businesses, the Common Womon Club and the Womonfyre Bookstore, cemented Northampton as the physical center of the regional lesbian social community. Founded in 1976 by a lesbian collective, the Common Womon Club, a restaurant defined as woman-only, served as a lesbian community center for readings, a resource center for information about lesbianism and feminism, and also as a permanent physical place to socialize with and to see other lesbians. In 1978, Womonfyre Books, a bookstore devoted to feminist and women’s publications, joined the Common Womon Collective in the same Masonic Street building, which was located one block from the city’s downtown. The purchase of the Masonic Street building as an economic symbol of lesbian property ownership was significant, and brought the lesbian population to the attention of the broader city mainstream during this time period (Fitzgerald, “Lesbians” 9; Forsyth, “NoHo” 631).
The visibility of these two lesbian-owned businesses underscored the implication of the lesbian population in the intertwined cultural and economic trajectories of the downtown revitalization. The previously vacant single-family house was painted a bright purple and had a large sign with red and gold flames symbolizing the name, Womonfyre. Lucy recalled the resonance of the physicality of the lesbian owned downtown business:

I remember the first time I saw Womonfyre. It stood out with that sign with the flames. I was just coming out and I was sort of embarrassed. It seemed so garish and bright as though anyone could go by and see us.

Another individual, Jill had this to say about the appearance of the Womonfyre building:

It made it special. It made it easy to describe to women who were new in town. You went to meetings there. It was a permanent community clubhouse that we bought and paid for. It was the place to go if you wanted to be an activist. I think I actually heard Mary Daly read there the first time. Didn’t she used to live around here? I know that I saw that photographer [JEB] who used to take those photos.

While Jill remarked upon the purchasing of the building housing Womonfyre Bookstore with pleasure as an acknowledgement of the permanence of the community, Lucy expressed concerns about the increased visibility of the lesbian population as exemplified by the bookstore’s sign. Moreover, as these recollections demonstrate, the visibility of that lesbian feminist space moved the community into a different type of public visibility.

The 1981 cover story in Harper’s magazine, “What Do Women Want?”, highlighted the Bookstore as a physical symbol of the Northampton lesbian presence:

Womon Fyre [sic] Books (specializing in Wimmin’s culture/Books by and Wimmin in all fields). The bookstore serves as a gathering place for women who are strongly disposed to alter language to suit their politics or their sexual preferences, which many of them consider to be the same thing. (Harrison 442)

As a lesbian space, Womonfyre sustained the subcultural and separatist communal formation in the 1980s. Furthermore, the Womonfyre sign was a powerful symbol of both the cultural and economic presence of the lesbian population and of the changing face of
downtown Northampton that resonated visually and symbolically with both lesbians and heterosexuals. Although defined as for women-only, as a commercial enterprise located in the city’s downtown, Womonfyre was technically open to the public, a source of contention that made the bookstore a visible target for the anti-lesbian backlash.

The formalizing of lesbian networking systems further broke down the privacy of the subcultural separatist boundary. The Valley Women’s Voice, which moved in 1980 from the University of Massachusetts to a downtown Northampton rented space, published a 10-16 pages monthly newsprint publication focused on articles and opinions about feminist and lesbian politics. The Voice included a calendar with listings for lesbian feminist social, and political events as well as advertisements for the emerging network of lesbian services. By the end of the 1980s, the Valley Women’s Voice collective had folded and was replaced by an individually owned business enterprise, the Lesbian Calendar. The Calendar, founded in 1987, carried editorials, letters to the editor, a complete calendar of events, personal ads, and advertisements for the assortment of businesses and services that were part of the network that economically sustained the subcultural community. Although the Calendar was a more separatist enterprise than the Voice with limited distribution through progressive bookstores and by subscription, both resources were available at public outlets. That public availability sustained the community while simultaneously moving the density of and formal organization of the lesbian population into more regional visibility. The calendars and service listings of both the Voice and the Calendar were acknowledged as critical sources of information for local lesbian events. Ruth remembered:

If you wanted to spend your money on lesbian-owned businesses, The Calendar was the place to look. If you wanted to know about dances . . . concerts, ways to
put your money into women’s events. All the big-name therapists that everybody went to when they came out or broke up were in the Calendar.

The Lesbian Calendar symbolized the separatist emphasis of the lesbian entrepreneurial impulse during this time period. As a central subcultural networking device, the Calendar further facilitated the institutionalizing of lesbian and feminist activities, organizations, events, and services, and, ironically, through that institutionalization, brought these lesbian resources to the attention of the city’s mainstream.

Lesbian separatist events designed to make money now interfaced with the permanent lesbian business spaces such as Womonfyre Books and the Valley Women's Voice and they bolstered the developing lesbian presence in the Valley. Although still part of the separatist resistance to the patriarchy, various types of entrepreneurial events entered into the emerging lesbian, economic network as lesbian-produced media forms were more broadly disseminated. For instance, the dances that had been held in church basements or at college gymnasiums moved into a different type of public spatiality in the 1980s. Beginning in 1982 a series of women-only dances, which were held at roving sites in the Valley, were organized by “La Mix,” a group of lesbian entrepreneurs. Once a month, different area restaurants or bars became lesbian spaces. Mary stated:

The dances were for women only but you couldn’t always keep out the men. . . . I felt sorry for those women [“La Mix”] because everyone always complained about wherever the dance was, you know, there was too much drinking. There were complaints about them having the male bartenders. There was no accessibility. You couldn’t win.

The “La Mix” dances were another example of separatist culture as a site for lesbian economic development, however meager those economics might be. And clearly, individuals were becoming more critical as consumers of such events. The challenges of lesbian entrepreneurship revealed some of the fiscal holes in the economics of separatism
in the Valley. Nevertheless, the ability to have some economic control over the physicality of separatist space, albeit a highly visible public space open to men, was critical to the feeling of safety that strengthened and sustained community in 1980s Northampton even as those transitioning economics mobilized the subcultural into interaction with the mainstream.

Lesbian contributions to the downtown revitalization moved the population deeper into the economic and cultural fabric of the city mainstream. The Gazette quoted one lesbian resident:

It is time to acknowledge and affirm the existence and the significant contribution of lesbian and gay people to every part of our political and cultural lives. . . . The homosexual community is more pervasive than many people realize. . . . We live on almost every street, we work at almost every kind of job imaginable. . . . We are everywhere. (Bradley, “Homosexual” 7)

The economic networks of the social community provided advertising and clients for lesbian businesses, while the city’s economic frameworks offered rental space and professional collegiality beyond the separatist formations. Those types of professional and economic interconnections bolstered the engagement of the lesbian population with the city’s mainstream. Another Gazette commentary reinforced that surfacing mainstream awareness:

There are lesbians who hold important jobs at institutions such as Smith College and the Northampton State Hospital, lesbians who own businesses downtown, and lesbians who wait on tables and work as carpenters, lawyers, schoolteachers, and psychiatrists. (Fitzgerald, “Lesbian” 9)

While many respondents were invested in an anti-patriarchal, anti-capitalistic position on consumerism, the involvement of lesbians in the economic revitalization of the city also created space for the subject position of lesbian consumer. Marian described the 1980s changes in her feminist commitment to opposing capitalism through consuming practices:
There was a period of time [pre-1990s] when I tried religiously to only spend money on items made by women or lesbians, or at least goods made by companies with some political conscience. It felt important to defy capitalism through my purchasing power. It was hard. My children were becoming old enough to care about brand names. When Northampton gentrified, it made it a challenge to go into town and shop because everything was so expensive. We did do the crafts show [annual Lesbian Arts and Crafts Show] for things like Hanukkah presents. That used to be easier because I did not need to buy clothes for work back then . . . I had child support. . . . I still try to buy local.

Marian’s discussion illustrated the negotiation between the economics of separatism and the movement of lesbians as consumers into downtown economics in the 1980s. Taking a stance on separatist economics through consumer choices, or, as one individual explained, “Supporting dyke businesses was part of what held us together as a community. The women’s bookstore and restaurant were where I did my spending.”

Although for many, decisions about spending money were based on wanting to give economic support to lesbian-owned businesses, there was a spillover into the other downtown businesses that meant lesbians began to be viewed as customers. Main Street retail storeowner Silvia R. Fine had this to say for the Gazette in response to controversies over the annual Northampton lesbian and gay pride marches in 1982:

I think people are just making too much fuss over the whole thing [lesbian population]. You don’t have to like or dislike what they stand for . . . They are just people. They come in here and buy what they need when they need it. They are just customers like anybody else. . . . We don’t look at them with labels. (Fitzgerald, “Viewpoints Differ” 1)

On one hand, this heterosexual business owner’s perspective on lesbians as visible consumers seemed to promote an acceptance of the lesbian population. On the other hand, it was a limited acceptance suggesting the increasing visibility of the lesbian population through such venues as marching down Main Street was “too much fuss” if you had to consider the lesbians as more than “just customers like anybody else.” There
is an inference in this perspective that acceptance was based on lesbians as customers, an inference that is made more explicit in this recollection from Joel:

> The majority of them thought about old Northampton with a smile and a wink. They like the changes if it’s to their advantage, but they don’t want to know anything about them. Maybe their complaint was that there are a few more of us than they would want it to be or we’re making too much noise, or they don’t want to see the kissing or whatever, but as far as the lesbian stuff goes with our money, I never heard anyone complaining. They’re not going to complain to me, the business community. The sense that I get is that we have a rather progressive business community because they want the money. They’ve always been very happy to take my money.

The additional subject position of lesbian as consuming citizen with spending potential was in economic accompaniment to the subject positions of lesbians as entrepreneur, business owner, service provider, renter, taxpayer, and employee. A television segment “Women Who Love Women,” which aired in 1992 on ABC’s 20/20 with a description of the lesbian community in Northampton, had this to say about lesbians and Northampton economics. 20/20 reported that members of this “controversial lifestyle” were “spending money and paying taxes,” and, furthermore, Northampton lesbians “are executives, lawyers, professors, hospital administrators, and restaurant owners . . . [who] own a sizable chunk of the town.”

The perception that lesbians “own a sizable chunk of the town,” was part of what I term the myth of casualty that projected the responsibility for economic displacement through downtown revitalization onto the visibility of the Northampton lesbian population. As we shall see, a myth of causality that blames economic displacement on lesbians was a convergence of a number of factors that intersected in the 1980s Northampton anti-lesbian backlash. Economic causality, coupled with gender disarticulation, was part of a conflation of lesbians with the “myth of affluence” associated with gay males (Badgett, Money). The gendered disarticulation from lesbian
identity of the realities of female economics, especially separatist economics, rearticulated lesbian with economic male privilege. The economic dimensions of the myth of causality were part of a series of articulative movements that disrupted the model of stable lesbian identity that was so central to subcultural separatism. These articulative movements converged in the anti-lesbian backlash as part of the 1980s crossover from subcultural separatism to a social community that was in a limited assimilative relationship with the mainstream city culture.

The myth of causality belies the realities of lesbian economics in 1980s Northampton. The majority of lesbian businesses were service oriented; lesbians were not among the real estate developers or entrepreneurial business owners of the upscale restaurants and stores. Instead, lesbians were a market for the increasingly high rents that were charged for the second floor office spaces and apartments that were less desirable than the upscale storefront properties of downtown Main Street. Lesbians might number among the employees, and, if they could afford it, among the customers. As Ann Forsyth underscores in her research, lesbians were contributing to the economic downtown revitalization as renters, not as property owners, with the exception of the six-year ownership of the small single-family building housing Womonfyre on a side street. As such, lesbians were part of the economic mechanisms that sustained the escalating costs for the downtown entrepreneurs who, Forsyth stresses, were largely white heterosexual men who gentrified Northampton in the 1980s (“NoHo”; “Nonconformist”).

While revitalization typically refers to the process of restoring a city through change that adds new vigor economically and culturally, gentrification refers to a downtown restoration that benefits only the middle class and affluent who can afford to
develop, rent, or shop in the transformed space. Gentrification has been negatively associated with the displacement of people with lower incomes or discretionary income through the process of redevelopment. Forsyth and others differentiate between the implication of lesbians and gay males in the gentrification process (“NoHo”; “Nonconformist”). While gay males have long been associated with the gentrification process in urban gay areas such as West Hollywood, the Castro in San Francisco, and Greenwich Village, lesbians, as women, characteristically have less income than gay males and have not participated in downtown revitalization through the same mechanisms (“NoHo” 629). One interviewee, Bets, had this recollection of the 1980s development of Northampton:

I didn’t move to NoHo until 1984, 85. So, gentrification had already started. That’s what I saw. I’ve lived in other places where that’s what’s happened, and if we were to go into depth about that, we would talk about class more than we would gay or straight. If we were talking about San Francisco, how middle class white boys came to SF and gentrified certain sections of it, because they had the access to money, and did it. It’s different here because there’s not as many boys.

As we have seen, the realities of lesbian economics in 1980s were in contradiction to the association of gay male economic privilege with lesbians through the myth of causality. The distinction between lesbian economics and the relative economic privilege of gay males, as men, was part of the broader separatist tensions between lesbians and gay males. As the Gazette explained, the historical conflicts between the two groups were “mostly because lesbians feel doubly discriminated against because they are both female and homosexual” (Bradley, “Homosexual” 7). Gina elaborated:

Men just seem to know how to do it. It’s as though they have some knowledge we don’t have and I do believe it’s more than that they have male privilege. Although I suppose that way they have of moving in the world is all about privilege. All I know is that the gay men I knew back then were sort of downwardly mobile, but they seemed to move into professions more easily. And gay men do better
socially, because everybody likes them. They’re not messy and disturbing. They’re not trying to challenge the patriarchy all the time.

Gina’s recollection reflected distinctions between lesbians and gay males including disparities in economics and in public access. And another individual, Bets, concurred:

I’m coming back to this thing about money again; I got a sense of that as the focus. Money seems to be so involved in everything; lesbians don’t have as much money as gay men. It does come down to money, on some level. Yes it does, it does.

Although lesbians brought different dimensions, such as feminist visibility to the 1980s politics of visibility, gay males were generally more visible in ways that intersected with these other gendered distinctions. While as men, gay males as a whole made more money than lesbians (Badgett, Money), gay men were also able to move more easily in professional circles in the revitalization of downtown Northampton.

The projected economic culpability for the economic displacement of Old Northampton” was especially ironic given the emergence of lesbian class distinctions as part of the disruption of separatism. As part of the broader series of articulative movements that fragmented lesbian feminist identity in the 1980s, the politics of separatist economics disturbed the communal tenet of identificatory homogeneity.

Similar to others who migrated to the Northampton region in the 1980s for reasons that reflected the Valley’s reputation for progressive politics and other aspects of quality of life, many lesbians chose to be downwardly mobile, the movement from one social class to another, in terms of employment, income, and housing in order to live in Northampton.

Joel recalled:

It was the norm when I first moved here [in the 1980s], and I felt very comfortable. Everyone identified as working class, I think. Then, you found out that some of the dykes had trust funds on the side. But they were working waitressing or cleaning houses. We were all doing that thing. We were downwardly mobile.
In general, lesbians did not move to the Northampton area for economic reasons in the 1980s. National low employment coupled with limited industries in the region meant limited job possibilities. Moreover, the emphasis on lesbian service businesses was not typically in line with the profit-making goals of capitalism that drove the downtown revitalization. In addition, the economics of separatism, of working separate from men, contributed to choices about work and career in the 1980s. One woman, Pam, noted that she considered going into the trades during that time period because of her separatist beliefs:

I realized early on in my coming out that I couldn’t work with men because of the sexism. There was a time when I couldn’t even be in a room with men. We were all doing stuff like that then: being auto mechanics, carpenters, learning to use our bodies in utilitarian ways that were not just a cultural reflection of how women should look and be in order to appeal to men. It was either that or get a waitress job at Bart’s [Bart’s Ice Cream Parlor] or P & E’s [Paul and Elizabeth’s Natural Foods Restaurant].

The economics of separatism were coupled with the downward mobility of choosing to live in an area for the lesbian community itself rather than for professional opportunities. Lesbians were frequently under-employed and under-paid as a result of geographic choice, which further contributed to the class distinctions of the lesbian population. Bets had strong opinions about the politics of lesbian economics:

There were certainly a number of middle class white girls, but they didn’t necessarily have the money or the goal of making that type of money. . . . Just generally speaking I wish that there could be a more fair distribution of the money in the world. But, it’s not what is. If lesbians with money are going to come into an area, I hope they do what we did [in the 1980s] . . . We made businesses for women’s money. . . . I would like everybody to think about others. I don’t want to see rich lesbians oppressing their own working class or poor. I think if that were to happen, it would be against the general community we were creating.
Downward mobility was also a factor in the housing choices that further belied the responsibility of lesbians for economic displacement in 1980s Northampton. Andrea remembered:

There was the lesbian neighborhood on Grant Ave off of Market and Union; that was the Lesbian Slum. That’s what it was called and that’s where we lived. Off Market Street, up to Cherry Street. And there was a Lesbian Cooperative and everybody was trying to fight the power. You got the sense, you knew some people had money, but they didn’t flaunt it. Nobody had houses, and nobody, hardly any of us, had cars. So, I felt like, oh everybody’s this way. It’s funny to see your peers move away from that.

And, Jeanne confirmed:

There’s the Green Street Boarding House that isn’t anymore, but for years and years and years. I thought there used to be a little community on Belmont Ave. when a group of us lived in apartments there. Then everybody bought houses and moved out. Entered the Bourgeoisie.

The use of “Lesbian Slum” to describe one of the enclaves of lesbian housing was verified in Forsyth’s research into lesbian housing patterns in the 1980s (“NoHo”) as well as Gazette coverage of that time period. Of note was the housing displacement from the downtown to neighborhoods that might be viewed as “slums” in the Gazette’s review, “Business Review ’83: Downtown Northampton – The Changing Faces of a City,” which stated that there were no longer many affordable downtown residences.

The gendered-specificity of the marginalization of the lesbian population challenged the myth of causality that projected economic displacement onto lesbians. Through the identificatory articulations that associated lesbians with the relative privilege of gay male economics, lesbians were conflated with some aspects of maleness and male privilege. This conflation was especially ironic given the history of lesbian erasure through the subsumption of lesbians under the broad umbrellas of “gay” and
“homosexual.” That subsumption had long been a point of contention for lesbians
involved in gay liberatory politics. For instance, Del Martin, one of the influential figures
in early lesbian and gay politics stated at the 1959 Mattachine convention:

What do men know about Lesbians? In all of your programs and your “Review”
you speak of the male homosexual and follow this with – oh, yes, and
incidentally, there are some female homosexuals too and because they are
homosexuals all this should apply to them as well. . . . Neither organization has
recognized the fact that Lesbians are women and the 20th century is the era of
emancipation of woman. Lesbians are not satisfied to be auxiliary members of
second-class homosexuals. (qtd. in D’Emilio, Sexual 10)

The subsumption of lesbian under the broad category of homosexual was another aspect
of the articulation of lesbian with gay male, in this case an articulation that contributed to
dimensions of erasure as well as of visibility. That articulative erasure was furthered
through the 1980s local coverage of the lesbian population. A comprehensive variety of
titles by reporter Maureen Fitzgerald that were published in Daily Hampshire Gazette
Assessing Its Growing Impact on Northampton,” “Homosexuals Discuss Northampton-
Amherst Area Climate,” and “Homosexuality: The Church View.” In most cases,
homosexual was used as an umbrella term that positioned gay men as members in equal
numbers if not stand-ins for the much larger and more institutionalized lesbian regional
community. As part of the broader series of articulative movements that comprised the
1980s anti-lesbian backlash, this coverage rhetorically conflated lesbians with gay males,
with both subsumed under “homosexual.”

**Coming Out Through Pride, Coming Out Through Backlash**

Through the different processes of coming out – the national and local coverage
of the Northampton community, the lesbian migration, the formalizing of feminism and
subsequent coalition building, and the implications of the lesbian population in the
parallel economic and cultural downtown revitalizations – a subcultural separatism
transitioned into a lesbian social community that was in increasingly involved with the
mainstream city. However, that communal coming out was into an atmosphere conflicted
about the emerging visibility of the lesbian population. The economic and cultural
displacement experienced by long-term residents who felt that Northampton was no
longer their city was concurrent with the surfacing mainstream awareness of the lesbian
community. The tensions between Hamp and NoHo escalated with the first Northampton
Gay and Lesbian Pride March held in May 1982, and moved into a full-blown anti-
lesbian backlash by the end of that year. In a series of movements that articulated various
aspects of maleness with lesbian identity, the boundaries of subcultural separatism were
further disrupted. These articulations contributed to the Northampton anti-lesbian
backlash, and, moreover, facilitated the 1980s crossover from subcultural separatism to a
social community that was in a limited assimilative relationship with the heterosexual
city.

**Coming Out through Pride**

The first Northampton Gay and Lesbian Pride March was held on May 15, 1982
was a significant event for the lesbian community as well as the rest of the city. Local
coverage including the Gazette’s “Homosexual March Here Attracts 500” (Bradley) and
the Advocate’s “Coming Out: Western Mass. has its First Gay Pride March” (Young).
The March coverage was contextualized within the national visibility of feminism and
gay liberatory politics, and, moreover, in the local context of grassroots feminist activism
and progressive feminist coalitions, and which also included emerging gay male
alliances. Moreover, the march was concurrent with the national and local cover stories
on the uniquely concentrated Northampton lesbian population that furthered the city’s reputation as “a veritable lesbian Ellis Island” (Van Gelder 13), “a mecca for women who love women” (Fitzgerald, “Homosexuality . . . Assessing” 1), and, “the San Francisco of the lesbian community” (Carton).

Coming out through the Northampton Gay and Lesbian Pride March was another level of coming out that further facilitated the disturbance of boundaries of a subcultural separatism upon privacy for safety. The 1982 march exposed what some members of the city’s heterosexual population might not yet have been conscious of – the large lesbian community’s presence in and impact on the city. While on the surface, articles in the Advocate and Gazette self-congratulated Northampton on its tolerance of the “homosexual” population, these changes in media and social visibilities also brought to the forefront the harassment and discrimination that worked in conjunction with the appearance of acceptance and diversity.

The first Northampton Pride March included numerous lesbians as well as gay men and straight allies (Bradley, “Homosexual” 1). The local coverage stated that the Northampton March was the first to be held outside of Boston, and as such, was a historical “first” for the region. The Gazette reported, “Northampton may be viewed as a microcosm of the gay rights movement around the country, although a step behind” (Fitzgerald, “Assessing” 9). Andrea maintained:

Marching together for the first time was astonishing. It was astonishing to see these lesbians marching down Main Street. It felt historical. They weren’t doing stuff with gay rights in the rest of the world, but we were doing it here; we were first; we were in the forefront. We were doing this for each other and to show the world who we were. We were doing it for one another as a community, not as individuals. We wanted to show the city who we were. We wanted that one day to be out there as a part of Northampton.
Such recollections exemplified a lesbian investment in being part of the city, and, relatedly, the impact for both gay and straight people of the striking visibility of 500 marchers in downtown Northampton. For many respondents that first march was remembered in detail as a celebratory moment of great significance in the history of the lesbian community. Laura stated:

> It was a celebration, very festive, pretty fantastic overall. It was a joyful day, a big party with all these new women to meet. The straights that didn’t want us to march, I imagine most of them became more educated by seeing us. Those early marches felt like a natural part of my other political work. People are always scared of what they don’t understand. If more people see others of all kinds they will begin to understand and accept lesbians. The march was part of our political organizing and made it much larger than anything we had done before as a community.

The previous cultural and political scarcity of events where the community could come together in public en masse produced a symptomatic status for that first march in much the same way as a 1980s film text such as *Personal Best* became so notable to the constitution of social audience during that time period. The importance of the first time status of the 1982 Northampton Gay and Lesbian Pride March resonated in local publications. The *Advocate* stated, “It was something new in the life of small-town and rural New England” (Young, “Coming” 12), while the *Gazette* reiterated that it was “unusual for such a march to occur outside a major metropolitan area” (Bradley, “Homosexual” 1).

Moreover, the march intersected with the gay liberatory visibility strategy of coming out for acceptance and achieving socio-political goals. As an extension of grassroots organizing, feminist political action, and coalition building, the goal of marching for change permeated respondent recollections. The *Advocate* reiterated that strategy: “Gay visibility and the self-acceptance that leads to it, is seen by many
experienced gay activists and writers as far more essential than concern about laws that may or may not be passed” (Young, “Coming” 14). Thus, both marchers and the local press affirmed the strategy of educating the public with the goal of visibility equaling social change.

That social change, however, was not a goal of all who marched. While the first march reverberated in recollections of the 1980s as a strong sustainer of subcultural community, there were aspects of public visibility that simultaneously disrupted the privacy of that separatist formation. Marchers such as Andrea expressed concerns about the changing visibility of subcultural separatism:

That march was pretty much it for the community. . . . I mean, in terms of having any real safety in the community. Being invisible helped protect us. It’s different being a lesbian. People know you can lose a lot . . . we’ve all been through that. We were seen as sick by outsiders. We were seen as lesser than by the people on the sidelines. Why would you want to subject yourself to their negative thoughts, their homophobia? I think we all know what happened because of the march.

Such responses demonstrated the negotiatory tensions of the visibility strategy – a contradiction of visibility associated with social acceptance and political gain versus visibility associated with a fear of backlash. That fear, as we shall see, of backlash was every real. By December 1982, months after the May 1982 pride march, the lesbian population was under attack by a group of local residents. Thus, the series of communal comings out in public visibility had both positive and negative consequences for the community. Bets had that same opinion, albeit for some additional reasons:

I thought then and I still believe this. I still believe it is a taboo to tell straight people much about lesbians. The more we tell, the more we lose our strength and joy in having made a society that was just for women. There’s something very special about being a lesbian that changes when everyone knows about it. . . and, you know, I still do believe the publicity caused the violence.
Thus, the changing face of public visibility elicited contradictions between fears about unsafety as well as concerns about loss of subcultural identity versus the goal of social acceptance and political changes through coming out as a community. The powerful contradictions of coming out, termed by the Valley Advocate the “twin tensions of visibility and fear,” were mobilizers of change in the coming out of the social community, and, in turn, the social audience (Young, “Coming” 12). Sid verified:

I marched in the very first one. I was scared shitless. I made the choice to not hide in the closet. I see myself as a lesbian and for me that means there is no choice about sexuality. I always knew I was different. I march over and over because I don’t want to feel afraid or hate myself. I need to be honest about who I am. Marching made the community powerful.

The Gazette reiterated the goal of marching to educate the public about gay and lesbian people in quotes from marchers who “hoped the events signaled to the passersby the size and spirit of the homosexual community” who wanted to make the community “alive to people on the street” and with the goal that the general public would understand, “Maybe they’re not so sick after all” (Bradley, “Homosexual” 7).

The 1982 Northampton Gay and Lesbian Pride March did bring the community into the public eye. Moreover, the Gazette’s coverage did educate readers about not only the increasing presence of lesbians in Northampton, but also about the increasing organization of the lesbian community. In the following Gazette quote from one of the lesbian marchers who, in underscoring the contradictions of being out versus being safe, asked for anonymity for reasons of personal safety:

It is time to acknowledge and affirm the existence and the significant contribution of lesbian and gay people to every part of our political and cultural lives. . . . The homosexual community is more pervasive than many people realize. . . . We live on almost every street, we work at almost every kind of job imaginable. . . . We are everywhere [last ellipsis in original]. (Bradley, “Homosexual” 7)
One respondent, Greta further acknowledged the visibility contradiction in her recollection of the first march:

Oh, I think it was good, very good. I think it’s very good that, you know, mainstream American society sees us and in spite of what everybody would like to think about it being so accepting in this city, the only way they get used to something is by seeing it a lot. And at first they push against it, and they don’t like it, and they think it’s wrong. And that does include many who live in Northampton. That’s what happened with the march and then the violence against the lesbians. But with everything, you know, it’s still there. You haven’t been able to wipe it out, it’s not going away, and you make peace with things. Whether it’s people living together and not being married, or people from different races getting married. People get used to things, and it’s not a big issue anymore.

While this commentary accentuated that educating the public was one of the primary functions of marching, there was also awareness of the local negotiations between the appearance of tolerance in Northampton and experiences of discrimination and violence.

Such negotiations illustrated the broader contradictions of visibility as strategy in the negotiation between the potential for visibility promoting social acceptance and the potential for visibility causing backlash.

A number of marchers were ambivalent about being out in public in a reflection of the visibility contradictions between “the twin tensions of visibility and fear.” Mary emphatically recalled:

I wanted to march because I knew many who would not be able to because of their jobs or families. My goal was to march so that everybody could come out ultimately. I don’t just mean in Northampton, but everywhere. There’s this saying that if you do what you are the most afraid of it can change the world and I really believe that. [The first march] was exhilarating and terrifying at the same time. Marching down Main Street and seeing your coworkers watching was a scene. Then seeing the Baptist Church with their stupid signs did not feel funny; it felt like hate; it felt like violence.

In what became an annual demonstration, several members of the Faith Baptist Church in Florence carried placards reading, “Jesus Loves the Sinner but Hates the Sin” and “Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve.” In traditional illustration of journalist objectivity, the
Gazette front page coverage typically included both a photo of the sparse religious demonstration as well as a wide angle shot of the numerous marchers (Bradley, “Homosexual” 1). Although the demonstrators represented a small Northampton minority, their presence was a powerful symbol that first year, and, after the subsequent backlash, became a symbol of the discrimination and violence that existed alongside the appearance of tolerance in the city.

In response to concerns about personal and professional safety, march organizers provided brown paper bags and clown-type makeup for marchers who were concerned about publicly revealing their lesbian or gay identity. As opposed to the heterosexuals quoted in the local papers, many lesbian and gay marchers refused to give their names to the press for fear of repercussions. The brown paper bags and makeup made a visual statement about the fear of coming out. Arlene noted:

The march was small. I made a point of going to the early ones. It was important for us to be there and be seen as a community. There were some who were closeted. Several with paper bags on their heads. I did not feel safe being recognized because of my job. I worked in the downtown, I was nervous about being seen by my supervisor who was a real man. . . . Now I’m in private practice and my clients are almost all lesbians. I didn’t look like a lesbian back then because I had to wear hose and suits to work. Effectively I was passing for straight and there was a discrepancy between that and marching. . . . the marching made it real. The marching made it something that could have repercussions in my life.

That fear of repercussions was very real. The Gazette also reported that several of the more visible organizers of the first march in 1982 received threatening phone calls prior to the event. One of organizers was quoted in the paper, “It’s still pretty dangerous for people to be visibly gay in their hometown” (Bradley, “Homosexual” 1), while a statement from another marcher was paraphrased, “. . . despite Northampton’s large homosexual population, harassment and discrimination still exist here” (7).
The presence of anti-gay attitudes in Northampton was confirmed through the inclusion of anti-march and anti-gay statements from city residents in the local march coverage. One heterosexual-identified individual declared in the Gazette, “I think it’s disgusting, . . . If they want to be that way, that’s their business. They don’t have to advertise it” (Bradley, “Homosexual” 7), while another announced to the Advocate, “They ought to march them up to the state hospital and keep them there” (Young, “Coming” 14). That hostile long-standing conflation of gayness with mental illness spoke to respondent commentaries about the fears of gay and lesbian people in the Valley who were afraid to march that day in 1982. As one lesbian reported to the Advocate, “We all know the liberal veneer of this town could chip off” (14). For those who were against homosexuality, the march was also a type of coming out, that is, a coming out as heterosexuals who were adamantly anti-gay and deeply invested in maintaining the proverbial line between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Accordingly, in an uneasy foreshadowing of the pervasive violence that began as part of the anti-lesbian Northampton backlash in December 1982, the coming out of the lesbian social community through the 1982 pride march was into a contradictory environment that was tolerant in some ways yet discriminatory in others.

Coming Out through Backlash

The first Northampton Gay and Lesbian Pride March was a context for confronting the contradictions between the appearance of acceptance and tolerance and experiences of discrimination and harassment in the city. In conjunction with that first pride march, the 1980s anti-lesbian backlash was a powerful symbol for the negotiation of social, economic, and political change in Northampton in the 1980s. The backlash was
a convergence of factors that further disrupted the already unraveling boundaries of subcultural separatism as a subcultural communal formation transitioned into a lesbian social community that was in engagement with the city's mainstream culture. Through that engagement, the separatist tenet of lesbian authenticity, as well as the hegemonic presumption of heteronormativity, were disrupted through a series of identificatory articulative movements that ultimately disturbed the broader cultural opposition between homosexuality and heterosexuality. That series of identificatory articulative movements effectively fragmented lesbian feminist identity through articulating different dimensions of maleness with lesbian identity.

In December 1982, about six months after the first Northampton Lesbian and Gay Pride March in May of that year, a series of events began that were terrifying to the Northampton lesbian community. Three women were raped and one was also badly beaten; the women were told that they were assaulted because they were lesbians. Individual lesbians received phone calls threatening death, while Womonfyre along with several other lesbians businesses and organizations received bomb threats (Ayers, “Lesbians”; Dyke, “Lesbian”; Jill Clark, “Northampton”). Mary recalled with duress:

The backlash was life-threatening and if you were a lesbian you lived in a state of fear. Because we were in a subculture the news spread like wildfire through the community. . . . At least three lesbians were raped and they were told they were being raped because of being lesbians. . . . One of them was phoned in the hospital and threatened. The paper was harassed on the phone [Valley Women’s Voice], the bookstore [Womonfyre]. You couldn’t walk down the street without someone yelling ‘dyke’ out the car window.

And, Laura confirmed:

It feels like yesterday. Everyday you heard more and more stories about what was going on. . . . death threats, bomb threats, women were being raped. That’s how strongly the memory of that time reverberates through my body. I walked around everyday knowing I could be attacked. You’re always on guard. No one should have to live that way. . . . that year we felt as though we were marching together
for our lives literally. It was emotional. I still get emotional about it. Then you’d look in the paper and see these horrible homophobic letters.

The post-march violence only made visible the history of harassment, discrimination, and violence directed toward lesbians that was hidden under the surface of the city’s “liberal veneer.” Mary described the history of violence against and discrimination toward lesbians in the Northampton region:

Everybody knew that lesbians were being raped in Northampton. It had been going on for a long time. It put us on notice about walking around town at night by yourself. . . . It was rage we felt. . . . just rage. Everybody would say that it was such great place to live and that was an ideal I suppose.

While members of the lesbian population were wrestling with the “twin threats of visibility and fear,” the longtime residents of conservative Hamp were grappling with the twin threats of economic and cultural change. Consequently, there was increasing resentment about the Northampton migrators who were perceived as usurping the city on multiple levels. On the economic level, the city’s developers and entrepreneurs were raking in enormous profits. On the cultural level lesbians were becoming increasingly visible as part of the downtown revitalization: lesbians were opening businesses, renting office space, eating in restaurants, and going to movies, which, additionally, were sometimes about lesbians. Moreover, lesbians were working for women’s rights and marching down Main Street for the right to be open and proud about their sexuality. The increasing visibility of the lesbian population coupled with the rapid downtown revitalization created the perception among the working class “townies” that their city and their way of life was under attack. The tensions between Hamp and NoHo led to the lesbian community being attacked through the articulative movements of the myth of causality. The responsibility for economic and cultural displacement was articulated with the lesbian population through the articulating of male economic privilege with lesbians.
Additional articulative movements were present in the movement into public visibility of lesbians, and thus, the movement into public visibility of knowledge about lesbians as sexual beings.

The visibility of lesbians marching down the streets of Northampton in 1982 disrupted hegemonic belief systems about normal sexual identities and behaviors, particularly beliefs about the visibility of lesbian sexual behaviors in the public realm. The escalating tensions between Hamp, as personified by the individuals who were attacking lesbians, and NoHo, as embodied by the newly visible and now under attack lesbian population, escalated through the broader negotiations of what constituted sexual normalcy. The conflict between Hamp and NoHo was mediated through respondent memories of the 1980s along with the local press coverage of the first annual gay pride march and of the anti-lesbian backlash. The inflammatory vocabulary which emerged during this time period was present in the Gazette articles quoting local conservative residents letters as well as in the published letters to the editor decrying the “homosexuals” who “flaunt their sex in public” (Fitzgerald, “Viewpoints” 9).

Not surprising, the letter writers made use of the religious thrust of the national conservative movement’s “family values” agenda to bolster their anti-gay arguments. The Gazette quoted various local conservative residents as well as members of the Faith Baptist Church in Florence, whose statements mirrored, frequently word-for-word, the rhetoric of the religious right: “We don’t hate them. We hate their sin” and “We’re standing up for God” along with “Two of the same sex cannot be fruitful and multiply, and that is one of the commandments” and “We need to love the sinner” (Fitzgerald, “Viewpoints” 9). One anti-gay individual explicitly acknowledged the recent national
media coverage of the lesbian population: “Northampton and Amherst are being called the ‘San Francisco of the east.’ I for one do not want this type of notoriety for the Pioneer Valley” (“Viewpoints” 6).

Several respondents viewed the anti-gay comments published in the Gazette as another form of assault, characterized by one individual as “horrible homophobic letters.” In recollections of the backlash, interviewees censured the Gazette’s printing of what were viewed as hate letters. Arlene indicated:

They felt they had a license to do this after the Gazette letters. I remember opening the paper and reading the articles and the letters to the editor everyday and being attacked. I feel the Gazette contributed to the violence. I do question the types of letters they chose to print. I feel the Gazette was negligent for using what should be a medium for a free and open discussion of opinions to promote the idea that lesbians should be closeted and . . . our right to march should be censored. I doubt if the Gazette would have felt it had to present hateful opinions if the targets were blacks, Jews, or heterosexual men.

One anti-gay individual, John Crawford made use of the classic conservative rhetorical strategy of appropriating the language of gay liberation in a letter to the Gazette:

It’s time for the normal-straight people that have normal sexual habits to rise up and protect their rights as well as those of their children. We have been quiet long enough about the minority of individuals that are homosexuals, and who continue to flaunt their desires and themselves in public. No one person has the right to show off their homosexuality in public, or to influence others by displaying their homosexuality. (John Crawford 6)

In an appropriation of the language of silencing used by the disenfranchised, this commentary suggested that “normal-straight people” with “normal sexual habits” were the ones who were silenced. Moreover, this individual argued that gay people should not have the same full range of privileges as heterosexuals. This letter illustrated the most threatening aspect of gay pride – the disturbance of the presumption of heteronormativity through the visibility of lesbian in public displays of affection. That disturbance was daunting perhaps even to those residents, who while considering themselves part of the
Northampton “liberal veneer,” perhaps had a contradictory, and less than tolerant response when confronted with the visibility of the size and scope of the Northampton lesbian population. Such contradictions create an opposition of normalcy versus abnormalcy between the presumably heterosexual, and, thus, by inference, normal, Hamp population, and, thus, by inference, the abnormal lesbian population. Requiring gay and lesbian people, as one letter writer stated, to “be decent enough not to flaunt their sex in public not to flaunt their sex in public” drew the line between heterosexuality and homosexuality through inferentially setting up different standards for each (Fitzgerald, “Viewpoints Differ” 9).

At the 1982 Northampton Gay and Lesbian Pride March the chants that would soon become ubiquitous at all pride marches reverberated against the historical architecture of downtown’s Main Street, “Hey, hey, what do you say, someone in your life is gay” and “Two, four, six, eight, don’t presume your friends are straight,” along with a lesbian-specific variation, “Don’t presume your wife is straight” (Young, “Coming” 14). These pride march chants reinforced the heterosexual discomfort over the disturbance of the heteronormative boundary. The aforementioned anti-gay protester, John Crawford responded, “tell these homosexuals to keep their sexual actions to themselves” (6). When considered in the broader context of a system of heterosexual sexuality and romance, which conventionally views heterosexual displays of public affection with a friendly nod, the public displays of physical affection between same sex couples, while prevalent, were relatively benign at the annual Northampton marches. For instance, Ruth recollected:

I lived in Northfield then and I was really alone. Just seeing another lesbian made me smile. I was so happy to see all of these women in town being lesbians. It was
a very sexy scene when you had been living in a subculture with mostly couples. . . . Holding hands, arms around one another, dancing along . . . there were dykes were kissing on Main Street.

Consequently, for lesbians, the march was not only a social and political coming out, but also a coming out as sexual beings. For lesbians, even the most taken-for-granted benign displays of public affection were taboo, if not dangerous, in public space.\textsuperscript{xliv} The privilege of touching or kissing another lesbian on the street was underscored by several respondents as crucial to both the celebratory and political tone of gay pride.

Here the previously discussed “power of the sexual” can be seen from another vantage point. For Northampton lesbian migrators and city dwellers “seeing the sexual” was a visible affirmation of their lives; for heterosexual residents who were uncomfortable with “seeing the sexual,” at least when the sexual meant homosexual, “seeing the sexual” disrupted a deep investment in a fixed and stable heterosexual identity. That disruption of heteronormativity was a catalyst for additional discursive movements that further articulated gay male sexuality with lesbian identity. As we have seen, beliefs about an essentialized female predisposition to a more relational-oriented sex were in distinct contrast to beliefs about the sexual promiscuity associated with gay maleness. As part of the broader subsumption of lesbian under homosexual during this time period, the anti-lesbian letter writers conflated lesbian sexual visibility with the most stereotypical aspects of gay male sex.\textsuperscript{xlv} Similar to the articulation of male economic privilege with lesbian identity, gay male sexuality was now articulated with lesbian identity. Thus, the public visibility of lesbian displays of sexuality not only disrupted heteronormativity, but also further fragmented a stable model of lesbian authenticity that hinged upon lesbian feminist beliefs about female sexuality. As discussed in Chapter Two, an emotive lesbian sexuality was part of a broader feminist transforming of the
patriarchy through redefining female sexuality. That feminist project disarticulated the sexual from lesbian through the articulation of a feminist identity with a lesbian identity. Consequently, the articulation of gay male sexuality with lesbian effectively rearticulated sexuality with lesbian identity, further disrupting the identificatory homogeneity of lesbian feminism. These gender and sexual articulations will be further explored in the Chapter Four consideration of the queering of the stability of lesbian identity through film identifications.

The subsumption of lesbian under homosexual created other dimensions in the constitution of the 1980s anti-lesbian backlash. Several interviewees expressed the concern that the conflation of lesbians with gay males contributed to the backlash. Joel had this to say about the interconnections between violent behavior toward lesbians and the negative association of disease with gay males:

Men used to make a point of coming up to Northampton to gaybash and unfortunately what that really meant was going after us Dykes. Because the men [gay males] weren't around in the same way. . . . You didn’t see them on the streets. There was no publicity about them. . . . people wrote in saying that the gay thing would spread disease. And this was before AIDS hit the Valley. But the funny thing was that it was really almost all lesbians in the March.

Joel’s recollection described the violence against lesbians as a displacement of homophobia about gay males onto lesbians. Moreover, this comment touched upon AIDS as a factor in moving gay and lesbian people into visibility in the Valley.

Several interviewees viewed the association of gay males with AIDS during this time period as potentially responsible for some of the anti-homophobic letter writing. The anti-gay letters took on an especially vehement tone when coupled with an emerging 1980s discourse about AIDS, homosexuality, and disease. The Gazette paraphrased an
anti-homosexual Northampton resident, Ronald Frost, who expressed fears and concerns about homosexuality and what the paper termed, “the disease factor”:

He [Frost] worries that diseases, such as AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome), a deadly disease which primarily afflicts gay men, will spread as the number of homosexuals grows. . . . I do not want any of these diseases and I don’t think anyone else does either (especially my children). (Fitzgerald, “Viewpoints Differ” 9)

In the same article, other local conservatives conflated the visibility of the large and concentrated lesbian population with a fear of AIDS, which many, including the Gazette, associated with “homosexuals.” As one man indicated: “I’m afraid to eat in downtown Northampton. You never know what you might pick up” (9). Belief systems about sexuality resonated through these discursive associations with disease, promiscuity, and homosexuality. The entrance of sexual knowledge about lesbianism into public visibility was a contested site for the negotiations of broader cultural oppositions about what constituted normalcy.

Not all individuals were on board with public displays of lesbian affection at the pride marches. There was a fear of the consequences if the distinct dimensions of lesbian sexuality were made public. One interviewee, Pam maintained:

Sex should be private. I do agree that sex should stay in the bedroom and should not be in public. I don't want straight people knowing about lesbian sex. The thing is, the types of people who wrote in to the paper [Gazette] saying we shouldn’t be marching are the ones who support discrimination against us . . . they would discriminate around renting a place or hiring us for a job . . . what really bothers me is that there is some sort of relationship between them telling us to stay in the closet and the fact that they might ignore, sort of just let it go on, violence against women because we are lesbians.

While Pam’s recollection also reinforced the proverbial heterosexual/homosexual boundary regarding public displays of affection, that line was drawn partially through the lens of separatism that viewed privacy about lesbian lives as critical to communal
constitution and safety. Additionally, implicit in this commentary was the suggestion that public displays of lesbian affection, and the visibility of lesbians as sexual beings were too threatening for heterossexuals, and, therefore, created the conflict that escalated to the harassment and violence of the backlash.

Following from other respondents who suggested that the *Gazette*’s coverage of the 1982 pride march contributed to the atmosphere of violence in Northampton in the 1980s, this commentary further interrupted the city’s “liberal veneer” by suggesting that those who might not be overtly anti-gay were complicit in anti-gay behaviors and beliefs. Andrea recalled:

> The police were just as involved as the paper. They were simply cavalier. There were rumors flying everywhere that the men [the perpetuators] had some connection to the police. . . . The city was the infrastructure that supported the entire thing. They wanted us to go back into hiding. They did not like the changes in the town and the lesbian community was blamed because we were not proper women, we were not proper women with husbands and boyfriends. We were moving in and creating our own culture in the city. . . . making women’s spaces, women’s businesses, taking care of ourselves so we didn’t need them.

Along with echoing the positions of other respondent positions on the implication of the *Gazette*, this recollection acknowledged the complicity of the Northampton police in the anti-lesbian backlash. Moreover, Andrea, linked the inferential threat of visible lesbian sexuality to the discomfort of changing female sexuality and gender roles.

Several other individuals recognized that gender-specificity as part of the broader 1980s anti-feminist backlash, concurring with the opinion that the backlash was not just anti-lesbian, but also an anti-feminist backlash that fell under the broader category of violence against women. Mary recalled:

> I always had this theory that they went after those women [owners of Womonfyre and others] because they were feminists and separatists. That they felt threatened as men because these women did not want anything to do with the male patriarchy.
In the 1980s, feminists theorized that lesbians, as independent women working outside the patriarchal system, were not “proper women,” and, therefore, were threatening to beliefs about the stable external categories of heterosexuality and masculinity (Brooks; Frye; Pearlman). Because the control of women is basic to patriarchy, and capitalism, Sarah J. Pearlman argued in 1987, heterosexuality must be mandatory and enforced, and, thus, lesbians must be penalized (313). The disarticulation of aspects of femaleness from lesbian identity as part of the rearticulations of elements of maleness with lesbian identity further fragmented the essentializing boundaries of identificatory stability.

The series of sexual and gendered articulations that comprised the 1980s anti-lesbian backlash challenged the constructedness of both sexual and gender identity categories. These articulative interruptions challenges models of both lesbian authenticity and essentialized femaleness as well as of heteronormativity and masculinity. Both sides of the subcultural and mainstream equation were changed through the interactions with one another. Accordingly, in a blending of the national conservative anti-gay and anti-feminist backlashes, the anti-lesbian harassers displaced their frustrations over economic and cultural displacement onto the perceived challenge to their masculinity as interconnected to their heterosexuality. Another interviewee, Greta, was of the same mind about the implication of a challenge to masculinity in the gender-specificity of the backlash:

There’s always going to be a negative reaction to our being out there. There’s this belief that if we stop “flaunting our lifestyle,” and how I hate that word [flaunting], there will be no problems, or people will be okay with us. We know from experience that is simply not true. There’s the idea that change only happens if we come out together as a community. . . . maybe the backlash was about growing pains. Was it was just a small group of nuts who go after anything that they’re uncomfortable with? I don't think so. I think a lesbian woman who doesn’t need men still makes a lot of people uncomfortable out there and there will
always be some sort of backlash if you get too involved with the straight world. I’m not sure how far raising some sort of awareness goes.

The gender threat was validated by letters to the editor. Randy Womack wrote in response to the 1981 _Valley Advocate_ overview of the lesbian subcultural community:

I know a lot of lesbian women. I used to live in Northampton and a lot of them don’t like men. I’ve been there and they said bad things about men . . . my used-to-be- woman is a lesbian now, and I’m one of the men they talk about now. . . . she’s not as lady-like anymore. I mean things like dresses. I don’t see her in them anymore. But that’s just me. I like to see women in them sometimes. To me it’s lady-like. Not that if a woman doesn’t put them on she’s not a woman. (5A)

Here can be seen a rejection of lesbian public sexuality, albeit benign, that additionally disarticulated the female from lesbian, or, at least the female from lesbians who did not fit conventional gender roles. Another local man, Donald Ashton, in an anti-gay letter to the _Gazette_, conflated homosexuality with changes in gender roles:

The amenity of the public toward teachings that would destroy all morality and the function of the family. They would pit man and woman as rivals rather than see themselves as willing to sacrifice for the love of each other and family. . . . the errors of the total equality of the sexes. . . . Homosexualism seems to spreading like a fire, and homosexuals speak with boldness and audacity. This gross sin is a perversity beyond compare. It is sinking below the animal level. It is a Godless society bent on self-destruction. These are the signs of the end days. (6)

The pumped-up evangelical rhetoric of this letter reflected a rationale of sexual abnormalcy for the harassment and violence of the anti-lesbian backlash that was hand-in-hand with a rationale of improper femaleness for an anti-feminist backlash. As another participant, Mariam, stressed:

Patriarchal hierarchies always mean there’s male power over women, you see it everyday even in the Valley. . . . power over resources, space, what you own, where you live. A lot has to do with what you wear, look like . . . definitely more rigid in the past, really changed for me when I came out [in 1978], more so when I left the professional world. . . . a lot of what being a lesbian, being a community was about, now being part of that system, that power.
The resistance to and redefinition of gender and sexual roles in the 1980s was challenging to the hegemony of normative heterosexuality and masculinity, and, moreover, provided a target for the economic and cultural displacement produced by the rapid downtown revitalization as well as the increase in the lesbian population. It was not surprising that the working class men of Northampton would respond to change by attacking a group that could easily be labeled as deviant. Rather than respond to the economic and cultural threat of displacement, these men responded to the threat to their sexual and gendered identities.

The anger and fear that participants described about the 1980s anti-lesbian backlash still resonated in interviews almost twenty years later. Some participants were deeply invested in the model of subcultural privacy that they believed would shield the lesbian population from backlash. Nevertheless, the 1980s Northampton anti-lesbian backlash both sustained and disrupted characteristics of subcultural separatism while simultaneously moving the lesbian population into increased engagement with the regional mainstream. One respondent, Sid described how the community fought back:

Around Womonfyre, when Womonfyre was being firebombed or threats of firebombing. We were doing patrols and that felt like a time of community. I would call people I didn’t know, and I would make shit happen. We started keeping track because the police weren't. We organized street patrols to watch the store. I felt like if those persons weren't found, hunted, and kicked the shit out of, that would mean there was not a community here. Because you know, that’s like a tragedy and I do blame the city. There should have been some protection for us from the city. But, there wasn’t anything happening. A lesbian gets beat up or raped, and there’s a fucking rally? And I feel like of all the fucking places I could be, there should have been lesbians rioting in the streets. I don’t know what I would have done if I had seen them [the perpetrators], but certainly I would have felt compelled to do something to them. More than counting on the city to take care of it.

The backlash was a vehicle for strengthening lesbian grassroots activism, and, moreover, for strengthening coalitions with lesbian allies. While the backlash sustained some
elements of community such as grassroots activism, the increased visibility also changed
the interactions of the subcultural formation with the mainstream in ways other than
through violence and fear. Although I would stop short of suggesting the 1980s
Northampton anti-lesbian backlash had positive consequences for the city’s lesbian
population, the coalitions and alliances that had begun with the formalizing of feminist
political work with other progressives, as well as organizing the gay pride marches with
gay males, were strengthened by the backlash.

In May 1983, 1,500 individuals, three times the previous year’s turnout, marched
at the second annual Northampton Gay and Lesbian Pride March in an opportunity for the
lesbian population to visibly unite with allies in a public communal stand against the
harassment and violence. The march was an opportunity for the gay male population to
fight back in solidarity with lesbians for what was a threat to them as well. Moreover, the
numerous heterosexual allies who marched alongside the lesbians and gays affirmed by
their visible presence that many straight Northampton citizens defended the presence of
the lesbian population in the everyday fabric of the city.

These coalitions were further strengthened through the visibility of letters to the
Gazette editor from heterosexual allies. One long-time Northampton resident urged:

I strongly encourage friends and neighbors, other family people, and “straight”
women and men to come out and join the march Saturday and support the right of
gay women and men to live comfortably here. They contribute so much to our
community, in every workplace, every church and civil organization and major
social institution, both professionally and personally (Gorman 6).

Such letters publicly announced support for lesbian and gay males as Northampton
citizens. In a letter to the editor, “Homosexual Rights and Human Rights,” one city
resident proclaimed:
They like their predecessors (Ghandians, civil rights advocates, etc) simply want to be treated as human beings with dignity and justice. They don’t want special treatment or applause for their sexual behavior. If gay people were not beaten, harassed, discriminated against in jobs and housing, and told to shut themselves away from their neighbors as if they were “untouchables,” then they would not need to march for their “rights” and make a “big thing” about their sexuality.

(O’Shea 6)

Such straight supporters maintained that all citizens, including homosexuals, had the same rights as other Northampton citizens, and, indeed, as all American citizens.

The rhetoric of rights as American citizens was in use in both the pro- and anti-gay letters through language that reflected the broader rhetorical debates of both gay and lesbian politics as well as the conservative religious right. Interviewees such as Mariele linked participating in the pride marches to free speech, civil rights, and citizenship:

We marched because we were claiming our rights. It was never about public sex or trying to recruit to our sexual orientation. Gay rights are about being protected legally in the same ways that heterosexuals are and that means being safe in your own city. I have a right to live as a free person in this county. As Americans we are supposedly guaranteed safety and freedom of speech. Otherwise we do not live in a democracy anymore.

The violent backlash against the lesbian population did not sit well with the more moderate citizens of Northampton and some provided support through marching and letter writing. The old adage of “live and let live” was in play in “Viewpoints Differ,” a Gazette article on “homosexuality”:

What they do is up to them. It doesn’t bother me. . . . I’ve lived in the city for the last 10 years, and my wife and I have just grown to accept that (homosexuality) is here [ellipsis in original]. (Fitzgerald, 1, 9)

One heterosexual individual who identified herself as being very religious, was nevertheless appalled by the violent backlash:

While it is deplorable that in 1983 homosexuals must march for their rights to live freely and without harassment or persecution, I admire their courage in asserting their rights peacefully in a law-abiding fashion given the hostility and ugly intolerance which had surfaced in our community, along with the bigotry and
hatred. . . . we as responsible democrats and people who try to follow the 10 Commandments really do not want to discriminate against other human beings . . . We are directed to love our neighbors as God does not tell us to love thy neighbor unless she/he is gay or Puerto Rican or on welfare or poor or a woman or otherwise different: God dictates, ‘Love they neighbor as thyself’. (Gorman 6)

This letter-writer affirmed that some city’s residents, even the more moderate ones, were repulsed by the harassment directed toward the lesbian population and did not want to see that in their city. Consequently, the anti-lesbian backlash not only reinforced coalitions with lesbians but also other progressives. Moreover, the more moderate city residents became allies through their distaste for the “hostility and ugly intolerance” and “bigotry and hatred.” In some ways, the anti-lesbian backlash pushed some of the city’s moderates over the line of liberalism in appearance only. In the spirit of visibility as a means of education for social acceptance, the changing visibility of the city’s lesbian population became a type of pedagogy for the city’s heterosexually identified residents as heterosexuality came out simultaneously as a constructed sexual identity. Mary substantiated:

We were all marching for the same reason: for our right to be open and free and safe in who we are. The straights, the gay men, the political allies, we marched for the right not to be persecuted. We marched for the right to choose who we are and to live freely in a democracy. . . . there was the recognition that we were the same. There was an acceptance in the city that let us all march down Main Street with the allies arm in arm with the community.

Eventually, an August arrest was made of one man, Robert Kremensky, a twenty-five year old working-class, long-time resident of Northampton from a staunch Catholic family. A phone tap placed on his phone by the District Attorney’s office led to his apprehension and subsequent conviction (Bradley, “Lesbian”; Jill Clark,” Arrest”; Fitzgerald, “City Man”; Fitzgerald, “Man”). While both the police and the community believed that there were many harassers, with Kremensky’s arrest, trial, and conviction
the phone calls stopped. The city was finally sending the message that harassment of lesbians would be punished (“Evidence”). One interviewee, Lucy, has this to say about Kremensky’s arrest:

The first [Northampton Gay and Lesbian Pride March] exposed us to the American public. Made us even more susceptible to that type of hate. Legal protections are the only way to go up against homophobes who will not understand anything else. If they hadn’t caught him [Kremensky], the harassment would have gone on until they killed one of us. They probably would have blown up the bookstore.

Kremensky’s defense lawyers sought psychological testing and defended him on the grounds that he was under duress because of his Catholic background and, therefore, had been brought up to believe homosexuality was wrong. Kremensky stated during the trial, “I would like to know what the community thinks about this. I would like to know what the Northampton natives think about this” (“City Man” 1). His brother, in infamous Gazette letters to the editor, said the Kremensky family had “lived and worked in this town all our lives, and it’s too bad this once normal town is already starting to be known as a lesbian community” (“Man” 1). Although convicted and sentenced to three months, after serving only six weeks in jail Kremensky's sentence was cut in half (“Judge”; “Trail”). Kremensky made a good symbol, and perhaps, a scapegoat, for the negotiations of downtown revitalization, lesbian visibility, and sexual normalcy in 1980s Northampton.

Conclusion

The series of articulative movements that constituted the anti-lesbian backlash in 1980s Northampton was part of a broader crossover transition, disrupting both heteronormativity as well as authentic lesbianism. The increased visibility of the lesbian population in all facets of everyday city life changed the boundaries of both subcultural
separatism and mainstream culture. The openings for coalitions with heterosexual and gay males allies were enlarged as moderate and even some conservative citizens supported the right of the lesbian citizens to live free from violence. However, that support was part of what I term *mitigated assimilation*, negotiated through the contradictions between the appearance of acceptance and tolerance and experiences harassment and discrimination. Nevertheless, the series of gender and sexual articulations in the 1980s provided a context for both lesbian and heterosexual citizens of Northampton to live more fully.

The negotiations between the economic and cultural revitalization of downtown and the visibility of the city’s lesbian community will be further explored in the following discussion of the coming out of the social audience in the 1980s. The processes of coming out as a social community into economic, political, and sexual visibility expanded into the constitution of a social audience. The social audience effectively took over downtown theaters for communal viewing of the 1980s symptomatic film texts that depicted out lesbians engaged in sexual activities. The social audience provided a public context for the subcultural separatist community to move into different types of public visibility and interaction with the city’s heterosexual mainstream. The contradictions between acceptance through a limited assimilation and experiences of discrimination continued to be negotiated in this context. Moreover, the social audience provided a site for the further mediation of the transitioning lines between heterosexuality and homosexuality as well as the fragmenting categories of gender and sexual subjectivities in the 1980s.
CHAPTER IV

THE CONSTITUTION OF A LESBIAN SOCIAL AUDIENCE

The implication of the lesbian population in the downtown revitalization as well as the backlash against that population provided context for the coming out of a lesbian social audience in Northampton in the 1980s. As such, the social audience was a mediating site for the constellation of factors that constituted the transition from subcultural separatism to a lesbian social community that was involved with the city’s mainstream by the end of the 1980s. In recollections of film viewing, participants drew attention to four particular 1980s films that took on symptomatic status in the coalescing of a lesbian social audience. The out lesbian characters, relatable storylines, and explicit lesbian sexuality depicted in Personal Best, Lianna, Entré Nous, and Desert Hearts resonated across descriptions of film viewing in the 1980s. Moreover, interviewees recalled specific screening venues, making detailed references to the Pleasant Street Theater and the Academy of Music, the two Northampton arts cinemas that figured as cultural reference points in the revitalization of the city.

This chapter is divided into five sections. The first, “Coming Out as a Lesbian Social Audience,” examines the coalescing of a lesbian social audience through collective viewing rituals and lesbian spatial territorializing. I investigate the interactions between social community and social audience along with the emergence of a heterosexual co-audience. In the second section, “Lesbian Film Consumption,” I explore lesbian film consumption as an additional dimension of coalition building in 1980s Northampton. Section Three, “Consumer Acknowledgement, Critical Consumption,” focuses on a tentative 1980s lesbian commercial acknowledgement that was in concert with a critical
consumer awareness. In Section Four, “Lesbian Authenticity, Variegated Subjectivity,” I delve into the significance of lesbian authenticity to the lesbian social audience. In turn, I consider the disruption of lesbian identificatory homogeneity through collective viewing rituals and symptomatic textuality. The in-depth focus on sexual visibility is enhanced by a brief discussion of gender and raced identifications. In the concluding section, “Co-Audiences, Co-Consumers,” I envision the interactions of lesbian and heterosexual viewers as co-audience members and co-consuming citizens as potentially an additional dimension of coalition building. Overall, this chapter positions the lesbian social audience as a mediating site for the city-wide negotiations between acceptance and discrimination in 1980s Northampton along with the broader disturbances of lesbian authenticity and heteronormativity.

**Coming Out as a Lesbian Social Audience**

The early 1980s was a significant time for the coming together of community through the rituals of film viewing. The communal aspects of watching a specific film in a local movie theater were significant to the interactions of a lesbian social community and a lesbian social audience. Mary remembered:

> We made a point of going on opening night to see [Personal Best]. Didn’t everyone? It was the event. I lived near downtown Northampton then. I think we walked to the theater [The Academy of Music], and there were just these lines of lesbians coming to the theater. I said to my then partner, ‘we were all like salmons going to the source.’

Recollections of communal viewing mirrored recollections of the celebratory tone associated with the first coming out as a social community in Northampton in the 1980s. Lucy acknowledged:

> I remember going to see it [Personal Best] in Northampton at I think the Academy of Music. There were mobs of lesbians, I went the first night, and it was spring.
And everyone was looking around because there were all these lesbians in town. And it was like gay pride march, it felt mobbed.

The reciprocal interactions between movie going and the sociability of seeing other lesbians on their way to the movies connected film viewing with other public contexts such as the seeming ordinariness of everyday street lives along with the exhilaration experienced through participating in the first gay pride marches. Recollections of 1980s collective film viewing as a lesbian social ritual stood out against the isolated and depressing viewing remembrances of the 1960s. Mary further recalled:

The time I was seeing that movie [The Children’s Hour] was when I was in my more closeted phase. So it was something to identify with, something culturally that wasn’t just about. Nobody had found each other in the late sixties. It wasn’t until the seventies and the ‘80s with the Everywoman’s Center support groups that people really started finding each other. Then we were in the theater at the same time.

Descriptions of film viewing in the 1980s mirrored the exhilaration of coming together in the 1970s. Mary’s recollection demonstrated the dramatic changes across the decades from a 1960s isolation to lesbian subcultural separatism to the public visibility of a 1980s social community that was in interaction with a lesbian social audience.

Seeing one of the four symptomatic 1980s films in a specific Northampton theater with a lesbian audience was a community ritual in the same way that attendance at other lesbian events was important to communal formation. Symptomatic textuality played a central role in the constitution of social audience through the inclusion of everyday storylines, out characters, and depictions of explicit sexuality. The plotlines of the four films with their female-female couplings resonated with respondents: Personal Best (1982), two elite athletes who fall in love; Lianna (1983), the married woman who leaves her husband to come out as a lesbian, Entré Nous (1983), the two female friends who become each other’s primary lifelong commitment; and, Desert Hearts (1985), the
college professor who falls in love with a free spirit. A tone of celebratory exhilaration regarding the “first time” primacy of these films was palpable in remembrances such as Marian’s:

You had to make sure you went early on. If you didn’t, you were somewhat out of the loop socially. Desert Hearts was really the talk of the whole town; the whole community came out to see it during that first week. I can’t really remember anything else like it since. We didn’t have e-mail but, we might as well have because of how the word was spread. I made a point of calling up friends, “Go see it. Go see. There are lesbians in that movie.”

Film viewing reinforced constitutive aspects of community such as networking and socialization, and, moreover, echoed the significance of the lesbian sexual imaginary in mobilizing the migratory impulse of moving to Northampton in the 1980s.

Here I extend Kath Weston’s discussion of the gay migratory impulse to power of seeing the sexual in both media texts as well as the social audience. Through the transitioning 1980s lesbian sexual imaginary, lesbians became more aware of other lesbians in both social contexts and medic venues. Accordingly, the emphasis on the sexual imaginary in the queer migratory impulse can be expanded to the urgency associated with viewing these particular films with a lesbian audience in downtown Northampton during this time period. The impact of the these textual firsts was a powerful catalyst in the constituting of a broader lesbian sexual imaginary and further underscored why this particular cultural moment loomed large in participant memories. An awareness of self as lesbian along with an awareness of others as lesbian put the sexual imaginary in practice through the interactions of seeing and identifying lesbians in audience, on the screen, and, through extension, on the streets. That collectivizing of the individual processes of interpellation mobilized the interrelations of media and migration.
The coming out of a lesbian social audience in Northampton theaters put lesbianism into public circulation as a reconfigured form of sexual knowledge, which was concurrent and interactive with coming out as a social community in the 1980s. The primary tropes of LGBT public visibility – the closet and the coming out narrative – ran across participant descriptions of coming out through the various dimensions of the social audience. Mary commented:

I mean there were movies like Personal Best and Desert Hearts, and it was more than one, there were those movies where every lesbian in the valley came out every night any of these films were showing. And I mean came out. Characterizations of viewing films as a type of coming out interfaced with the migratory impulse to see the sexual. Additional commentaries associated movie viewing with pride marches and symptomatic textuality with the closet, while others linked the coalescing of social audience with the broader coming out of Northampton. Bets recollected:

Oh yeah, the lesbian movies would be the ones that everybody went to see. The lesbian movies were the big social events in Northampton. Sort of like Northampton does Northampton. Lianna, oh my god, and then, Personal Best, and that other one with the two women who end up together by the sea [Entré Nous]. These movies were all the major social events in Northampton.

The statement “Northampton does Northampton” inferentially highlighted the coming out of Northampton as a lesbian space through the geographic- and gender-specificities of viewing these particular films in local theaters as part of the movement into visibility of the lesbian population in the 1980s.

Many respondents making a point of viewing films with lesbian content in Northampton theaters for the safety to be found in the ritualistic communal experience of viewing such films with other lesbians. Respondents such a Jill stressed the relative safety to be found in these theaters in the 1980s.
Everybody was there. It was just part of what we did. Like when we went to see Personal Best. You would go and see other lesbians you knew and to watch it with them. There would be straight people there but there were so many lesbians that first week that it didn’t really matter. It felt safe. We were in control of the theater and it didn’t really matter who else was there.

Important to the feeling of safety in this communal experience of resistance, safety, and pleasure was the presumption about the lesbian authenticity of other viewers.

Underscoring the gender-specificity of the Northampton regional lesbian population, were the implicit and habitual references to the demographics of the viewing audience: “all lesbians,” “lots of lesbians,” “for women only,” “just for us” and “mostly women.” In comparison, participants such as Greta recalled uncomfortable viewing experiences in other geographic locations:

I remember going to see actually one of them in Worcester with the woman I was involved with at the time – Personal Best. It was totally different than going in Northampton where I lived, and we were, we felt like the only two gay people in the theater. Straight people were laughing at the kisses, and it felt like a very scary thing as opposed to this joyful thing. There we were on the screen and people were making obnoxious sounds. Kissing, whistling, yelling, you name it.

Given that the 1980s Northampton anti-lesbian backlash was concurrent with the coalescing of a 1980s lesbian social audience, unsafe viewing experiences were not limited to locations outside of Northampton. In what Jean-Ulrick Desert has termed a “doubling of public space,” the heteronormative hegemony of the film viewing space was disrupted and activated as lesbian space through the visibility of the lesbian social audience. As Desert continues, “The doubling of public space requires that a catalyst such as the observer’s perception or a collective consensus of readings bring forth that queer latency from being merely implicit to explicit” (22). Northampton theaters became lesbian spaces temporarily through the interactions of seeing and identifying lesbians. Nevertheless, these temporary lesbian spaces were public movie theaters, conventionally
constructed as heterosexual spaces in the same way that all public places are presumed to be heterosexual unless defined otherwise. As such, the lesbian collective viewing rituals along with the emerging lesbian sexual imaginary were necessarily shared with heterosexual co-audience members.

The subcultural resistance that coalesced through feminist politics in opposition to the patriarchy extended into the now public and shared lesbian space of the social audience through the territorializing of the physical space of the theater as well as the space of the sexual imaginary. As Sid described:

It became our theater when that movie [Lianna] came out at first. We just took over Pleasant Street. You stood in line and saw who else was going and who they were going with. Who was single. Who was available. It was better than a bar with that movie. It was hysterical. We just kept laughing when someone else arrived. It was like going to a dance or concert that was for women only. Just for us.

Descriptions of a lesbian social audience that, in the words of several participants, “took over” or “had control” of a movie theater, echoed the collective empowerment experienced in other lesbian spaces in the 1980s. Along with the activating of downtown public spaces as lesbian spaces through use for lesbian political and social events, the city’s movie theaters became activated as public lesbian spaces through collective viewing.

The notion of a “doubling of public space” was extended through the viewing of 1980s symptomatic texts with overt lesbian content. Bets’ had this to say about the depictions of explicit same-sex female sexuality in Lianna:

This was a BFD [Big Fucking Deal]! It was a BFD! And it was sort of like a community affirmation. And it’s again how we’re shaped by the media. Think about it. Back to The Fox where you’re skulking around watching the movie. By yourself. To Lianna, where it’s like, there they are, two lesbians together getting it on, on the screen and this was our movie. . . . Because it was about our lives and we were there watching it.
Bets’ description of a “community affirmation” through film viewing put the physical and symbolic trajectories of migratory impulse into practice and demonstrated the sense of ownership attributed to 1980s symptomatic textuality. Not only did the physical space of a theater have the potential to become “our theater,” but the symbolic space of the heterosexual imaginary could become territorialized as “our movie.” Accordingly, the territorializing of the downtown theaters through the entrance of the lesbian social audience into public view, was accompanied by the entrance into public visibility of the lesbian sexual imaginary. These interactive and mutually productive aspects of spatial doubling effectively disrupted the heteronormative presumptions traditionally associated with systems of romance and sexuality in film.

The social audience was an eroticized space occupied by many noisy and exuberant lesbian viewers laughing in unison at secret codes and yelling at the characters on the screen. In some cases at least, lesbian audience members were engaged in cruising, kissing, and other sexual activities. Proclamations that “It was just sexy to see that movie,” and, “The sex scenes were a turn on,” were accompanied by the exclamation, “Oh! Oh! The sex!!!” The primacy of the collective viewing rituals and the resonance of the symptomatic texts reproduced the significance of seeing other lesbians to communal formation through putting into practice both the bodily and the imaginary aspects of the migratory impulse to seek out the sexual. The eroticized lesbian public space was constituted not only through viewing lesbian sexuality in the 1980s, but also through eroticizing the theater space, and, thus, as several individuals noted, positioning collective viewing as perfect for a date night.
However, lesbian audience members were now coming out as a social audience that was visible to heterosexuals. The physical presence of heterosexual males in the theater space was one of the most inflammatory trade-offs of a 1980s social audience that was contingent on a movement into public visibility. Respondents were always aware of the audience demographics in ways that heterosexual audience members traditionally do not need to be as part of the presumption of heteronormativity in public. Participant references to audience demographics of “mostly lesbians” and “all women” regularly included notations of the presence or absence of “some men” and “straight people.” In reciprocity, even if only on a nonconscious level, heterosexual co-audience members had to note the presence of the lesbian audience.

The downtown theaters were activated as eroticized lesbian spaces occupied by the celebratory lesbian viewers who were talking out loud, laughing at shared subcultural codes, and engaging in public displays of lesbian sexuality. Yelling and catcalling from what were described as “hostile,” “sexist,” and “homophobic” male co-audience members were a not uncommon occurrence. Sid recalled:

Some guy in the audience was making homophobic comments out loud and everyone was afraid. Someone in the audience told him to shut up. . . . We just told him off, en masse, you know, just swallowed him up. We made him go away. So it was a very affirming audience to see those kinds of pictures in. We would not tolerate a hate audience.

A collective resistance was inherent in Sid’s recollection of fighting back against heterosexual co-audience members who were aggressively disturbed by overt lesbian portrayals. The lesbian territorializing of movie theaters was impressive given that unsafe experiences were not atypical whether in the theater, on the street, or in other public contexts during this time period that was concurrent with the 1980s anti-lesbian backlash.
Respondents such as Arlene reported Northampton film viewing events that ranged from tense to distasteful to frightening to dangerous:

They [group of men] were sitting behind us [during Personal Best] and they kept on commenting about the women’s bodies, the athletes. . . . How did that feel? Well, what do you think? I was afraid they would follow us when we left. We didn't feel comfortable walking to our car. It wasn’t safe for us. . . . there were a lot of other lesbians in the audience, but that homophobic group was right in our faces. . . . maybe because I was a Latina, or a butch. I don’t know really. It felt targeted.

Arlene’s multiple trajectories of self-identification, which included a raced and gendered as well as a sexual identification, most likely did contribute to her being “targeted” in the mostly lesbian audience. This description of being “targeted” further extended the theater space into the streets of the downtown, and, in reciprocity, extended the violence of the 1980s backlash into the viewing experience. Consequently, in spite of the reputation of Northampton as a “Lesbian Utopia,” the safety in the activation of the theater space as lesbian space was a temporary safety that was constantly being renegotiated.

Interviewees described being alarmed by not only the discomfort, but also the potential danger of sharing lesbian space with what one participant termed, “male voyeurs” as well as by the idea of “lesbians as erotic toys for men.” The eroticized lesbian space was also an eroticized space for male co-audience members. Participants expressed discomfort with sharing both viewing space and symbolic space with heterosexual men, variously expressed as “I find myself uncomfortable in a movie theater with sexually explicit lesbian scenes” and “It turns men on, and that kind of turns me off.” It has been widely acknowledged that watching two women have sex is the number one heterosexual male fantasy. In “Two Girls For Every Boy,” Esquire professed that “all men—straight ones, anyway—are aroused by the idea of two women having sex with each other” (Segell 31); and, in “5,000 Married Men Confess,” Redbook explained that men
are obsessed with the idea of another woman: “Simply put: more boobs, more butts, more lips” (Lister 98). The reconfiguring of the boundaries of heteronormative was especially provocative when considered in the context of lesbian sex scenes. As another individual stated, “There’s an uncomfortableness when there are sex scenes in lesbian movies because I know that men are watching and that’s what they’re looking for.”

The coming out of 1980s film portrayals of out lesbianism and explicit sexuality was a coming out into public visibility with heterosexuals also seeing such texts for the “first time.” Just as the lesbian social audience in Northampton movie theaters disturbed the presumption of heterosexuality in the viewing audience, so did these symptomatic texts impact a hegemonic presumption about film portrayals. A key aspect of coming out through symptomatic textuality was the denaturalization of the heteronormative system of desire, romance, love, relationships, procreation, and sexuality. The discomfort expressed about sharing viewing space with heterosexual co-audience members extended into additional concern about a symbolic coming out of the private subcultural knowledge associated with 1980s symptomatic films. One participant stated, “Now everybody can see us,” and, another concurred, “I do believe that lesbian lives are better off being private.” An additional interviewee was of the same mind, “I don’t want the world to know . . . The secret part is very, very important.” The tradeoffs of the changing boundaries between subcultural privacy and safety and mainstream visibility were not always viewed as worthwhile. The increased availability of symbolic materials and lesbian subjectivities through film consuming choices along with the potential for changes in public perceptions of lesbianism did not necessarily offset experiences of discrimination and harassment.
The movie theater, through the doubling of the public space as lesbian space, and in conjunction, the doubling of 1980s films as part of the broader lesbian sexual imaginary, was reconstituted as a shared space with a co-audience that included heterosexual men. The spatial reconfigurations of the 1980s social audience were a mediating site for the citywide tensions of the 1980s anti-lesbian backlash. Moreover, as we shall see, the social audience was a mediating site for additional forms of coalition building through shared viewing, shared texts, and the potential for a shared cultural imaginary. The significance of expressions of lesbian sexuality in the constitution of the social audience further illustrated the discursivity of space, or what Bell And Valentine have termed, “the ways in which the spatial and the sexual constitute one another” (8). In the next section, I examine the constitution of the lesbian social audience as a space for film consumption that extended film viewing into other downtown consuming practices.

**Lesbian Film Consumption**

Film consumption has been a productive site for examining the gendered dimensions of consumption (Hansen; Kuhn, *Dreaming*; Peiss; Somerville; Stacey, *Stargazing*). Feminist historians such as Kathy Peiss and Siobhan Somerville emphasize the significant role of attending movies in the reconfiguration of women’s leisure time and relationship to public space, and thus, to the distinctions of gendered consumer practice. Especially in comparison to gay male consumers (Chase; Douglas; Sender), lesbians have traditionally been conceptualized as “anti-consumers” who reject patriarchal consumption point blank. However, that dismissal of lesbian consumption does not consider a fuller perspective on lesbians who desire consumer recognition through film viewing while still making informed critical choices about film consumption.
through a feminist perspective. Moreover, as part of negotiations of separatist economics, the dismissal of lesbian consumerism does not take into account lesbians who do not reject mainstream consumption patterns.

In the following, I further examine the transformation of the lines between subcultural separatism and the mainstream heterosexual culture of Northampton within the lesbian social audience. I first consider the emergence of lesbians as desirable film consumers within this local context. I then discuss the expansion of lesbian film consumption into other local consuming practices. Film viewing and other consuming practices were part of a coalition building that offered a vehicle for changes in the acceptance of the lesbian population in the city of Northampton in the 1980s.

Lesbian interviewees emphasized film viewing as significant to the constitution of community and individual identities. Excerpts drew attention to the prolific film consuming habits of lesbians: “I used to be a movie addict,” “I’m an avid consumer of movies,” and “I’ve seen a vast number of movies. Sometimes I’ve seen as many as three movies in a theatre in a day, and I’ve watched as many as five on TV in a day.” Mary, one of a number of habitual film viewers, stated:

I used to go to movies I’d say. I taught film, you know, so I’d go to movies all the time; taught film in high school, so I would go to movies. I probably went once or twice every week. As a kid, all I did was watch old movies on TV. Of course, I’ve seen all the lesbian movies many, many times, usually with others. Watching movies on the VCR, that probably happens about once a week.

Mary’s prolific film consuming practices extended into the participatory desire to see lesbians on the screen, whether that was a movie or a television screen. Another interviewee, Brandy, emphasized the distinctions of watching a film in a theater:

I just like the dark. I like the silence of the movie theater. And, I like being in the dark and watching the film. It’s less like being alone. It’s just a very private, beautiful experience just to be sitting in the dark. That you’re with a bunch of
people watching a movie. And, it’s like all your senses are open. Any time I see a movie, it’s like my senses are being opened. Any kind of movie is stimulating, but the queer ones are more of a stimulus. . . . my senses are being opened to the taste of it, my senses are being opened by watching it. All my senses, but mainly vision, and emotion, vision and emotion.

Brandy’s recollection illustrated the connections between the collective physicality of watching a film in a theater with an audience and the imaginative experience of entering into an individualistic space, in this case as part of a sexual imaginary.

The previous characterization of the 1980s lesbian social audience as “Northampton does Northampton” underscored the geographic- and gender-specificities of viewing films in the city’s downtown in the 1980s and took on additional dimensions when considering the revitalizing of Northampton alongside the coalescing of the social audience. The geographic-specificity of the city worked hand-in-hand with the gender-specificity in placing the celebratory moment of social audience within this particular time and place. Participants such as Mariele emphasized the distinction of watching movies in a local theater in the 1980s as part of her overall film consuming patterns:

Well, I love going to the movies so I go to the movies quite a bit. I see many, many movies in the theater. . . . So those films [1980s symptomatic texts] weren’t really necessarily memorable, but going to the [Northampton] theaters was an exciting experience and I think it’s instilled in me the love of going to the movie theater which I think is different from watching a movie in general. . . . on video or television, it’s not the same watching a film on television. . . . I prefer the spectacle, the experience of going to a theater.

Northampton theaters were stressed by participants as an important place for viewing films with lesbian content such as Personal Best, Lianna, Entré Nous, and Desert Hearts as well as for a significant context for creating lesbian territory in the city. Thus, there was a relationship between the presumed to be mainstream practice of consuming films and the subcultural practice of territorializing lesbian spaces that disrupted both.

Although there were sporadic screenings of narrative films with lesbian content as well as
documentaries with feminist subject matter at the local colleges and at the University of Massachusetts, in the 1980s Northampton area, the screening venues most available for films with lesbian content were the two local art house cinemas – the Pleasant Street Theater, a small alternative art house just off the main downtown intersection, and, in aesthetic contrast to the simplicity of the Pleasant Street Theater, Main Street’s ornate Academy of Music, a historic opera house where Jenny Lind once performed. As key symbols in the 1980s makeover of the city’s downtown, the two theaters both contributed to and benefited from Northampton’s revitalization.

It was compelling to hear the elated tone inherent in these in-depth recollections of communal viewing experiences and to note the geographic-specificity of Northampton as participants remembered where they saw the four 1980s symptomatic films. Greta reiterated:

I remember when *Entré Nous* came out at the Academy. I had heard something about it, read a review somewhere so I knew it was about these two women, but I didn’t really know what to expect. I went to opening night and I was so excited, I called up friends, I was with [my girlfriend], and we invited those friends to come down from Vermont, and we all went the second night to see it again. We were thrilled because it was so good!

This recollection further illustrated the significance of Northampton’s strategic location to the constitution of lesbian social community, and, thus, social audience. Another illustration of the significance of Northampton film consumption can be found in Laura’s underscoring of the gender-specificity of collective viewing rituals in the city’s theaters:

What can I say about seeing those movies in Northampton? It was a profound time. I believe it was something just very, very unique that impacted on the way we all thought about lesbian movies in general. . . . It was just a part of living in town in those days. Different than anything else I can recall offhand, certainly not something I have experienced anywhere else. Partially because as women we wanted to be with other lesbians back then . . . and there weren't that many places that were comfortable.
This sense of detail in these celebratory recollections emphasized the power of the sexual imaginary in the migration of regional film viewers to Northampton to see films with lesbian content with a lesbian audience. Participants cited the two Northampton theaters through explicit designations as these physical spaces effectively became auxiliary community spaces. However, public lesbian space that was public was only a temporary lesbian territory with a spatial identity that was negotiated through the contrasting experiences of safety and fear.

Respondents made comparative notation of the geographic- and gender-specificities of Northampton through contrasting viewing experiences in other places they had lived, nearby cities or states, and additional locales known for gay communities. Ruth had this to say about the collective viewing ritual at the Pleasant Street Theater in the 1980s:

There’s tons of lesbians in Northampton, can’t know them all, there’s so many, but you could find them at Pleasant Street, and, a few men, a few men and women, but mostly lesbians, mostly women. There was a kind of general excitement with the lesbians. And there was a long line of lesbians as I recollect, to go to see a film. And, so we got our tickets and were excited and had to pick a place to sit. You didn’t want to sit too far back, but enough so you could look at the others. And we sat down and ran into people we knew, so there’s kind of a general chattering, ‘I’ve heard this is a really good film’ or ‘This one is pretty bad.’ And, so then we watched the film.

Ruth’s detailed narrative illustrated the interactions of seeing lesbians in the streets on the way to the film and seeing lesbians in the audience as well as on the screen in downtown theaters in the 1980s. Moreover, the absence of lesbians was strongly noted in other geographic locales: “We felt like the only two gay people in the theater.” Laura concurred:

It was like a big event when it was a lesbian movie that you could see in a movie theater. My oldest friend, we’ve been friends since we were like 18 and 19 in college and came out at the same time. She lives in New York and she would
come up here to see these movies in Northampton. So even though we don’t live in the same city, but during visits . . . I didn’t go to see her to go to movies because it was really a big deal early on to see them in Northampton.

Not only did lesbian film viewers count on encountering lesbian audiences in a Northampton theater for a pleasurable and safe collective viewing experience, but so also local movie theaters counted on the frequent movie going habits of lesbian film consumers as a profitable and desirable film demographic. Parallel with other coalition building in Northampton in the 1980s, lesbian viewers were now co-consuming citizens as well as co-audience members.

Lesbian film viewers could be counted on to form large audiences for particular films in Northampton with a spillover into the general viewing selection and, later in the decade, could also be counted on to rent videos. The growth of the Northampton lesbian population in the 1980s alongside the concurrent downtown revitalization positioned lesbians as a desirable consumer niche. The city’s two art house cinemas were central to the positioning of Northampton as an arts community with upscale shopping and dining opportunities catering to the consumer with discretionary income. Chelsea verified the significance of downtown Northampton movie theaters in this detailed description of the Academy:

There’s the Academy, it’s really a glorious theater. It’s probably my favorite all-time theater. It’s art deco, it’s just magnificent, beautiful, totally restored. It’s this huge space, sort of like a church, and there’s this gay guy, who’s been working at the Academy for like forty-something years. So, that’s a really wonderful thing about that theater. So the queer films were really a blast. Really fun. Every showing was a gala event. It’s a really fun people-watching experience.

Chelsea’s acknowledgment drew attention to the role of the Academy in the downtown aesthetics that were so central to the city’s cultural and economic revitalization.
Moreover, the content of the independent and foreign film selections shown at the theaters further positioned the city’s reputation for progressive tolerance.

The film consuming habits of Northampton’s gender-specific lesbian population contributed to a rare lesbian consumer validation in the 1980s. Marian remarked upon that recognition of the lesbian population as consuming citizens:

I used to go to a number of movies back in the day. I still rent videos religiously. I watched Waiting for the Moon again just a few months ago. . . . I think I first saw it at Pleasant Street, and I also rented it from them [Pleasant Street Video]. They’ve always been good to the community in that way of getting lesbian movies.

In these recollections, the two then owners of the Pleasant Street Theater, business partners Richard Pini and John Morrison, as well as the then manager of the Academy of Music, Duane Robinson, were implicitly acknowledged as the decision makers behind the screening of films with lesbian content in the 1980s. In the Pleasant Street Theater’s 1980s heyday, prior to the ubiquitous presence of VCRs in every home, lines of moviegoers snaked around the corner of Pleasant Street waiting to buy tickets to popular films. Customers stood in line outside the Academy in order to guarantee seating before the doors opened. The owners and managers of the two Northampton art cinemas knew that a film with lesbian content or a focus on female friendships typically guaranteed a moneymaker.

Although the focus of this discussion is on film viewing and film consumption in movie theaters, I do wish to acknowledge the emergence of video viewing of films in the 1980s as part of the expansion of the social audience and sexual imaginary into the public realm. Local business awareness of lesbians as potential customers also expanded into a desirable consumer niche at local video stores that opened in the region in the 1980s.iii The geographic-specificity of a localized consumer acknowledgement at city movie
theaters in the 1980s was extended by the end of the decade to video rentals of the same films. Mary, confirmed:

Lianna, oh my god, we even had that one on Beta. I think I still even may have the tape on Beta. Friends would be over . . . That was part of the fun. Sometimes you couldn’t even hear what was going on because people would be making comments and talking about it. There never was a sense that anything might happen, but we were just so damn happy to see these strong positive women on the screen.

Such recollections described the extension of collective film viewing in a theater to the home via VCR usage and the local consuming practices of video rental. Laura recalled the collective pleasures of the home film viewing experience:

You could pass it around or try to get together and have a potluck and movie night. People really knew the characters. They really knew which scenes were coming up. They were cueing certain scenes. Yeah. it was kind of fun, it was very different for me. It was a very different experience. It’s like you weren’t watching it together for the story, you were watching it because it was familiar.

Joel discussed the role of renting videos in the coming out process:

I saw those all on video. After the fact, years later. Personal Best was probably the very first film I saw that was lesbian, and I know I wasn’t out then, and I saw it on video. And I know I really liked it. But I can’t remember who I saw it with and I don’t remember talking to anyone about it. I rented it a few more times, I think I’d watch it alone. Didn’t know anyone to watch it with . . . a place where I could finally be myself.

Other participants acknowledged how repeated viewing on VHS and DVD enhanced their detailed remembrances of Personal Best, Lianna, Entré Nous, and Desert Hearts. In an interesting illustration of the investment that many respondents had in this project, several individuals, including Ruth, viewed films with lesbian content in preparation for their interviews:

I saw Celluloid Closet recently and watched some of those other movies. . . . I do remember seeing them before [in the 1980s], who I saw them with. How I felt. That comes back to me every time I watch one today. I admit that I have seen some of these more than once or twice. Some perhaps five or six times. They become old friends, something comforting to come home to.
Conspicuous in Ruth’s characterization of 1980s film as “old friends” was the similarity to descriptions of coming out into the social community in the 1980s. Moreover, the characterization of 1980s films as “old friends” was comparable to the sense of ownership attributed to “our movies.”

The coalescing of the 1980s social audience brought lesbians to the attention of downtown movie theaters as prolific, and, thus, potential film consumers, and illustrated another instance where lesbians both benefited from and contributed to the city’s revitalization. Moreover, the coalescing of the 1980s social audience paralleled and strengthened lesbian networks, which now included the lesbian businesses and organizations that were becoming increasingly visible in the economic and cultural frameworks of downtown Northampton during the same time period. The surfacing awareness of lesbians as a desirable consuming demographic strengthened the limited acceptance of the lesbian population in a city where revitalization was concurrent with an anti-lesbian backlash. Thus, as an additional dimension of coalition building with Northampton’s heterosexual residents, the visibility of the subject position of lesbian consumer was an emollient in the soothing of the discrimination side of the contradictions between acceptance and discrimination in the 1980s.

Just as the sociability of the film viewing experience extended into the city streets through seeing lesbians standing in line outside the movie theaters and on the streets on their way to the theaters, so did the consuming practices of film viewing extend into the various businesses of the Northampton downtown. Dining in local restaurants before a film or getting coffee, dessert, and drinks after the collective viewing experience connected film consumption with other consuming practices. Jill recalled:
You go to dinner first and you talk about it. You go out and dessert afterwards and you talk about it. And, of course, what are you going to wear? And who’s seeing you? It’s like going to a Holly Near concert, you’re seeing and being seen, and you know what? It’s a good thing.

Downtown businesses counted on lesbian customers enjoying the proverbial dinner and a movie followed by drinks or dessert that was the standard of dating rituals, in this case, of lesbian dating rituals. Sid recalled:

Those movies were a big part of our social lives back then. And you flocked over [to Northampton] back in the days when Common Womon was open. You went to dinner there and then you went to the movies. A lot of us did. We liked it, it was, we were into whole earth planet stuff. We were all into PC [politically correct] in a big way. If you mix beans and rice you get protein.

Sid’s comment further enlarged the parameters of social audience from the theater to the street to one of the prominent separatist spaces in Northampton. The Common Womon Club was a restaurant collective formed in the late 1970s that evolved in include the WomonFyre Bookstore in the early 1980s. Although as a commercial business operating in the city the restaurant and bookstore could not officially be for women or lesbians only, there was commonsensical knowledge among lesbians, and, increasingly among heterosexuals, that this was a separatist space. In linking movie going to a space that could only be intermittently separatist, this recollection further demonstrated the changing terms of subcultural and dominant culture as lesbians moved into public visibility.

Another dimension of spatial doubling took place as the downtown became lesbian space on movie nights. In further illustration of the extension of film consumption into the economic frameworks of the city’s downtown businesses, Mariele noted:

There were always a lot of people from out of town, people got a bit dressed up. People are going out to eat, then they’d to go to the film, and then they’re going out afterwards to a bar or something, maybe coffee. People are really excited, it feels exciting. There’s just a real energy about the event, laughing and smiling.
Lesbians were not only a desirable consumer niche for film viewing and video renting, but also for purchasing clothing, dining in restaurants, and consuming other goods available for purchase in the city’s downtown. And, Mary described an additional extension of the interconnections between film consumption and other consuming practices:

I always get dressed up when I go to something like that [movie]. I wear a tie. I’m conscious that there’re going to be people I know, and they’re going to be looking at me. I want to see what they look like, and who’s with who.

These recollections of dressing up for film viewing are an expansion to lesbians of George Chauncey’s discussion of the gay male historical use of dress codes to identity self as gay to other gay men. As Gina playfully asserted: “it’s an event . . . you dress up because you know you’re going to be seen about town,” recognizing that “seeing and being seen” is a public display which extends beyond the theater, further breaking down the boundaries between public and private and between communal and individualistic.

Film reviews in both local and national publications were Another venue for identifying a tentative lesbian consumer recognition in the 1980s. Mary recalled the appearance of lesbianism in film advertisements in the local paper:

They used the word lesbian in some of the advertising [for Personal Best]. In the paper. Oh, it was a total turning point. Pun intended. . . . You know, that lesbian movie of course [The Turning Point]. There were local ads in The Gazette. Totally.

Others such as Jill acknowledged reading film reviews looking for hints about the lesbian potential of various films. Along with several other individuals, Mary acknowledged reading local papers such as the Daily Hampshire Gazette and the Valley Advocate for identifying characteristics of lesbianism. Jill concurred:

One of the best ones from back then was Entré Nous. I used to read reviews looking for movies about women who were friends. That was one of the signs that
they were lesbians. There were reviewers that used to drop hints . . . all those little hints that you would be paying attention to in the ads, those pictures of two women . . . And we would all talk about this one and that one, different lesbian movies, when we got together. That was something we were able to do to counter the patriarchy.

Hints of lesbianism in film reviews demonstrated another aspect of the movement of lesbianism into mainstream consciousness through commercial visibility. In contradiction to the resistive pleasures of a subtexting that had been available only to those with subcultural competency, film reviews were now a site for the movement of private subcultural knowledge into the mainstream in ways that many found disturbing. Ruth, described another type of interaction:

> I read mainstream stuff, maybe *Time*, maybe *The New York Times*. I don’t really remember, maybe some of those women’s magazines, *Vogue*? *Glamour*? One of those. Then the local stuff [*The Daily Hampshire Gazette; The Valley Advocate*]. I would also look in something that was for lesbian feminists, maybe *Off Our Backs*. . . . there were definitely places where you knew someone out there was trying to tell us something.

In an explicit illustration of the interactions between subcultural and mainstream knowledge Ruth described making use of the “mainstream stuff” to locate signs of lesbianism, while she also searched for that same information in alternative publications such as the feminist periodical *Off Our Backs*. Participants searched for the imagined encoder or distributor who might be imaging lesbians as well, even as subcultural knowledge moved into popular magazines and newspapers, and, therefore, began to be available to heterosexuals.

Film publicity and reviews were another good example of a transitory lesbian consumer recognition in the 1980s. While Northampton theater owners and managers might have been actively seeking the local lesbian consumer in the 1980s, lesbians were not the likely imagined demographic for most film producers or distributors.
Nevertheless, given the incorporation of feminist ideologies into film and television in the 1980s, it is possible to conjecture that systems of film production and distribution were beginning to imagine the lesbian consumer in the 1980s (D’Acci; Douglas; Dow, Prime). On the local level, the expansion of film consumption to downtown Northampton businesses further moved the lesbian population into the public eye as community members. Sharing theater space with heterosexuals as co-audience members as well as downtown space with heterosexuals as co-consumers created the potential for additional dimensions of coalition building, albeit coalitions through consumption, and further contributed to the changing terms of the negotiations between acceptance and discrimination in Northampton. In the following, I continue to explore the emergence of a tentative lesbian consumer acknowledgement in the 1980s.

**Consumer Acknowledgement, Critical Consumption**

Through collective viewing rituals as well as symptomatic textuality the social audience was a mediating site for the interactions of both sustaining and disrupting lesbian identificatory conformity. While individual interviewees also cited various 1980s Hollywood films cited additional films,iii the four 1980s symptomatic texts – *Personal Best, Lianna, Entré Nous*, and *Desert Hearts* – were the centerpieces of these viewing recollections. Respondents felt validated by the inclusion of out lesbianism, relatable plotlines, and explicit sexual interactions, yet were acutely aware of the economic and cultural constraints of changing lesbian visibility. These 1980s filmic modifications were partially driven by the commercial investment in incorporating feminist ideologies into film and televisual texts in reflection of the significance of feminism in the mainstream imaginary.ivi These films spoke to the lived experience of participants such Greta:
I just remember them being really exciting. Yeah, we’re seeing ourselves in the movies, on the screen, in a reasonably positive light. This was new and different. This was a good thing. The energy was just exuberant, very joyful. It was just so refreshing to have something you had never had before. It was almost magical. I think it’s part of what helped me just totally come out of the closet.

Greta connected the intensity of first-time viewing of these films with her own coming out experience. Other interviewee descriptions of the “magical” viewing of out lesbian characters and coming out storylines were strikingly similar to descriptions of lesbians finding one another in 1970s consciousness raising groups and other community spaces. Along with Greta, a number of interviewees made comments about the “coming out” of the four 1980s symptomatic texts. Such references can be interpreted through the double entendre of a queer lens – “This was a movie that came out!” The coming out into public visibility of a lesbian social community and a lesbian social audience was extended through the symbolic coming out of 1980s films into the broader cultural imaginary.

As prolific film consumers, respondents were invested in the transforming lesbian film lexicon. Prior to the 1980s, lesbian viewers had to make do with pathologized stereotypes, against-the-grain readings, and narrative limitations. Arlene explained:

Before they gave us the crazy butch who made her girlfriend do despicable things [The Killing of Sister George] or the one who went off to hang herself [The Children’s Hour]. There was also the type who had the close friend and gazed into her eyes across the table, always across the table, or the one that didn't know it, but we knew that she was a baby dyke. What was that movie with that sad young girl based on that Flannery O’Connor story [The Member of the Wedding]? When you see that first one [Personal Best], when everything has been in the closet or just the same images over and over, there’s something very profound about that.

Previous cultural scarcity figured prominently in assessing portrayals of lesbianism in the 1980s. As Jump Cut noted in 1981:

Given the absence of any real lesbian ‘image’ on the screen, the lesbian audience over the years has had to make do by identifying with portrayals of strong woman characters, adventurous male characters, or occasional women's friendships . . . It's often a case of settling for crumbs.
Moreover, subtextual codes carried a particular history in the lesbian film lexicon. Jump Cut elaborated:

The most important viewing strategy has been to concentrate on the subtext, the "hidden" meaning, of commercial films. The nature of the lesbian subtext depends upon the knowledge, suspicion or hope that some participants in the film (director, actress, screenwriter) were themselves lesbians, and that their perspective can be discerned in the film even though disguised. (Becker, et al. 18)

In addition, a lesbian consumer acknowledgement has taken the form of speculations about the sexual identity of encoders who worked behind the scenes inserting subtextual codes into films, which, as one individual conjectured, might be “sort of a hint and even, I’d like to believe, a nod to us.”

Respondents hypothesized about lesbian screenwriters, directors, and producers who might practice subtexting during time periods including the 1980s when these codes could not be more overtly present due to political and economic constraints. Sid noted:

I searched for lesbianism in those films and I did think some of those movies were being made for me. Something about the way the women kept an eye on each another. I think about the way that those two hot ones [the female characters in Black Widow] looked at one another and this makes me very happy. Oh yeah, there’s just something about any woman who would just blow some man away. Sigourney Weaver [in Aliens] is one of the all-time greats. Give me a hot brunette blowing the man away anytime. And I have to think that as mainstream as those movies were, there are Hollywood producers who are lesbians and they are putting lesbians in there. They are putting it in there whether it’s for me, or maybe for the white male who likes to jack-off to like girl-on-girl- shit in Penthouse.

In this eroticized comment, Sid recognized the potential lesbian consumer validation to be found in several 1980s Hollywood films. Although there might indeed have been a lesbian encoder working behind the scenes on 1980s films such as Black Widow or Aliens, this astute participant was quite aware that even if lesbians were the imagined demographic for subtextual codes, they were not the only potential demographic.
The revamping of the lesbian film lexicon contributed to a transitory lesbian consumer validation that might or might not hinge upon the purposeful intent of film encoders. The 1980s movement into visibility of subtextual codes suggested an additional exchange between subculture and dominant culture as one variation on the crossing over association with cultural appropriation. While respondents such as Sid felt validated by the imagined lesbian behind-the-scene subtexting encoder, she also expressed concern about the heterosexual viewer who now had access to lesbian subcultural knowledge. The separatist supposition that heterosexuals did not have access to codes of lesbianism was thwarted by the use of the same codes and stereotypes on both the side of production as well as on the side of reception.

The primacy associated with the first-time viewing of the 1980s symptomatic films was related to the movement from subtextual codes to portrayals of out lesbians and explicit sexuality. Increases in quantity of films, alterations in content, and changes in production codes contributed to 1980s emergence of a fleeting lesbian consumer validation that was strongly noted by participants including Sid:

There were lots of different images, so you didn’t have to be so desperate anymore. Even when it was bad, it used to be like incredibly pleasurable. There was something about liking it because they were lesbian characters. They were main characters and it was about them.

Increases in lesbian films and characters offered additional symbolic materials through which to potentially construct variegated lesbian subjectivities. A significant aspect of consumer validation was to be found in the 1980s inclusion of coming out storylines. Several respondents such as Jeanne highlighted the coming out journey in the independent film *Lianna* as particularly applicable to recollections of coming out:

Everything was so common. The married woman who comes out. The woman who’s really a lesbian who takes a class in Women’s Studies. The one who falls in
love with the professor: everybody knows somebody who did that at least once! The lesbian who is ready to move in right away. It was the average lesbian story around here. It definitely reminded me of that phase.

Interviewees recognized the coming out trope in these films as pertinent to their own lives, and, therefore, as an expression of film authenticity that was reflected in this 1981 quote from Jump Cut:

> Coming out has been a central ritual of the lesbian movement . . . Such films offer a public expression of personal experience. They are one component of a lesbian culture that shapes, supports, and politicizes personal change and self-definition. (Becker, et al. 20)

Participants felt validated by other aspects of an emerging commercial visibility in 1980s films. Personal Best was a much-publicized Hollywood feature with a big-screen budget, as were Silkwood and Black Widow. Of the actors in the four symptomatic texts – Personal Best, Lianna, Entré Nous, and Desert Hearts – only one of the characters, Chris Cahill, in Personal Best, was played by a recognizable actor, Mariel Hemingway, whose 1980s star power was one of the driving forces behind the commercial success of the film. The commercial success of Personal Best can partially be attributed to the bankable stardom of the big-name actor Mariel Hemmingway and the academy award winning director-writer, Robert Towne, adding to the impression that there was a potential for lesbians to acquire representational capital through film consumption. Personal Best was emblematic of a burgeoning commercial interest in the moneymaking potential of portrayals of lesbianism in the 1980s. Mary remembered:

> I would go anywhere to watch that movie [Personal Best] even though it’s the most depressing. . . . but, first time name stars in a movie about lesbians and high quality with lots of publicity. They lose one another, the protagonist turns straight, she’s saved by the male, but still incredible, incredible stuff.

Mary recognized the significance of star power and publicity in the constitution of a lesbian consumer acknowledgment, perhaps intentional, perhaps not, on the side of
production and distribution, that began to emerge in the 1980s. Mary viewed some aspects of commercial visibility with skepticism taking into consideration the normalizing limitations of narrative recuperation. Lucy’s remembrance of Personal Best further illustrated the potential for lesbian consumer validation:

With lesbians especially, . . . you hadn’t seen that before, a star in a movie with real lesbians. It’s always, you know, it’s been so closeted, and this was sort of the first one, it was like, well you know, this is a star, a well-known director, it must be okay. It shows that we’re okay.

Lucy’s recollection utilized the vernacular of the closet to highlight the previous history of invisibility as well as the significance of commerce in the 1980s transitioning lesbian film lexicon. Moreover, Lucy recognized the potential impact of that commercial influence in changing public attitudes toward homosexuality with the public now including heterosexual co-audience members.

The validation experienced through the potential for a 1980s lesbian consumer acknowledgement existed in simultaneity with the critical skills of informed lesbian consumers who were cynical about the effects of being imagined as a lesbian demographic. Multiple scathing comments about the heterosexual narrative recuperation\textsuperscript{13} of Personal Best, in which the one of the female athletes ends up happily paired with a man while the other is left alone and embittered, were a feature of the interviews. One participant commented, “Not very feminist. Pretty negative overall,” while another stated, “I saw that one as very detrimental to lesbians.” Others, such as Arlene read-against-the grain of the narrative structure of that film:

So, in Personal Best she leaves her girlfriend and goes off with man. I give her a year or two with him at most and she’ll be back with women.

Marian brought an entirely different perspective to the Personal Best narrative dénouement:
We all went through similar experiences on the road to coming out. It’s such a myth that everyone comes out and stays out without any type of backsliding. I appreciated seeing this in a movie as something complex and true. That type of movie stays with me even if it’s cheesy or badly written and acted.

Arlene and Marian read against the grain of and transformed a particularly irritating aspect of the history of lesbians in film – the heterosexual narrative resolution. These imaginative reworkings of the ending of Personal Best were connected to the emerging tension within lesbian communities regarding stable lesbian identity and “hasbians” who became involved with men after coming out.\textsuperscript{lxiii}

While some respondents described a validation in the recognition of “hasbians” as a form of social heterosexual recuperation in a film such as Personal Best, others adamantly took the position that recuperation reflected the discriminatory undercurrent of a fleeting lesbian consumer validation that was in appearance only. Similar to the 1980s revitalization of downtown Northampton, the inclusion of lesbianism in film had both beneficial and disturbing aspects for the lesbian population. In particular, participants were disturbed by the well known of appeal of lesbianism to heterosexual male viewers who now had access to lesbian space and portrayals of lesbian sexuality. Although modifications in 1980s films did not constitute a complete symbolic revitalization, there was at least as a dramatic makeover of lesbianism in films during this time period. However, similar to the interactions between the increasingly visible lesbian population and the downtown revitalization there were also detrimental and damaging aspects to the 1980s symbolic revitalization that were parallel to the 1980s Northampton lesbian backlash.

A transition from the savvy deconstructor of separatism to the savvy film consumer was negotiated through the accompanying pejorative discussions of what the
tradeoffs in transitioning lesbian visibility in film might mean for lesbians in their everyday lives. As film consumers who might be or not be imagined by encoders, many participants were quite skeptical about the new 1980s film visibility. Jill explained:

I’m really jaded when it comes to thinking about how I would like to see women in the mainstream. I think when it comes to the mainstream, we can’t really underestimate the power of the dollar and how those movies got made. That’s been part of my feminist training, analyzing that history in advertising, movies . . . classes in college, other things like that.

The entrance of lesbianism into 1980s commercial film visibility was problematized through Jill’s feminist-informed observations. Another individual, Mariele, had this to say about the commercial incorporation of a potential lesbian subtextual reading of the 1980s television program *Cagney and Lacey*:\(^{lxiv}\)

It’s part of the bigger problem of capitalism, I would also have to say patriarchy but perhaps more capitalism. . . although you can’t really separate them. Ultimately I think it’s good for lesbians in general to see themselves in some form. I even thought it was mostly positive, I also know that was the beginning of lesbian culture being co-opted.

Mariele’s commentary underscored respondent awareness of the deep institutional structures of the Hollywood industry and the commercial constraints of the inclusion of out lesbianism with explicit sex scenes in 1980s films. Moreover, Mariele made reference to the mainstream appropriation of lesbianism for commercial purposes. Such commentaries highlighted the tension between an appearance of commercial validation and the critical skills that were inherent in the development of media analyses that have been so central to feminism.\(^{lxv}\)

Respondent critiques were informed by a layperson’s conversancy in media history and production, courtesy of the subcultural analytic frameworks that developed socially in simultaneity with the academic feminist analysis of lesbian positive imaging and against-the-grain readings.\(^{lxvi}\) Pam had this to say about the influence of feminism on
lesbian film consumption: I believe we tend to be more aware of who we are in relation to the media. . . as feminists we have had to be. I think I’m kind of hyper-aware” – and another described her conversancy in media literacy – “I know a lot about films so I am picky. I am opinionated,” while this individual had this to say about her consuming habits in general – “I’m very particular about what I spend my money on. Andrea affirmed:

I had made the decision not to spend money on the patriarchy and it was hard because I wanted to go and see those movies. Everybody I knew was talking about them, but I could tell for myself that seeing them in a theater might be hurtful even damaging. . . It’s not possible to get away from the general misogyny in Hollywood. I made a decision as a feminist not to see misogynist movies even though that meant I could not go to as many movies.

Interviewees were acutely aware of the residual presence of symbolic annihilation as part of the broader economic and cultural constraints of an emerging lesbian commercial visibility in the 1980s. While there were changes from the previous history of invisibility, against-the-grain readings, and pathologized characters, a tentative lesbian consumer validation was simultaneously filtered through the larger system of film production and distribution.

However, a fledgling lesbian consumer validation was also negotiated through the transitioning terms of lesbian separatist economics in the 1980s. Lesbian critical consuming practices were a legacy of the feminist subcultural rejecting and boycotting of patriarchal media and the developing of a separatist lexicon. Gina expressed frustration with the limitations of symbolic separatism:

That was sort of the lesbian rule: you take what you can get. That’s what we all did, we went to these terrible lesbian performances and awful shows, we all sang along, we all applauded everything. I have to admit I was totally into it. You had to be there if you were a lesbian. . . whiny women’s music, the Music Festivals . . . that entire system of bad lesbian culture, bad poetry, boring porn, bad movies. I can only say it bluntly, badly done work, no technique. That was hard. I suppose you do want to support making women’s work. I don’t see why it has to all be the same.
In ironic contradiction, feminist critical analyses manifested in a rejection of the codes of separatist culture. Gina was especially critical of the aesthetics of separatist culture:

There’s no discernment. There’s embarrassingly bad poetry. Don’t get me started on women’s music. There’s no sense that we are paying good money and should have some choice. Lesbians will take whatever they can get.

Here we can see a burgeoning awareness of subcultural selves as critical consumers who might desire a recognition of aesthetic difference in addition to the mere presence of other lesbians both on the screen and in the audience. There were other types of exchanges between the aesthetics of separatism and the codes of commercial production that further complicated the transitioning interactions between subcultural and mainstream visibility. Lucy problematized the conflation of positive or negative with both the positive imaging aesthetics of separatism as well as the production codes of commercial visibility:

I didn’t particularly care for Personal Best. There’s something very self-deprecating about how the women were presented that I didn’t find attractive. I also thought the ending was very flat and stereotypical. I don’t remember a lot of the details about Desert Hearts, but the acting seemed wooden, like cardboard characters. It’s just annoying that this was the best that we could, do, that our community had to look at. You accepted bad lesbian culture and then they gave you bad mainstream culture.

Another interviewee, Greta, had an additional take on the negotiations between film consumption and separatist culture:

I never heard anybody say oh that’s a good lesbian movie [Personal Best], but we all spent our money to see it, didn’t we? Here we are again giving our money to the capitalist patriarchy instead of spending it on women’s work.

There were limitations in both the building of the separatist lexicon as well as the enjoying of the transitioning lexicon of lesbian film visibility. Critical reflections on film consumption were an expansion on separatist economics. Instead of the separatist rejection of the patriarchy, a potential emerged in the 1980s for different types of
consumer engagement with mainstream media including additional symbolic materials through which to construct variegated lesbian subjectivities.

Every individual I interviewed wanted to see more complexity and variety in portrayals of lesbians: “I liked seeing a polished movie” and “a beautifully made positive movie.” Hollywood films were regularly conflated with assessments of “quality.” The positive imaging aesthetics of the separatist lexicon were disrupted by the simple fact that without exception, every participant wanted to see films with “really good quality” and “excellent writing” versus films assessed as “fairly trite,” “cheesy or badly written and acted,” or “devoid of artistic merit.” Participants such as Jill evaluated various films through a critical assessment of elements of production such as screenwriting that filtered into her habits of film consumption:

I’m very particular about what I spend my money on. Like Desert Hearts, lots of people loved Desert Hearts. Didn’t like it. Didn’t seem real . . . Then [in Personal Best], I just thought, you know, first of all, I didn’t believe that they were lesbians. I didn’t think the acting was good. It wasn’t believable to me. . . . The screenwriting wasn’t very accurate in terms of what actually happens in lesbians’ lives. Not worth the price.

And, Marian reflected on Entré Nous:

I remember when I watched it and having it be a very profound experience because it was just beautiful as a movie. And I thought that they were lovers. An outstanding movie, very beautifully made . . . I don’t think it was intended as a lesbian movie, but it touched things in me that other movies didn’t. More like a lesbian film than some of them. It showed real relationships whereas Personal Best for instance didn’t. A brilliant movie [Entré Nous]. . . . Everything else seemed so fake, didn’t do much for me.

This recollection highlighted with pleasure the in-depth characterization and complex storyline of Entré Nous as another component of a lesbian consumer acknowledgement, albeit a subtextual one.
While assessments of production codes were related to the history of cultural scarcity, such assessments also carried aesthetic connotations of taste and class (Bourdieu; Fiske). For lesbian film consumers who had not been privy to affirming or complex depictions, the entrée to consumer acknowledgment was partially facilitated through an appreciation of the distinctions in the production codes of Hollywood broadcast films or the aesthetic prestige of a foreign-made film such as *Entré Nous*. Individuals such as Gina contrasted the quality of lesbian portrayals to the cultural cachet that has been aesthetically associated with gay males as participants in the arts:

I’m waiting for the day that we see something comparable to the roles that gay men take on. The smart one, the cultured one. The one who dresses well and eats well. The ones that go to the fancy-schmancy events.

Another respondent, Bets, had this to say about the aesthetic associations with portrayals of gay males:

Gay men have always leapfrogged over women in that department. They can make gay look okay in movies because they still have the women to look down on. You see this all the time, you see it with the men looking down on the women or the women not having anything to do but serve and support the male characters or be objectified.

As discussed in the specificity of the cultural and economic distinctions between lesbian and gay male businesses in downtown Northampton in the 1980s, as males, gay men, generally carried greater cultural capital and consuming power than lesbian women. Nevertheless, as critical consumers, many interviewees were assertive about participating in the broader system of mainstream visibility and consumption. While definitions of quality might indeed be constituted through stratified taste associations, the desire to have a place, as one respondent stated, as “a consuming citizen,” was not easily dismissed. Rather than expecting an underrepresented audience to deconstruct the taste aesthetics of assessing quality, such viewers needed that 1980s moment of celebrating a taste of
lesbian commercial validation even as they simultaneously censured elements of mainstream visibility and commercial consumption. The expectation that a movement from patriarchal rejection to informed consumerism would somehow vault over the celebratory moment of actually taking pleasure in some form of consumer acknowledgment is perhaps an unfair expectation of any underrepresented group.

The lesbian as film consumer demand for quantity, quality, and complexity complicated the anticonsumerist rejection of patriarchal culture. The emergence of a transitory 1980s lesbian consumer validation worked hand-in-hand with the movement from the savvy deconstruction of separatism to a savvy consumption exhibited through a conversancy in both the positive imaging politics of the separatist lexicon as well as the conventional filmmaking codes that comprised commercial visibility. However, there were trade-offs in the exchange of the privacy and safety of separatism for the factors that constituted a tentative lesbian consumer acknowledgment in the 1980s – public viewing venues, increases in portrayals, changes in production codes, and relatable storylines without characters and overt sexuality. One of the major tradeoffs was the presence of heterosexual co-audience members in the lesbian space of the public theater. However, that presence was part of a broader negotiation that disrupted not only heteronormativity, but also lesbian identificatory homogeneity. I next consider the social audience as a mediating site for fragmentation of models of lesbian identity stability and communal continuity.

Lesbian Authenticity, Variegated Subjectivity

The dual trajectories of the migratory journey – “the bodily and the imaginative” – manifested through the interrelated dimensions of coming out as a lesbian social
community, social audience, and additionally, as a lesbian symbolic space. The coming out of films with overt portrayals of lesbians heightened the migratory impulse to see the sexual through creating additional lesbian subject positions for constructing identifications of self as well as identifications for desire. The social audience was mediating site that sustained some aspects of social community, yet disrupted the central communal tenet of identity homogeneity. In the following I examine presumptions about lesbian authenticity as a significant aspect of the constitution of a lesbian social audience in the 1980s. I then consider the disruption of that identity homogeneity through examples of viewing and identificatory dissonance including gender and raced identifications. Last, I focus on the impact of expressions of lesbian sexuality in the coalescing of social audience as well as in the disruption of models of stable identity and communal continuity. Although distinct in origin, the articulative movements of the 1980s backlash were in correspondence with the identificatory articulations that fragmented lesbian homogeneity in the 1980s. As part of the coalescing of a lesbian social audience through symptomatic textuality, additional lesbian subject positions disturbed lesbian stability and disarticulated aspects of a lesbian feminist identity through a series of gender and sexual articulations with lesbianism. As we have seen, these articulative movements created openings for variegated lesbian subjectivities in the 1980s.

**Disruption of Lesbian Authenticity**

Underscoring the presumption of identificatory homogeneity, as well as the gender-specificity of the Northampton regional lesbian population, were the implicit and habitual references to the demographics of a viewing audience with “all lesbians,” “lots
of lesbians,” and “mostly women.” Such statements as “it was obvious that they were lesbians to anyone else who might have been there” drew attention to the interrelations between social audience demographics and beliefs about stable identity. One individual recollected, “It was what I wanted then, to watch lesbian movies with other lesbians. Seeing those movies with other lesbians was just very, very unique.” Calling attention to the safety in collective viewing, another chimed in, “as women we wanted to be with other lesbians back then . . . and there weren't that many places that were comfortable.”

The belief in the authenticity of other viewers was an expansion of the safety and privacy of subcultural separatist networks into the public realm of the theater.

Presumptions about stable lesbian identity were manifested in additional ways as subcultural accord about shared lesbian codes moved into the social audience viewing ritual. Melissa has this to say about viewing Lianna in Northampton in the 1980s:

Other lesbians sort of agreed without talking to one another that they would all be in the same place at once to see this movie. So there we were simultaneously and it definitely felt like we had some agreement about what we were watching. . . . that we all knew that these were lesbians on the screen. . . . there was something about watching it as a community. Just that we sort of had a knowing feeling or a knowing relationship because someone else would laugh at the screen and I could be knowing about and enjoy that I got it. And that’s important to me for some reason. We all knew what was going on.

The lesbian sexual imaginary was put into practice through what Melissa characterized as an “agreement” that rested upon collective knowledge of the social codes used in identifying oneself as a lesbian in relation to identifying lesbian characters on the screen. Thus, the social audience along with the lesbian sexual imaginary was a mediating site for communal socialization.

An interesting example of communal socialization through viewing rituals in conjunction with symptomatic texts is found in this remembrance from Chelsea, a self-
identified bisexual with a lesbian mother who grew up in the Northampton area in the 1980s. In this recollection of viewing *Desert Hearts* at Pleasant Street Theater, Chelsea described the interrelations between the coming out of lesbianism within a film and her own coming out processes:

That really affected me, this was a movie that came out, you know. I guess I just never had seen any visual representation of out lesbianism on screen, and I was nine and I had been understanding to some degree as much as a kid can, that women love women. And that women have sex with women, and you know, and that’s sort of part of life, and this was something that I experienced, had been experiencing at that point for five years, and had never seen in media, never seen on film until I was nine. I remember I was the only kid in the audience, maybe like the only kid anywhere who knew what was going on.

For Chelsea, there was a strong significance in the initial viewing of media portrayals that related to her own everyday life as the child of a mother who came out of a heterosexual marriage into a lesbian relationship during this time period. Distinct in Chelsea’s recollection was the function of seeing the sexual as a form of media pedagogy within the expanding sexual imaginary. Chelsea’s description of being “the only kid who knew what was going on” was similar to the absence of a vocabulary for lesbianism in recollections of isolated film viewing and other isolating experiences outside of the communal formation. Pedagogy through viewing lesbianism in films was similar to the pedagogical function attributed to the lesbian subcultural communal formation as a space for communal socialization (Franzen; Green; Ponse). As the child of a lesbian mother, Chelsea had an understanding of lesbianism: it was through the 1980s film viewing experience that she accessed additional symbolic materials through which to imagine her self and her life.

Respondents stressed that they made a point of going to see 1980s films in Northampton theaters due to the expectation of seeing other lesbians in the audience and
the allure of seeing out lesbian characters on the screen. Respondents catalogued the relative lesbian authenticity of various characters as “a real lesbian” versus “not a typical dyke,” and additionally evaluated the genuineness of various 1980s films as “the typical lesbian story” versus “didn’t ring true.” The cataloging of positive versus negative imaging was a central component of the legacy of separatism as well as a building block of the broader terrain of feminist media analysis. In conjunction with the contradictory assessments of lesbian authenticity, individuals made repetitive, yet dissimilar references to the relative positive imaging of films as “a beautiful positive movie” alongside “just ridiculously negative.” The contradictions in these disparate assessments pointed toward the potential for symbolic materials through which to construct variegated lesbian subjectivities.

Although many participants celebrated the safety to be found in the presumption of identity homogeneity, others described film viewing experiences in Northampton in the 1980s that were at odds with the presumption of lesbian identity conformity and communal continuity. Several respondents, including Gina, were critical of the behavior of the largely lesbian audience at communal viewing events during this time period: “They were all hooting and hollering at the screen [during Personal Best]. I was embarrassed to be in the theater. That’s why I avoid lesbian cultural events.” Gina connected her discomfort with the identificatory sameness of a film viewing experience with her previously stated criticism of the separatist lesbian lexicon: “There’s no discernment.” And, Jeanne recalled:

I went to see that one [Lianna] right when I was hired for the new position at Smith. I couldn't wait to get out of there. Everybody was making so much noise and being so out there. All I could think about was everybody is going to know
I’m a lesbian. Nobody was thinking about anyone but themselves and it did not make me feel like part of a community that I wanted to belong to.

Jeanne’s fear of being “outed” in the now lesbian space of a public theater was in contrast to the safety and pleasure described by many participants. Other descriptions of aversion, uneasiness, and dissonance were mediated alongside hegemonic communal beliefs about identity stability and communal continuity. Disparate assessments of authenticity and positivity as well as were in conjunction with disparate experiences of collective viewing. These identificatory and experiential differences indicated the availability of additional lesbian subject positions in the 1980s. There was now the possibility for a range of identificatory processes – recognizing, mimicking, desiring, rejecting, and transforming – that diversified a search for a “real lesbian” or a “positive image.”

In spite of the centrality of the presumption of identificatory conformity to safe communal film viewing, there were some fledging openings for difference among lesbian audiences members. One interviewee was excited about being in “a really jam-packed theater, [with] many types of women.” A part of that increase in “types of women” can be attributed to the strategic location of Northampton as the center of a broader regional community that included adjoining states. Ruth reiterated:

I remember it being all women, almost entirely. There might have been a few men in the audience but I don’t remember there being many. I remember the theater [Pleasant Street] being just full of these lesbians, all of these different kinds. Many more than I had seen before.

Many of the respondents who shared their recollections of communal formations during this period did not problematize a desire for seeking out, finding, and recognizing “real lesbians” in viewing contexts and other public venues. However, others described a desire for differentiated identities that prefigured the fragmenting of identity stability via the queering of lesbian subjectivities in the 1990s. Increases in portrayals of lesbianism
along with the inclusion of relatable content and sexuality in 1980s films created a context for the disruption of lesbian authenticity and communal continuity. Several respondents who self-identified through a gendered or a raced trajectory in conjunction with a lesbian identification recollected further dissonant experiences of film viewing and self identifying.

**Gender and Raced Identifications**

Instances of identificatory dissonance were to be found in recollections from participants who were seeking out portrayals of female masculinity for gender identifications. Modifications in against-the-grain readings of 1980s films provided the symbolic materials that put female masculinity into play. Individuals who had imagined previously they were a male Cary Grant kissing an Ingrid Bergmann in the Hollywood classic Stanley Donan’s *Indiscrete* (1958), now had identificatory access to the gender play of a Sidney Pollock’s *Tootsie* (1982). That imagined exchange of lesbian viewer for male character took on an entirely different dimension in the drag performance of Dustin Hoffman as Tootsie lying in bed gazing longingly at his female doppelganger’s best friend, Julie, played by Jessica Lange. Gina described the significance of the female masculinity in the television program, *The Golden Girls*:

> We used to call her [Dorothy, played by Bea Arthur]. ‘The Triple B,’ ‘Big Bea the Butch,’ or ‘Big Butchie Bea.’ Whichever one we felt like that week. We knew she’d been married, but she was so masculine. Sort of the head of the household taking care of everyone. She strutted. She had kind of a male strength that I for one could identify with. She was big with the short hair and that deep voice. It was hard not to read into it that she was a lesbian.

*The Golden Girls* was a source for a rarely seen female masculinity that was neither pathologized nor recuperated through narrative limitations. While the character of Dorothy was clearly encoded as a heterosexual woman through multiple storylines about
dating along with an ex-husband who regularly appeared on the scene, such portrayals were important to participants who described a subtle validation in the recognition of self in against-the-grain lesbian televisual visibility.

As part of the articulative movements that fragmented lesbian identity stability, an essentialized female gender became disarticulated from the sexual in lesbian identity, whereas aspects of maleness became rearticulated with lesbianism. In addition, there were respondents who made pleasurable identificatory as well as eroticized notation of several 1980s films focusing on gay male characters and storylines including Arthur Hiller’s Making Love (1982), Stephen Frears’ My Beautiful Laundrette (1985), Bill Sherwood’s Parting Glances (1986), Stephen Frears’ Prick Up Your Ears (1987), and Paul Bogart’s Torch Song Trilogy (1988). Ruth had this to say about Parting Glances:

That was a movie more about gay men. That was the first movie I remember seeing and going ‘this is people I know,’ and I don’t even know many gay men, but it felt like a real slice of life movie that worked for me in a way that most don’t. It definitely felt like a sense of community. Maybe not my community, but a sense of community that I could relate to even though it wasn’t my community. Something about the characters knowing each other and sort of a larger network of people who all knew each other and they were in and out of each others houses. . . . so I was happy that the movie felt very realistic, and yet it was interesting too. But that’s not really a lesbian community.

Ruth was able to make use of the symbolic materials proffered through this filmic depiction of gay men to construct an identification that related to her own experiences of lesbian community. Another participant, Bets, constructed a gendered identification with portrayals of gay males:

I relate to gay men because they [the characters] are given better feminine attributes than the women characters. I don’t relate to them [female characters] so I relate more to the man. Plus, the man is just more interesting and better. The women can be such a losers. I realize this has to do with how people see male-male relationships. If two men are close, there must be more there. I like watching it because they seem feminine, but they are not being sexually objectified.
While a site for contestation about gay male aesthetics and relative privilege, depictions of gay males did provide symbolic materials through which to construct identifications. The disarticulation of femaleness from lesbian identity was a particularly significant aspect of the articulative movements that fragmented lesbian homogeneity in the 1980s. As we have seen, the articulation of male economic privilege and male sexuality with lesbianism was part of the constellation of factors that contributed to the 1980s anti-lesbian backlash. While in correspondence with the articulative movements of the backlash, yet dissimilar in origin to, the disarticulation of femaleness from lesbian identity through film identifications with maleness, including gay maleness, constituted a masculinized lesbianism. The emergence of the subject position of masculinized lesbianism in the 1980s fragmented an essentialized lesbian homogeneity and prefigured a female masculinity that was part of the queer disruption of gender categories in the 1990s (Halberstam, *Female*).

The fragmentation of lesbian homogeneity was expanded through the interactions of lesbian and raced identities. Although other differentiated identity trajectories including class and age factored into the disruption of community, respondents specifically commented upon experiences of raced difference in film viewing. Esther remembered:

Mostly it’s because the area we live in, you don’t see a lot of black movies. So that’s what will bring me to the theaters, but sometimes it gets frustrating ‘cause we have to go all the way to Springfield. Because they won’t get it up here. . . . I wasn’t too impressed with *Desert Hearts*. Well, I didn’t relate to it, but I knew a lot of lesbians liked it. Understand why they liked it. But for me it was here’s another white person, here’s another white person.

Esther reflected on several aspects of identificatory dissonance. First, she acknowledged the raced limitations of the geographic-specificity of the Northampton area in stating that
she had to travel to see “black movies.” Second, was Esther's recognition of the raced limitations of the symptomatic films such as Desert Hearts that comprised the 1980s lesbian film lexicon. The statement, “here’s another white person, here’s another white person,” illustrated the identificatory dissonance she felt as a black woman in what she later described as an all-white audience watching an all-white cast on the screen. Esther described an affirmation in the viewing of Quincy Jones’ film of the all-black musical, The Wiz (1978) with an African American audience:

I’m more comfortable in a black audience because we’re allowed to laugh and talk during the movie. I mean that’s a real African American thing, you know. And if you didn’t hear a line or something, you get it on a video. But I mean, that’s the fun about it. I think the first time I remember feeling okay to do that was when The Wiz came out in theaters. I mean, we were all singing the songs . . . it was pretty much a black audience.

In accord with reasons cited for viewing lesbian films in Northampton, Esther described a geographic-specificity in making the trip down Interstate 91 to Springfield to view a film with an all-black cast with a mostly African American audience.

Similar to Esther, Pam, who grew up in Hawaii, described at length an affirming childhood viewing of Henry Koster’s Flower Drum Song (1961) with a mostly Asian American audience. Also similar to Esther, Pam, reported a internal dissonance in a communal film viewing experience with a lesbian audience in Chicago:

Let’s start with Personal Best because that’s one of the earlier ones. I did see it. It was ’82. I wasn’t living here, so I saw it in Chicago. And, there’s a lesbian community in Chicago and everybody said I should go and see this film. It’s a great film. I went with three or four other lesbians that I knew. . . . There’s a lot of lesbians in the audience. Didn’t like it, the subject material. I’m not athletic. It’s a sports film. It’s really not of that much interest to me. It presumes that all lesbians are athletic. And that they like the same thing.

Pam expressed a conflict between her self-identification and the presumption of identificatory sameness in her experience of a lesbian social audience. She continued:
Because also as a person of color, I’m used to being in audiences that watch certain kinds of films that have a different reaction to the film than I do. So it was familiar in that my experience of it was different from the audience that I saw it with.

Consequently, we can see in these responses expressions of the desire for expressions of raced difference both on the screen and in the audience. Through additional dimensions of identificatory articulation, a raced identity was articulated with a lesbian identity, creating a raced lesbian subject position. These raced subject positions were underscored through additional descriptions of the articulative movements of self-identifying.\textsuperscript{lxiii}

Pam, who identified as a Japanese American woman, described being interpellated as Asian American as part of the constitution of a multiply determined, yet at times dissonant, identification constituted through the available symbolic materials:

As Asian American, which was different than when I grew up which was Japanese American. And part of that is being in the mainland. One of my first experiences was people saying to me, ‘Ching, Chong, Chinaman. Hey Chinese, Hey Chinese.’ And I remember I was walking with somebody who was Korean and we laughed and we said, ‘We’re not Chinese.’ But that’s the experience . . . kind of the larger identity. . . . There’s a whole discussion within Asian American community about different terms.

Pam’s description of being generally subsumed under the broad category of Asian American contributed to the series of articulative movements required in constituting self as a Japanese American lesbian who, as she reported, was the “most comfortable” at this point with an Asian American subjectivity. Esther also described a series of articulations in constituting self. First off, Esther characterized the identificatory dissonance experienced as a black lesbian as “that’s when you get to separate the black lesbian from the non black lesbian.” Esther comment illustrated a disarticulation of lesbian identity that was articulated with, although in contraction to, her identification with blackness. However, as part of the constitution of a lesbian identity, Esther described a distancing
from blackness through the presumption of heterosexuality with African American identity. These identificatory negotiations were negotiated through Esther’s recollection of watching the film, *Waiting to Exhale* (1995):

It is a heterosexual relationship that all these women are in . . . you can relate it to the black couple you know over here, or relate it to a family member, or something like that, but it’s not a relationship to you at all, to being a black lesbian. I’m saying, if I was in the black neighborhood where movies were consistent, I don’t think *Waiting to Exhale* that would be on the top of my list. Because of the fact that we don’t get many black movies, you have to support. So, it’s economics.

As a lesbian who does not see herself in films focusing on black heterosexuals, Esther described a distancing from blackness. Moreover, she linked that identificatory dissonance to the economics of film production and distribution. Esther found affirmation of a raced lesbian identity in an against-the-grain reading of Steven Spielberg’s *The Color Purple* (1985):

Like when Celie is on the bed with Shug. Nothing happens that we can see. But, to me, it made me believe it even more because it was so little, the scene in the movie was so little, the lesbian scene, that it had to be in there because it also was part of the truth. But, they didn’t like focus on it. Just, shhh, shhh, [whispering sound] and that was it. . . . What I personally think is the focus in that one was society taking care of the racism, they wanted to show more of that, versus lesbianism.

Esther brought an extratextual filmic knowledge to her film viewing of the lesbian relationship between the female protagonist and another woman in the Alice Walker’s 1982 novel by the same name. Moreover, in explaining the filmic lesbian absence, Esther brought a politicized consciousness about race to her interpretation: That there might have been a cultural need in the 1980s to have a major Hollywood feature film made about racism in the 1930s south. Esther’s discussion of the omission of lesbian content in *The Color Purple* was a good example of bringing an ideological framework to the
reading against the grain process, in this case one which incorporated a raced identificatory trajectory.

Few interviewees who identified through a raced trajectory made references to 1980s film viewing, and, therefore, these recollections from Esther and Pam were particularly significant. It is important to note that experiences of difference were an additional factor in the communal discontinuities that began to erupt in Northampton in the late 1980s. While sexual identifications and behaviors along with gender identifications, were the most visible focus of community disruption, race, class, and age identifications also impacted on those changes. In particular, portrayals of sexuality were sites for a negotiation of what counted as genuine lesbianism that pointed toward communal discontinuities in Northampton in the 1990s.

**Lesbian Sexual Visibility and Subjectivity**

Changes in sexual visibility in 1980s symptomatic textuality created the most contested site in the movement of subcultural knowledge to mainstream visibility via the tradeoffs of a tentative lesbian consumer acknowledgement. For lesbian migrators during this time period “seeing the sexual” in the city’s downtown was a validation that was mitigated by the danger of the backlash against the lesbian population. Moreover, lesbian identity stability and communal continuity were additionally negotiated through the collective viewing of lesbian sexuality in 1980s films. With the exception of *Entré Nous*, the symptomatic films – *Personal Best*, *Lianna*, and *Desert Hearts* – portrayed explicit lesbian sexual encounters in ways that had not been seen before in Northampton movie theaters. Moreover, the eroticized theater space provided a physical context for the
emergence of differentiated lesbian sexual identities and behaviors. Joel commented upon
the importance attributed to these films in the lesbian sexual imaginary:

It was just sexy to see that movie [Desert Hearts]. You just can’t imagine what it
felt like to walk into that theater – I can’t remember, was it downtown at the
Academy or at Pleasant Street? – and see those women being together, really
doing one another, in a movie theater [Desert Hearts was shown at the Academy
of Music].

Although these depictions were somewhat limited with an emphasis on kissing, gentle
rubbing, romantic lighting, and soft focused close-ups of body parts, the sexual
encounters resonated with participants as a dramatic change from previous portrayals of
lesbianism, Arline affirmed:

I couldn’t believe it. It took a while to dawn on me, but I realized I was going to
be able to watch those two women making love in a movie theater. I thought that
the sex scenes were a turn on, and for me, that’s always kind of the litmus test if I
think that a sex scene is realistic or effective. . . . I actually wouldn’t mind seeing
more lesbian sex in movies.

These recollections drew attention to the significance of sexual visibility in what one
individual termed the “show me the money” scenes. While depictions of overt lesbian
sexuality had been typically found in pornography geared toward heterosexual men, the
movement of the codes of the male gaze into the context of an eroticized lesbian social
audience reconfigured the lesbian sexual imaginary in the 1980s.

The power of seeing the sexual put the interrelations of media and migration into
collective practice in the 1980s lesbian social audience. The sociability of collective
viewing rituals extended into assessments of sex scenes in Personal Best, Lianna, and
Desert Hearts. Jill recalled:

We would talk about them afterwards. That was part of the gestalt of the whole
thing . . . talking about it afterwards. Were they lesbians? What did we think
about the sex scenes? Were they positive or negative? What did we think about
this and that. Did you get that part? Part of going to see it was the sex. That’s
what made it exceptional. For me it was the anticipation that the two of them
would be sexual. Someone at work told me there was the great sex scene. . . . But it was fantastic then to see this. You got the feeling they were into it, the two actresses in it when they were doing one another. We all wondered if the two of them were lesbians or not.

This recollection strengthened community social networks by making interconnections at the local level through gossip at work as well as at the broader extratextual level through speculation about the sexuality of the actors. Participants had opinions about whether or not film actors who engaged in overt sex scenes were “really lesbians.” Lucy recapped a sexualized identification that connected questions about the authenticity of the two actors who played the lesbian lovers in *Personal Best*:

> Oh! Oh! The sex!!! I’ve seen a couple of good sex movies and Mariel [Hemingway] and Patrice’s [Donnelly] were definitely up there! Sexy and sensual! There was a buzz around town about it and I dragged her [partner] to that one and she goes, ‘Wow! Like those two were doing it.’ Let me tell you, I was mesmerized by them having sex. It looked real. It looked like they were into it. Like they were doing more than acting.

The presence of explicit sex became one of the strong signifiers of participant categorization of the relative authenticity or positivity of a film. Sid noted the implication of sex in assessing *Personal Best*:

> You knew it was a lesbian movie because they had sex. The only way you knew that they were really lesbians was that they had sex. We saw them having sex. Even though they were sort of presented as bisexual or something. . . . So then when the seduction happened, it was a very sexy scene. I loved watching it. This was exciting for me. Very arousing.

In conjunction with the relative authenticity of 1980s filmic expressions of sex, interviewees highlighted the experience of viewing overt sex scenes as primary criteria for film consumption. One noted, “I went for the sex,” while another asserted, “Part of being there at these types of films was for the sex.” One viewer appreciated, “That’s what made it exceptional . . . the anticipation that the two of them would be sexual” and another concurred, “For me a positive image means it is a hot movie.”
As we have seen, the desire for acceptance through media portrayals was mitigated through the offensive and off-putting aspects of 1980s film portrayals of lesbianism. Some individuals assertively denigrated portrayals of explicit lesbian sexuality: “the sex scenes, could have done without them” and “overall, I found those types of movies pretty distasteful, mostly damaging.” One disparaged a sexual depiction as “the thing that ruined what might have been a good movie.” An additional participant concurred, “There’s this piece of it that just felt like a male fantasy about who lesbians are. . . . Not very feminist. Pretty negative overall.” Such derisive commentaries characterized overt female-female sexuality in 1980s films as another type of discrimination that was only somewhat mitigated by increases in quantity and changes in content. Experiences of symbolic discrimination were heightened by concurrent experiences of backlash that included harassment in the movie theater. Memories of threats and violence were always present as participants expressed apprehension about the safety of sharing the physical viewing space of the theater: “We were opening ourselves up to more hostility. There was hostility in those audiences.”

Important to keep in mind is that sexuality as the most contentious aspect of lesbian visibility was always in proliferation in film portrayals within the hegemony of heterosexual systems of romance, love, and sex. Knowledge about lesbian sexuality, however, took on different dimensions as overt portrayals moved into public visibility in 1980s films. Sexual knowledge was reconfigured not only for heterosexual co-audience members, but also for lesbian viewers. Even as the heterosexual co-audience member was invited to enter into the space of a sexual imaginary that was in flux, the lesbian viewer was also entering a space of identificatory fragmentation. The explicit 1980s lesbian sex
scenes constituted a coming out of the unspoken, yet constant presence of sexual behaviors and identities exemplified in the statement of identity performativity, “We saw them having sex.” Consequently, the explicit presence of sexuality also disrupted lesbian identity stability and homogeneity.

Akin to other changes in the boundaries between subcultural separatism and mainstream visibility, sexual visibility was a predominant site for the reconfiguring of lesbian authenticity. The relatively mild lesbian sex scenes in Personal Best, Lianna, and Desert Hearts were a site for the fragmentation of the boundaries of lesbian sexual identities and behaviors. The central subcultural tenets of lesbian homogeneity and communal continuity were reconfigured through a series of sexual and gender articulative movements. These included: the 1970s disarticulation of sexuality from lesbian feminist identity; the articulations of male economic privilege and male sexuality as part of the 1980s backlash; and the articulations that contributed to the 1980s emergence of additional lesbian subjectivities – the masculinized lesbian and the raced lesbian. The dismantling of the toggled lesbian and feminist subjectivities was a central component of communal discontinuity that was negotiated through the visibility of lesbian sex in films in the 1980s.

Lesbian film sex was mediated through principles about normative lesbian identity. Feminist beliefs about female sexuality were a part of a conscious political practice in the 1980s. The rationale behind creating a separatist lexicon was a rejection of the codes used in patriarchal forms of portraying women’s bodies, notably in the codes of sexual objectification associated with pornographic depictions of female same-sex sexuality. A stable model of lesbian identity was contingent upon reworking of
patriarchal forms of sexuality into a more emotive female sensuality that was in correspondence with a disarticulation of certain forms of sex from lesbian identity.

Writing in 1984, feminist philosopher Ann Ferguson stated:

As feminists we should reclaim control over female sexuality by developing a concern with our own sexual priorities, which differ from men's - that is, more concern with intimacy and less with performance. (108)

The understanding that women were predisposed through an essentialized gender distinction to preferring more emotional connections through sexuality than men was variously termed “vanilla sex” or “soft sex” (Echols; Ferguson; Stein, “Sisters”).

Respondents utilized a vocabulary that characterized “soft sex” as “gentle,” “easy,” “emotional,” “romantic” and “woman-identified.” There was a clear message that “soft sex” did not include practices such as penetration and butch/femme role playing that were cataloged as negative heterosexual practices associated with maleness. Creating new forms of female sexuality through lesbian intimacy was part of the subcultural separatist project of resisting patriarchy along with constituting lesbian feminist identity.

Further naturalizing the interrelations of feminism and lesbianism, the cataloging of normative lesbian sexual practice ranked a women-centered political lesbianism over a sexualized lesbianism. Writing about the 1980s, Arleen Stein concurred, “Somewhere in the midst of designating sexuality as male, and lesbianism as a blow against patriarchy, the specificity of lesbian existence as a sexual identity seemed to get lost” (Sex 124).

The disarticulation of sexuality from lesbian identity was illustrated in recollections that highlighted the emotional connection between female characters in 1980s films. Andrea had this to say about Entré Nous:

I don’t know if they were lesbians, there was never a sex scene . . . There was almost hand holding and you palpably feel the interest whether it was meant to be sexual or not. I remember when I watched it and having it be a very profound
experience because I thought that they were lovers. It was really for each other. And that one scene were they were looking at one another, that to me was very sexual, very erotic.

And, Jeanne also expressed a preference for portrayals of romantic intimacy versus explicit depictions of sex:

I’m not a huge fan of graphic sex on screen. I mean, I’m not offended by it, but it doesn’t do a lot for me no matter who’s doing it. Whether it’s lesbians or heterosexuals or some other combination. I relate more to the emotional attachment between the people. . . . I don’t even remember the actual sex scenes so much as scenes where there was that incredible erotic tension which I found, that for me was more erotic than the actual sex scenes. I could fantasize that maybe it was behind the scenes or something, but the real intense bonding between two women is what does it for me. That’s what touches me. Which I would guess would be more true for women, not for just lesbians necessarily.

The disarticulation of sex from lesbian identity was in conjunction with the articulation of feminist identity with lesbian. To reiterate Arlene Stein’s previously cited observation about the early 1980s, “The former [lesbian] was assumed to grow naturally out of the latter” (“Sisters” 379). The discursive movements across these articulations were interrupted through the transitioning symbolic materials available through 1980s symptomatic textuality for constructing identifications of desire and pleasure.

Portrayals of lesbian sex scenes in 1980s films were negotiated through feminist beliefs about the interrelations among sexual objectification, pornography, and violence against women. Writing in the 1980s, feminist theorist Mariana Valverde had this to say about such associations: “Sexual objectification is a set of practices, not an ideology; rape, sexual harassment, and the production and consumption of pornography are its key aspects” (239). The codes of sexual objectification, which included the camerawork of the voyeuristic male gaze, were a significant source of contestation. Laura had this to say about Personal Best:
I do remember mostly just feeling shocked. There’s this piece of it that just felt like a male fantasy about who lesbians are. . . . Not very feminist. Pretty negative overall. Fetishizing the legs, then the crotches. Just ridiculous. Very pornographic-like. If I wanted to see women being objectified, there’s plenty of places to do that. I’m not sure if that was any different than lesbian porn for men.

Laura’s recollection underscored the numerous tight close-up shots of the female runners’ legs and buttocks in the film *Personal Best*. Along with some other respondents, Laura was well acquainted with the everyday vocabularies of feminist theories that associated pornography and violence against women with the codes of sexual objectification (Echols; Ferguson). Another participant, Greta, was also shaken by the sex scenes in 1980s films:

I was very taken aback by the sex. . . . some romance, more like soft porn, they were irritating to me in the content, truly offensive, in ways that I would never put up with today. I do think lesbian sexuality in movies can be a bit dodgy, even discriminatory, absolutely not for women-only. Truly not about what we were . . . the community.

Here can be seen the tension between the desire to view films with lesbian characters and the awareness that the public visibility of portrayals of lesbian sex disrupted a basic tenet of subcultural separatism: that images of lesbian erotica were designated for “women’s eyes only.” Moreover, Greta equated that reconfiguration of sexual knowledge as an additional form of the discrimination associated with the general movement of lesbianism into public visibility. Andrea was also distressed about the inclusion of lesbian sex scenes particularly in commercial films such as *Personal Best*:

That movie was an obvious example of how lesbians are objectified. I don’t want to see that in any movie. . . . Pornography is a pretty tangible example of discrimination against women. I wanted to see the feminist community do more about the problem with pornography and not just become another market for more objectification of lesbians. Having more porn out there was very disappointing to me as a feminist.
In linking consuming sex in movies with consuming sex in pornography Andrea was leery of a fledgling 1980s lesbian consumer validation and the tradeoff of safety for misogyny and discrimination. An additional and central tradeoff was the disruption of a stable model of a lesbian identity that was partially contingent on feminist beliefs about lesbian sexuality.

For every interviewee who stated that such codes were “Very pornographic-like,” there were others who remembered, “I loved looking at the women,” and “I liked seeing the breasts, the bodies.” Respondents made use of the codes of voyeuristic looking to construct desiring identifications – “that young butch was just really hot. . . . everybody in the audience sort of moaned when the camera first panned up her leg” – in their descriptions of films where “every jock lesbian in the Valley was in heat” over a sex scene that was “hotter than a goddamn pancake.” In contrast to participants who expressed discomfort over sharing the private knowledge of lesbian separatism, these individuals felt strongly that sexual visibility was critical to their viewing enjoyment. Bets concurred:

I want to see a sexual relationship, that they have a sexual relationship with another woman, physically. Having some sex makes it a better movie for me. . . . not just kissing. That’s extremely sensual, seeing women having sex on the screen, which I could identify with. I loved watching it. Overt heterosexual sex on the screen does nothing for me, nothing. I wouldn’t mind seeing more explicit lesbian sex in movies.

In these modalities can been seen the movements of sexual identity and practices across both pleasurable responses and critical assessments. These negotiations complicated the radical feminist perspective that pornography was the ultimate negative image and disturbed the symbiotic interrelations of lesbianism and feminism.
Questions about sexual objectification were intertwined with normative definitions of lesbian identity and sexuality that disassociated specific sexual identities and practices from the stable model of lesbian identity upon which subcultural separatism hinged. Sexual practices such as penetration, voyeurism, sexual objectification, and s/m, along with butch/femme gendered role-playing disrupted normative definitions of lesbian. Sid recollected:

There’s was one movie I still rent [She Must Be Seeing Things]. A very sexy movie, with voyeurism and sort of playful S & M stuff. That movie was the best fucking thing I had ever seen. It should have been a date movie if you know what I mean? That to me was a type of positive movie. I think a sexy movie is a positive movie.

Sexual visibility in 1980s films was a mediating site for the reconfiguration of lesbian sexual subjectivities. These negotiations prefigured the communal discontinuities that were to erupt in Northampton by the end of the decade as part of the deep ruptures within feminism that became known as the Sex Wars (Bensinger; Duggan and Hunter; Glick; Henderson, "Lesbian”; Hirsch and Fox; Hunter; Vance). Andrea, recalled:

I remember, in the late eighties, early nineties, having heated discussions about pornography. That for me, is where the real breakdown of the community happened. We were talking about are you a lesbian if you sleep with men? Yes, and we were talking butch femme too, and always, always about pornography. It just doesn’t make sense to me that porn or s/m stuff can be part of being a lesbian. Certainly not about being a feminist.

Andrea’s remembrance well illustrated the communal discontinuities in Northampton with references to conflicts over sexual representation, specifically pornography, and lesbian sexual behaviors and identities. A Sex Wars dichotomy was set up between “anti-sex” and “pro-sex” positionings that were negotiated through definitions of normative lesbianism (Echols; Ferguson; Valverde). With “anti-sex” associated with feminism, the chafing against feminist beliefs about sexual identities and behaviors further
disarticulated feminism from lesbianism by the late 1980s. Gina had this to say about the
surfacing communal conflicts:

That stuff about monitoring what people do in bed doesn’t work for me. I’ll tell
you why: you can’t watch what people do in their bedrooms. I have this
association that there was this lesbian feminist political project going on to make
everybody the same and that was going to happen through sex. This is a small
town and everybody needed to be the same. Being the same makes you ordinary,
boring, certainly boring in bed. . . . I don’t understand how that makes us radical. I
don’t get it. I get embarrassed that when feminists or any other, you know,
movement type group gets into that social conformity thing.

Gina employed the metaphor of surveillance in her recollection of the communal
regulation of normative sexuality in the 1990s. The rearticulation of different aspects of
sexuality with lesbian identity fragmented a stable model of authentic lesbianism
regulated through a feminist political commitment and a feminist definition of sexual
practice.

By the early 1990s vestiges of subcultural separatism existed side-by-side with
the emergence of a queer community constituted partially through communal
discontinuities. Debates about sexual identities and behaviors along with the factoring in
of different identity trajectories, notably gender, but also race, class, and age, disrupted
any claims to a homogenous, stable lesbian identity (Franzen; Green; Stein, “Sisters”).
The vilification of sexual practices associated with maleness contributed to conflicts over
gender identity and gendered role-playing as a particularly inflammatory aspect of
broader clashes between lesbian feminism and lesbian sexuality (Crawley; Hemmings;
Halberstam, Female; Jillian T. Weiss). Sid commented:

They [lesbian feminists] thought about butch femme as being this negative thing
that was the same as a straight relationship. Like I’m in an abusive relationship
with a man. I don’t like being treated like I can’t make grown-up decisions about
who I’m with and what I’m doing. That doesn’t feel very feminist to me. And
there’s so much judgment around it. And it is a Puritanism that’s just weird. And I
didn’t expect that from lesbians.

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Sexual practices perceived as male such as butch/femme effectively disarticulated the female from lesbian and rearticulated lesbian with aspects of maleness. Maleness was attached to sexual behaviors associated with heterosexual males as well as gay males.

Another individual Joel, had a very different take on sexual and gender identifications in relation to pornography, and sexual objectification:

I like gay male porn and partly I like it because I don’t have to worry about being offended the way I do with straight porn. You know, I can watch a man get off on a man without having to worry about if he going to say something really horrible to that woman. . . . but I also like to see two men together. I think that’s really sexy. I like their sexual play, it’s so different from anything that I engage in, so it’s really exciting from the perspective of being the ‘other.’ I like that a lot.

In correspondence with previous sexual and gender articulative movements in the 1980s, reconfigurings of lesbian subjectivity encompassed a disruption of gender categories. As detailed in the Chapter Three discussion of the anti-lesbian backlash, lesbians became conflated with gay males in Northampton through economic and sexual associations that articulated lesbianism with maleness. The articulative movements associated with film identifications – sexual, gender, and raced – contributed to the potential for additional lesbian subjectivities. There were both beneficial and detrimental elements involved in these sexual and gender articulations. While individual participants felt validated by the disruption of lesbian homogeneity, backlash incidents were more likely to be directed at individuals who did not fit into normative definitions of sexual or gender subjectivity.

The articulation of maleness with lesbian subjectivity was also met with discrimination within the lesbian community as part of the broader communal discontinuities.

The movements within and between the reciprocally constitutive negotiations of what counted as authentic lesbian and genuine feminist disrupted the identificatory homogeneity of both. As Taylor and Rupp remarked about the 1980s, “The sex wars are
fought within the community over who best deserves the label ‘feminist’” (46). This statement from Bets exemplified the negotiatory tensions over who had the right to claim those identities:

There are lots of ways to be a lesbian. I resented, and this was for years, having some prudes tell me what to do in bed. I dare anyone to tell me that I’m not a good feminist or don’t have good feminist politics. I was one of the first women around here to make things happen for the community. . . . And it was hard being a butch woman then, let me tell you. There was so much judgment, so much rigidness.

The following recollection from Joel illustrated the emphasis sexuality had in a model of stable lesbian identity during this time period:

Like twenty years ago, I felt very much a part of something, very solid and strong. And it’s different now. I guess it was that people were really identified around their sexuality. Like we were calling ourselves dykes, and we were dykes. Maybe there wasn’t a lot of variety there. So we had a similar identity, but that was also political. Almost like we were on the same team. Like we were fighting for something, and I think a lot of us got it. . . . As long as sexuality wasn’t an issue.

And, Jill expressed nostalgia for identificatory homogeneity:

I miss the old days when there was something that held us together. You knew who the other person was, what their politics were. I feel like the community was defined by a reason to be a community. . . . Being a feminist, being a lesbian, it means the same thing to me. It’s like it was all about what we had in common, you felt like there was a reason for us to be here. In the eighties, there was more of a need for lesbians to come together because there weren’t as many of us. So, in order to feel safe, in order to meet each other it was necessary for us to feel something similar and in common.

The reconfiguration of lesbian subjectivity in the 1980s facilitated the queer crossover movement into differentiated lesbian subjectivities in the 1990s. Lesbianism could now be articulated with queer subjectivities such as bisexual, female masculinity, transgendered, and gay male-identified. Bets had this to say about the constitution of a malleable model of lesbian subjectivity through implicit reference to queerness:

I hate definitions, having to always box things in. Because I can always come up with some sort of an exception. I hate pinning things down that way. Now I’m
aware this sounds a little ‘new-agey’ or ‘queer,’ but I do believe it takes all types. . . all types to make any community work. We used to fight with one another about this stuff [sex and gender]. Who should be in, who should be out, it’s always there for the changing.

These commentaries illustrate the interactions of different perspectives on lesbian identity and sexuality, which, along with discontinuities about identificatory difference, particularly gendered difference, were to disrupt a communal stability that rested upon identificatory homogeneity by the end-of-the decade. The reconfiguration of knowledge about lesbianism in the mediating site of the lesbian social audience in the 1980s created the potential for the reconfiguration of lesbian subjectivity, and, moreover, of heterosexual subjectivity.

**Conclusion – Co-Audiences, Co-Consumers**

The transition of the privacy of lesbian sexuality into mainstream knowledge was a site for the disruption of heteronormativity. That disruption, as has been seen, provoked unsafety and danger. George Chauncey suggests that backlash incidents of violence and discrimination are partially about the dominant heterosexual culture “policing its own boundaries” (25). Faced with the threatening disturbance of heteronormativity, “The normal world constituted itself and established its boundaries by creating the gay world as a stigmatized other” (26). As will be discussed in the concluding chapter of this study, as part of that reconstitution of “the normal world,” I envision additional dimensions of coalition building between the Northampton lesbian population and the heterosexual city culture in the 1980s. Through the coalescing of a social audience, and through the extension of film viewing into other downtown consuming practices, lesbian viewers entered into coalitions with heterosexuals as co-audience members as well as co-consuming citizens. I conceptualize this coalition building as a *mitigated assimilation* that
encompassed the citywide contradictions between acceptance and discrimination. The notion of mitigated assimilation takes into account the multidimensional and highly conflictual processes involved in cultural assimilation. Broader cultural oppositions including heterosexuality versus homosexuality were fragmented within the mediating site of the social audience in the 1980s. The sexual and gender articulative movements that reconfigured the stable models of lesbian homogeneity and communal continuity also reconfigured the boundaries between subculture and dominant culture. These negotiations facilitated the 1980s queer crossover from a subcultural separatism to the communal formations of a lesbian social community and a lesbian social audience that were in mitigated assimilation with the city mainstream by the end of the decade.
CHAPTER V

THE QUEER CROSSOVER FROM SUBCULTURAL SEPARATISM TO MITIGATED ASSIMILATION

According to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick the ubiquitous metaphor of the closet has been central to the place of gay people in Western culture (Epistemology; "Epistemology"). The closet has also been central to the place of heterosexuality, and as such, the closet metaphor exemplifies the discursive mutuality of the cultural opposition that is set up between homosexuality and heterosexuality. As Sedgwick eloquently stated, "'The 'closet' and 'coming out,' now verging on all-purpose phrases for the potent crossing and recrossing of almost any politically charged lines of representation, have been the gravest and most magnetic of those figures [of homosexuality]" (“Epistemology” 47-48). The coming out of a lesbian social community and social audience in Northampton in the 1980s changed the public terms of lesbian social and media visibilities, and, in turn, of the broader city. Coming out into the mainstream heterosexual city disturbed the stability of lesbian identity and the continuity of subcultural community. Those transitioning terms comprised a constellation of factors that converged in the disruption of the cultural binary between homosexuality and heterosexuality, and the broader changing discourses about sexual and gender identities. In 1980s Northampton the prevalent movements of ways of seeing lesbian interacted with these larger definitional realignments, and, in turn, instigated a movement from subcultural separatism to mitigated assimilation.

This study has examined how lesbian-identified individuals negotiated the transitioning terms of lesbian visibility and identity in the distinctive spatio-temporal
context of Northampton, Massachusetts in the 1980s. In contrast to a history of cultural, political, and social scarcity, the 1980s emergence into public visibility of alterations in both social and media expressions of lesbianism took on a unique primacy in the geographic- and gender-specific environment of Northampton. Informed by the literatures and methods of queer theory, cultural studies, and feminist film criticism, I considered the coalescing of two lesbian communal formations – a social community and a social audience – as mediating sites for not only a subcultural significatory proliferation of lesbianism, but also as vehicles for a surfacing heterosexual knowledge about lesbianism. I investigated the 1980s coming out of a lesbian community and audience through a convergence of factors that facilitated the transitional movements from subcultural separatism to a mitigated assimilation by the end of the decade. The movements between subcultural community and partially assimilated population in 1980s Northampton were exemplified in the negotiations between the appearance of acceptance and tolerance versus experiences of discrimination and harassment. Moreover, in what I characterize as a *queer crossover*, transitioning from the early to late 1980s, these coming out movements and negotiations put the lesbian population and heterosexual city into an engagement that disrupted the stable models of lesbian identity and community as well as the boundaries between subculture and mainstream.

The notion of crossover has been traditionally associated with the movement of both individual members as well as subcultural codes into mainstream culture. The crossing over can occur through either the processes of assimilation or through the appropriation of subcultural codes and rituals. Although when associated with cultural assimilation and cultural appropriation the notion of a crossover is frequently viewed as
negative, the notion of a queer crossover carries the possibility for resistance.\textsuperscript{lxxviii} As the regional lesbian population moved into public visibility and mainstream engagement in 1980s Northampton, the queer crossover reproduced two significant notions of queer theory: that identity is malleable and performative and that subcultural identity is constructed in interaction with the dominant culture (Butler, \textit{Gender}; Foucault, \textit{History}; Sedgwick, \textit{Epistemology}). Through coming out as a social community as well as a social audience, the queer crossover both reproduced and challenged the traditional model that associates a crossover with cultural assimilation.

In the following, I have examined the 1980s movement from a lesbian subcultural separatism to what I term a mitigated assimilation. The spatio-temporal context of 1980s Northampton, I suggest, offers insight into the broader implications of the changing terms of LGBT visibility and identity through providing a prefiguring site for questions about the feasibility of the goal of cultural assimilation that were to become important in the 1990s and 2000s. The 1980s queer crossover foreshadowed academic discussions and activist debates as to the potential benefits as well as damages of transforming LGBT visibility and identity (Bawer; Bernstein and Reimann; Bronski; Cimino; Harris; Phelan, “The Shape”; Phelan, \textit{Sexual}; Rand; Rimmerman; Seidman; Andrew Sullivan; Vaid; Walters \textit{All}; Warner). In particular, the tensions between the subcultural separatist lesbian population and the heterosexual population in 1980s Northampton prefigured various positionings on the feasibility of the goal of cultural assimilation for LGBT people that additionally added to discussions about the efficacy of consumer culture (Barnhurst; Bawer; Bronski; Chasin; Harris; Jacobsen and Zeller; Kates; McCloskey; Sender; Andrew Sullivan; Vaid; Walters, \textit{All}; Warner).
Debates about the compatibility of the goals of cultural assimilation with the goals of LGBT politics and identity speak to significant questions about citizenship, civil rights, and equality (Bawer; Bronski; Harris; Phelan, Sexual; Rimmerman; Seidman; Andrew Sullivan; Vaid; Walters All). These debates can be partially traced through the legacies of the important political movements of the last fifty years, which also form the backdrop for the lesbian visibility cultural moment of the 1980s. Assimilation debates have resonated across the 1990s and into the 2000s through such controversies as the participation of gay males and lesbians in the institutions of marriage, parenting, religion, education, and the military. Positions on assimilation have frequently been expressed through the dichotomy of pro-assimilationist (Bawer; Cimino; Andrew Sullivan) versus anti-assimilationist (Bronski; Phelan, “The Shape”; Warner) with some more cautionary approaches (Bernstein and Reimann; Harris; Phelan, Sexual; Rand; Seidman; Vaid; Walters, All). As Walters writes, "There is a general split between a left-leaning gay radicalism and a sort of neoconservative assimilationism" (54). The movement from subcultural separatism to mitigated assimilation in 1980s Northampton, I argue, complicates that oversimplified binary of pro- versus anti-assimilation and instead envisions assimilation as a multidimensional and highly conflictual process.

Relatedly, questions about the role of consumer visibility and consumption in the movement into cultural assimilation have been an especially contentious area in debates about the feasibility of LGBT assimilation (Bawer; Bronski; Harris; Phelan, Sexual; Rimmerman; Seidman; Andrew Sullivan; Vaid; Walters All; Warner). Negative evaluations of consumer culture and consumption are intricately connected to negative evaluations of LGBT consumer visibility. Marketing goals, critics suggest, are
incompatible with political goals, and many of the images of consumer visibility erase a long history of political struggle. In addition, consumer visibility has been linked to a loss of LGBT subcultural community and grassroots political activism (Barnhurst; Chasin; Jacobsen and Zeller; Kates; McCloskey; Sender; Andrew Sullivan; Vaid; Walters, All). Lesbians have been largely absent from the marketing imaginary as consumer identities, an absence that is evidenced partially by gendered economic disparities (Badgett). When examined, lesbian consumption has been viewed as having distinct dimensions from gay male consumption partially because of differences in male and female economics, but also because of the feminist rejection of patriarchal beauty ideals and body norms along with the reputation of lesbians as the “anti-consumer” (Chasin; Douglas). Moreover, these gender-specificities have considered that lesbians and gay males have different use values for capitalism. While lesbians have sometimes been seen as objects for consumption in pornography or as objects used to sell goods, gay males have been viewed as consumers of objects (D’Emilio, “Capitalism”). Lesbian consumption, I suggest, can be complicated through considering the gender-specificity of lesbian film consumption in the context of 1980s Northampton as part of the movement from subcultural separatism to mitigated assimilation. In this context, the coalescing of a lesbian social audience, and, in turn, the appearance of the subject position of lesbian film consumer played a role in constituting both a hospitable as well as a simultaneously hostile environment for assimilation.

In the following, I examine debates about assimilation through a continuum of four assimilationist positionings: pro-assimilation with cultural acceptance through increased visibility; anti-assimilation with concerns about backlash through visibility;
queered assimilation with heteronormative disruption through radical visibility; and mitigated assimilation constituted through the contradictions between acceptance and discrimination. The concurrent coming out of the lesbian population as a social community and a social audience in 1980s Northampton, I suggest, provided a context for complicating the dichotomy of pro-versus anti-assimilation. The cultural binaries of both subculture/mainstream as well as homosexual/heterosexual binary were constituted and disrupted through the realignments of sexual knowledge about lesbianism in Northampton in the 1980s. Accordingly, the interactive processes of constructing identity through “seeing the sexual” were part of the 1980s crossover from subcultural separatism at the start of the decade to mitigated assimilation by the end.

**Pro-Assimilation**

Convention defines assimilation as a culturally integrative process whereby subcultures combine with or blend into the unaltered mainstream (Glazer and Moynihan; Gordon; Skerry). Assimilation exemplifies the narrative American dream approach to subcultural integration in that the goal is to win mainstream acknowledgement, acceptance, and protection through becoming part of, and thus, similar to the larger group. The LGBT pro-assimilation perspective supports the notion that gay people should live in the mainstream world, as opposed to the subcultural world, and work toward common ground and identity with heterosexuals (Bawer; Bernstein and Reimann; Andrew Sullivan; Vaid). This perspective reflects the traditional model of assimilation, which, Peter Skerry notes, exists “as an animating force in our communities and in our national life” confirming that “assimilation is alive and well” (57). The LGBT acceptance through visibility strategic positioning corroborates the assimilationist perspective of
building bridges with mainstream culture. The belief that social acceptance and political gains, and, in turn, cultural assimilation will be achieved through increased visibility works in concert with the belief in the importance of coming out (Bernstein and Reimann; Rand; Vaid). As illustrated in a fundraising pamphlet for the Human Rights Campaign, the national lesbian and gay political organization that emerged in the 1980s, the “National Coming Out Project” has been a significant component of the HRC’s public education campaign, “encouraging LGBT Americans to come out of the closet with pride every day.”

The queer crossover movement of the lesbian subcultural population into public visibility in 1980s Northampton was mobilized through a series of comings out that concurrently instigated the beginning of the movement from subcultural separatism to mitigated assimilation. In striking contrast to previous cultural scarcity, transitioning knowledge about lesbianism entered into the public realm through significant “firsts.” The groundbreaking entrance into national visibility of gay and feminist politics in the 1980s was in an interactive association with the incorporation of portrayals of out lesbianism into 1980s Hollywood and independent films. The appearance of the Northampton regional lesbian population in national and local publications in the 1980s was a “first” that increased the visibility of the increasingly formalized and politicized presence of that population during the same time period. The first Northampton Lesbian and Gay Pride March in May 1982 was concurrent with the release of Personal Best in 1982. Personal Best, the first Hollywood film depicting an explicit lesbian relationship as well as explicit sexuality, was screened at Northampton’s Academy of Music the same spring as the first march. Coming out on multiple levels reflected the multiple dimensions
of assimilation as negotiated in the context of 1980s Northampton. Important to the awareness of the multidimensionality of the assimilative process is the understanding that assimilation has a variety of interactive trajectories. Assimilation is generally conceptualized, Skerry explains, “[as] about whether this or that group will ‘assimilate,’ as if assimilation were a single, coherent process when, in fact, it has several different dimensions — economic, social, cultural, and political” (59).

Northampton was in a state of transformation in the 1980s with a budding renown for alternative diversity, educational opportunities, progressive politics, and cultural resources that created a hospitable atmosphere for the assimilative process. That hospitable context was manifested through a constellation of interactive factors that included the gender-specificity of the lesbian migration as well as the rapid revitalization of the city’s downtown. The convergence of elements strengthened some aspects of the lesbian social community, while in contradictory simultaneity, placed the lesbian population and mainstream city culture into reciprocated interdependence. Moreover, the concurrent coalescing with the social community of a lesbian social audience in 1980s Northampton was a particular site for the mediation of these transforming assimilative interrelations.

The subcultural community was strengthened by the multiple movements of the lesbian population into public visibility through the national and local coverage of the area’s uniquely concentrated lesbian population along with the visibility of the formalized networks of feminist politics, which included coalition building with other city progressives. The implication of lesbians in the dual economic and cultural trajectories of the downtown revitalization supplied opportunities for lesbian to make a
living, offered spaces to rent for businesses, meetings and events, and generally presented lesbians with multiple opportunities to become visible to one another in the everyday fabric of city life. The emerging feminist political networks, coalitions, and businesses, moved the social community into visibility as members of the everyday fabric of the city. The increasing visibility of lesbians on the streets, in downtown businesses, and in neighborhoods further created the context for, if not acceptance through visibility, at least awareness through visibility, with the potential for assimilation further supported. As part of the movements of the lesbian population into public knowledge, new lesbian subject positions including parent, student, neighbor, and political ally as well as renter, service provider, taxpayer, employee, and customer strengthened community while also strengthening inter-reliant relations between subcultural and mainstream populations.

The pro-assimilationist position on acceptance through visibility was reflected in the interactions between the concurrent growth of the lesbian population with the rapid revitalization of the city’s downtown. Ann Forsyth’s distinction between the parallel trajectories of economic and cultural revitalization can be expanded to an understanding of the multiple dimensions of assimilation (“NoHo” 623). The mutual economic and cultural interdependence between the lesbian community and mainstream city culture increased the movement of the burgeoning lesbian subculture into public visibility and supported a welcoming environment for the assimilation process. That interdependency further supported an atmosphere with the potential for subcultural absorption as heterosexuals became increasingly aware of the lesbian population’s implication in the city as well as an awareness of lesbians as individuals.
Coming out in its various permutations has been considered key to LGBT identity and culture as part of the movement from subcultural separatism to assimilation into the public mainstream. Urvashi Vaid had this to say about the coming out strategy as part of the pro-assimilationist belief in acceptance through visibility:

Gay liberation as movement created queer culture by claiming a public space for people to be openly gay. The priority placed by gay liberationists on visibility, on each individual coming to terms with their sexual orientation, moved a private behavior into the public square where it could begin to define itself as a culture. . . . Visibility to each other was the precondition for our construction of a gay and lesbian community, movement, and culture. (197)

Vaid’s statement touches upon the political significance attributed to coming out both individually and collectively and the interactive negotiations of public and private that are associated with coming out. Moreover, Vaid underscores the importance of “seeing the sexual” in constituting queer identity and community through “visibility to each other.” The opportunities for seeing other lesbians in the everyday fabric of city life reflected the series of comings out that knitted together the physical and symbolic aspects of “seeing the sexual” as a significant component of supporting the social community. Nevertheless, while “seeing the sexual” bolstered and sustained the lesbian social community in 1980s Northampton, “seeing the sexual” also placed lesbianism into a public circulation that disrupted the lesbian communal formation.

The transforming city of Northampton in the 1980s created both physical and symbolic space for the dual comings out of the social community and social audience. These transformations provided vehicles bolstering at least some aspects of the separatist safety of the subcultural community, while concurrently moving the lesbian population into mainstream visibility and engagement, and, in turn, into the potential for assimilation. However, the same factors that sustained subcultural separatist community
were also, in contradiction, the same factors that instigated the movement of the subculture into mainstream engagement, disrupting separatist safety and privacy. Movements into different forms of public visibility also made lesbians visible to the heterosexual population of the city. The coming out of the lesbian social community, and the subsequent coming out of the lesbian social audience, was in correspondence with, yet simultaneously in contradiction to, the movement of the lesbian population into assimilation. The contradiction between those interrelations illustrated the multidimensionality of assimilation.

The multiple dimensions of assimilation were complicated through the implication of the social audience and lesbian film consumption in the downtown revitalization. The coalescing of a lesbian social audience in Northampton in the 1980s was in reciprocity with the interactions between sustaining subcultural community through movement into public visibility. On the national level both feminist politics and lesbianism as a subset of feminist politics as well as of the gay liberatory movement were incorporated by the Hollywood industries into the symptomatic films that were central to the constitution of lesbian social audience. The downtown revitalization offered an emerging arts scene that included two art theaters for screening lesbian films containing previously unseen out characters and explicit sexuality. Taking over theater spaces and viewing “first time” films with an almost all-lesbian audience was an exhilarating and subversive event. The ownership experienced in taking over a public space watching what were regarded as lesbian films carried a first time primacy akin to the primacy of the first pride march. Thus, in conjunction with the coming out of the social community,
the social audience along with symptomatic textuality offered numerous additional sites for “seeing the sexual.”

The social audience was in reciprocity with the social community through the collective viewing rituals of film attendance and the interactions between seeing lesbians on the screen, in the audience, and on the streets. As discussed in Chapter Four, the social audience, was an additional catalytic site for moving into interdependency with the mainstream, and, in turn, a potentially hospitable climate for assimilation. In particular, the coalescing of a lesbian social audience through film viewing rituals and symptomatic texts was propelled by the implication of lesbians as film consumers in the cultural and economic trajectories of the downtown revitalization with film consumption a visible example. The presence of almost all-lesbian audiences was more than noted by local businesses, particularly the two local art house cinemas, the Pleasant Street Theater and the Academy of Music. The collective viewing rituals extended into the city streets through the interrelations of lesbians seeing lesbian characters on the screen, lesbian viewers in the audience, and lesbian citizens on the streets. The pre- and post-film consuming practices of lesbian viewers further extended the social audience into the streets and businesses of the city's downtown. As consuming citizens, lesbians entered into what could be regarded as another form of coalition building, in this case with other consumers who were important to maintaining the economic trajectory of the newly revitalized downtown. The subject position of the lesbian consuming citizen was an entry point into additional forms of cultural acceptance and tolerance in 1980s Northampton.

The implication of the lesbian population in the 1980s revitalization of downtown Northampton was particularly relevant as lesbians became visible via economic subject
positions. As consumers, lesbians were in a mutual economic interdependence with the primarily heterosexual entrepreneurs, landlords, and business owners of the downtown. As film viewers, lesbians further benefited from and contributed to the economic and cultural structures of the city. However, the subject position of lesbian consumer was in contradiction to the subcultural emphasis on lesbians as “anti-consumers” (Allen; Douglas; Murray). The anti-consumer reputation was constituted as part of the feminist impetus to rework the patriarchy through purchasing only women-made goods from lesbian separatist businesses. Moreover, the lesbian anti-consumer was implicated in the subcultural separatist rejection of the patriarchal beauty culture, and the boycott of patriarchal media including film. The reworking, rejecting, and boycotting of consumer habits put feminism into practice in the subcultural separatist community in the 1970s, but were disputed through the emergence of lesbian economic subject positions in downtown Northampton in the 1980s.

However, that disruption was complicated due to the necessity for the lesbian population to sustain community both economically and culturally through consuming practices that included engaging with mainstream culture. The negotiations between the rejection of mainstream consumption and the necessity for some mainstream engagement for not only survival, but also for the sustenance of community and identity, were illustrated in this comment from Jeffner Allen on separatist economics:

Although we choose to live as lesbians, we are obliged ... to stand in relation to the patriarchal economy . . . We are obliged to stand in relation to men, especially to secure food, water, shelter, clothing, and frequently, for the goods and money that must be exchanged for such commodities. (40)

As an example of the broader contradiction between sustaining separatist community and the necessity of participating to some degree in mainstream engagement, lesbian film
consumption was a site for illustrating the multidimensionality of assimilation. The mutual interdependence between the lesbian population and the revitalizing downtown meant an exchange on both sides that, as we shall see, disrupted the boundaries of both. Although the social audience and symptomatic texts sustained community, the specificity of a lesbian space that was concurrently a public heterosexual space further disrupted the central tenets of subcultural separatism. Moreover, these transitioning terms resulted in a 1980s anti-lesbian backlash contributing to an atmosphere of hostility that was in contradiction to the coalescing of a hospitable environment with the potential for assimilation.

The example of lesbian film consumption complicates questions about the role of consumption in cultural assimilation. The criticisms of LGBT consumer visibility, I propose, do not take into account the multiple facets of cultural assimilation. In the spatio-temporal context of the transforming city of Northampton in the 1980s, the entry of lesbian film consumers into the economic and cultural trajectories of downtown revitalization benefited both sides. I suggest that beliefs about lesbians as anti-consumers, as consumers who do not spend money or do not desire consumer recognition, can be examined through additional dimensions including the contradictory negotiations between subcultural separatism and mainstream assimilation, and, additionally, the gender-specificities of consumption. As was discussed in Chapter Four, as part of the 1980s crossover changes in lesbian consumer visibility in 1980s films provided lesbian viewers with symbolic materials through which to construct different types of identification of self and desire. Other new lesbian subject positions, including economic subjectivities such as lesbian film viewer, were part of what I term a queered assimilation.
that takes into account the queer tenets of malleable identity and communal formation discontinuity.

The model of pro-assimilation in 1980s Northampton was negotiated through the mutually beneficial exchanges between subcultural separatism and the dominant heterosexual culture in constituting a welcoming environment with the potential for assimilation. Additional exchanges, however, were more insidious, setting up a contradiction in the city between appearances of acceptance and tolerance versus experiences of discrimination and harassment in its very constitution. The contradiction between the constitution of a hospitable versus hostile environment was crystallized in a 1980s backlash against the Northampton lesbian population. Concurrent with the other transformations during this time period, the 1980s backlash placed the mutually interdependent subculture and mainstream into another type of interaction that illustrated both the multiple dimensions as well as the conflictual aspects of assimilation.

**Anti-Assimilation**

The detrimental aspects of cultural assimilation have been expressed through apprehensions about the erasure of subcultural identity, depoliticizing goals of feminist and gay liberatory politics, and concerns about the potential for backlash through increased visibility (Bawer; Bernstein and Reimann; Bronski; Cimino; Vaid; Walters, All). As Peter Skerry succinctly states “Assimilation and conflict go hand in hand” (62). Although there have been changes in social acceptance, political protections, and media visibilities, an anti-assimilationist approach broaches questions about the limitations of the conventional goals and processes of cultural assimilation. Those who have grave
apprehensions about the promises of limited acceptance with restricted protections are nonetheless in accord with the need to resolve homophobia and discrimination.

The dichotomy of pro- versus anti-assimilation was negotiated in 1980s Northampton through the two strategic visibility positionings: acceptance through visibility versus backlash through visibility. The belief in social acceptance and political gain was challenged in 1980s Northampton by the tensions that were always present as the conservative right moved into increasing visibility with anti-gayness as the facilitator (Bawer; Bronski; D’Emilio, *Sexual*; Lacayo; Rimmerman; Vaid). As the anti-assimilationist position argues, when gay and queer people become visible in media portrayals, in social lives, in economic contexts, and in political realms, their ways of visibility may result in discrimination and harassment. Various expressions of sexual visibility in both media venues and social contexts have been particularly distinguished as sites for potential causation of the conservative backlash (Bawer; Bronski; Andrew Sullivan; Vaid; Walters, *All*). The impact of “seeing the sexual” had profound implications for all aspects of the movements between subcultural and mainstream assimilation but particularly for the constitution of the anti-lesbian backlash. Through the movements of “seeing the sexual” the anti-lesbian backlash manifested concerns about the breakdown of the boundary between lesbian subcultural separatism and mainstream engagement with heterosexuals. The tensions between the pro- and anti-assimilationist positionings were manifested through two powerful symbols of “seeing the sexual” in 1980s Northampton, the first pride march and the subsequent anti-lesbian backlash.

The first Northampton Gay and Lesbian Pride March in May 1982 was significant in the series of comings out that mobilized the lesbian population into the heterosexual
city’s view. Together with the increasing publicity about the regional lesbian community, the march brought the uniquely concentrated population into a different type of public visibility. Coming out into public visibility through the march further supported the development of a hospitable and mutually beneficial environment for assimilation. The march sustained the community by providing additional venues for lesbians to find one another in a strong illustration of the symbolic power of “seeing the sexual.” As a convergence of regional grassroots organizing, feminist political action, and coalition building, the march also strengthened networks with lesbian allies, which, while simultaneously bolstering, also moved lesbians into additional mainstream engagement that was in contradiction to a community that hinged upon subcultural separatism. The march, however, also produced a hostile environment that supported a full-blown anti-lesbian backlash. Although the march offered the possibility of acceptance through visibility by educating the city’s heterosexual population about the presence of lesbian citizens, coming out through the march also included coming out to hostile residents. Thus, while the march was in accord with the gay liberatory visibility strategy of coming out for acceptance and achieving socio-political rights, the backlash that followed the first Northampton pride march was in contradiction to those goals. In providing a context for resisting assimilation due to the material realities of harassment and discrimination, the march moved between the pro- and anti-assimilationist positionings.

The movement into mainstream engagement through public visibility in 1980s Northampton was constituted through the same convergence of factors that provided a hospitable environment for assimilation, yet also created a hostile atmosphere for harassment of and violence against lesbian individuals and businesses. The emergence of
the conservative and feminist backlashes along with “Reaganomics” supplied a national climate for the local tensions between the more working class, politically conservative, and less educated, “old-time” Northamptonites and the more affluent, educated, and politically progressive “newcomers” to the city. The first pride march placed the lesbian population in these tensions as experiences of economic and cultural displacement were articulated with lesbian visibility. In turn, these discursive moments manifested into a full-blown anti-lesbian backlash that continued throughout 1983. Several lesbian women were raped and one was beaten while additional individuals received death-threatening phone calls, and several lesbian businesses and organizations received bomb threats.

Moreover, the social audience was a mediating site for the negotiation of a hospitable versus hostile assimilative atmosphere. There were drawbacks in claiming the public space of a downtown theater as lesbian space and pitfalls in professing ownership of the broader symbolic sexual imaginary through claiming ownership of films. Coming out as a social audience into a public theater also means sharing both physical and symbolic space with heterosexual viewers and lesbians reported harassing incidents and fears about safety. Although many local heterosexuals were allies, others were not, and the negotiations between acceptance and tolerance versus discrimination and harassment were mediated through film viewing experiences in reciprocity with the anti-lesbian backlash during the same time period. All in all the seemingly hospitable 1980s assimilative environment was contradicted by the backlash experiences of harassment and violence, further reinforcing an anti-assimilationist position.

In conjunction with the first pride march, the 1980s anti-lesbian backlash was a powerful symbol for the consideration of the multiple dimensions as well as the
conflictual aspects of assimilation. Movements into public visibility both sustained and disrupted the subcultural formation while supporting a mutually beneficial interdependence between the community and the mainstream. Movements into public visibility also resulted in the 1982 to 1983 backlash against the lesbian population. The backlash events created an atmosphere of fear that called into question the “liberal veneer” of the city's reputation as a welcoming place for lesbian migrators to enter into some aspects of assimilation, and, instead, supported an anti-assimilationist position of maintaining the subcultural community as separate. The march and subsequent backlash underscored the apprehension of anti-assimilation: when lesbians become visible they become unsafe. Peter Skerry comments, “Assimilation is a multidimensional process in which gains along one dimension may not be neatly paralleled by progress along others” (61). The visibility of both the march and the backlash were negotiated through the interactive but not equivalent trajectories of social, cultural, economic, and political change in Northampton in the 1980s as was the cultural binary of pro- versus anti-assimilation.

That pro- v. con- binary can be further complicated through examining the backlash as an example of a moral panic in hegemony (Cohen; Crichter; Hall et al.; Irvine; McKenna, “Lesbian”; Watney; Weeks). Stanley Cohen initially formulated the understanding of a moral panic in 1972 to explain rapid escalations of public moral outcry over social changes. A moral panic is somewhat different from the popular understanding of a backlash. Similar to the conventional assimilative model of subcultural absorption into mainstream, such conceptualizations of backlash imply a direct relationship between the oppositional terms of subculture and mainstream. The
moral panic formation suggests a multiply determined constellation that is in accord with a multidimensional model of assimilation. Several scholars have focused specifically on moral panic in relation to transitioning sexual behaviors and identities including feminist debates over pornography (Rubin), concerns about the depiction of AIDS (Watney), and the regulation of sex education (Irvine). These studies suggest that moral panics over sexuality are particularly fraught with inflammatory tension as other social tensions, frequently economic, become displaced onto the moral target of various forms of sexual visibility. As Janice Irvine notes, “Intense public hostility is an important characteristic of moral panic” (143).

In 1980s Northampton, the anti-lesbian backlash was a series of dis- and re-articulations that comprised a moral panic. The articulation of economic and cultural displacement with the visibility of the lesbian population produced not only a hospitable environment for cultural assimilation but also a hostile environment that resulted in an anti-lesbian backlash. As outlined in Chapter Three, the economic displacement created by gentrification and revitalization was projected onto the lesbian population. I term this projection a myth of economic causality. As delineated in Ann Forsyth’s research, while lesbians were implicated in and did benefit from the downtown revitalization, they did not make any money, and, moreover, were blamed for economic and cultural alienation. Alienation was about more than Northampton’s transformation from a “sleepy ghost town” to a city known for diverse populations, expensive restaurants, progressive politics, and art aesthetics. Although that environment provided a context for the lesbian population to enter into visible engagement with the heterosexual city, it also provided a context for the projection of tensions over economic and cultural displacement.
In a precise illustration of the mechanisms of moral panic, the response of an organized group of working-class Northampton men to economic and ideological alienation was a projection of causality onto the lesbian population. Although that myth of causality was created through a number of factors, the backlash, as a mechanism of moral panic, partnered the changing visibilities of lesbian sexuality within the context of the transformation of downtown and the changing city demographics. Moral panics, Gayle Rubin notes, have been particularly applied to the changing terms of sexuality:

Moral panics are the ‘political moments’ of sex, in which diffuse attitudes are channeled into political action and from there into social change . . . Sexual activities often function as signifiers for personal and social apprehensions to which they have no intrinsic connection. During a moral panic, such fears attached to some unfortunate sexual activity or population. (25)

The harassment and violence of the backlash was in interaction with the changing terms of sexual identities and visibilities, and, consequently, changing gender identities in the 1980s. The movements of the lesbian population into public visibility created a different reconfiguration of knowledge about lesbianism as lesbians, as well as heterosexuals, were seeing the sexual. The response to that sexual knowledge was moral outrage over lesbian sexual visibility, and, consequently, backlash, which, Irvine writes, “generally implies a disproportionate, misguided, even irrational response” (210). The vision of lesbians marching down the street celebrating their presence in the city brought lesbians into public view as sexual beings. That sexual visibility effectively disrupted the presumption of heteronormativity in the city, and, moreover, disrupted the boundary between heterosexuality and homosexuality.

In addition, through the movements between sexual visibility and sexual identity, the boundaries between gender identities were disturbed through another series of articulating movements as female was disarticulated from lesbian, and the economic
affluence and promiscuous sexuality associated with gay males was rearticulated with lesbian. In an amalgam of the national conservative anti-gay and anti-feminist backlashes, the 1980s Northampton backlash projected an economic and cultural displacement onto the lesbian population that incorporated the interlocking dynamics of disarticulating some aspects of female from lesbian. In correspondence with the working class male displacement of economic and ideological alienation onto the lesbian population, the reconstitution of lesbians as visible sexual beings, and, thus, as full social beings, disturbed the boundary between heterosexuality and homosexuality, and effectively outed Northampton heterosexuality and masculinity as constructed identities. That outing also served as a call to order for masculinity that put into question the constructed belief in two separate and distinct genders.

The assimilative trajectories of political, economic, cultural, and social change converged in the moral panic through the articulating movements of sexuality and gender behaviors and identities. The mechanisms of the moral crisis were mobilized through a series of sexual and gender disarticulations and rearticulations. These discursive movements were produced through the transformations of the city in conjunction with the comings out of the lesbian social community and social audience of Northampton in the 1980s. As Peter Skerry confirms, “It is during periods of growth when individuals have greater opportunities to break beyond previously established group boundaries. But opportunities for more interaction also lead to opportunities for more conflict” (61). Assimilation has multiple and conflictual dimensions and, as will be next be discussed in the consideration of a queered assimilation through radical visibility, there were additional aspects of assimilation that instigated the 1980s Northampton queer crossover.
**Queered Assimilation**

Beginning in the late 1980s, both activists and academics reclassified the historical connotations of queer as deviant into a reworking of queer as a designation of pride, and, moreover, as radical. A queered assimilation makes use of that hegemonic definitional reappropriation. In addition, through the development of queer theory, queer has come to mean a breaking down and disturbance of broader cultural categories that catalogue the hierarchies of normalcy, and, particularly of sexual and gender normalcy (Butler; Foucault; Phelan; Seidman; Rubin; Sedgwick). Ellis Hanson explains:

The extraordinary usefulness of queer theory submits the various social codes and rhetorics of sexuality to a close reading and rigorous analysis that reveal their incoherence, instability . . . The very word queer invites an impassioned, even an angry, resistance to normalization . . . it declares that the vast range of stigmatized sexualities and gender identifications, far from being marginal, are central to the construction of modern subjectivity. (4)

The queer liberationist approach to assimilation, which I term a queered assimilation, emerged at the end of the 1980s. Queered assimilation espouses radical change by either working outside the system to transform power structures (Bronski; Clarke; Phelan; Rimmerman; Seidman; Warner) or by subverting the system through an in-your-face confrontational visibility (Bronski; Epstein, Impure; Shilts). This radical approach is exemplified by the Queer Nation slogan, “We’re here, we’re queer, get used to it,” a slogan that contrasts with the innocuous HRC mission of “working for equal rights.” In a queering of assimilation the goal is sexual citizenship, with full rights and absolute equality for all LGBT people (Seidman). Instead of a pro-assimilationist model of subcultural absorption into the mainstream or an anti-assimilationist model of staying separate, a queer assimilative model emphasizes the profound alteration of the diversifying movement of the subcultural into the dominant culture.
A queered perspective on assimilation makes use of the central tenets of queer theory – the disruption of stable identity, the disturbance of the boundaries between subculture and mainstream, and a consideration of the interrelations of power as mutually productive and interactive formations – to conceptualize a model of assimilation that reconfigures both sides of a binary equation using the materials of each. In contrast to the pro-assimilationist model of subcultural absorption and the anti-assimilationist model of staying separate, the queered model of assimilation requires a restructuring of both society and subculture that deconstructs the stability of both. Both pro- and anti-assimilation approaches are contingent on a stable model of identity, and, therefore are contingent on the broader cultural binaries of heterosexual v. homosexual as well as normal v. abnormal. The ultimate goal of queered assimilation is the disruption and revision of both homosexuality and heterosexuality through radical queer visibility. Queered assimilation makes use of a radical queer visibility in disrupting broader oppositional cultural categories to suggest that such boundaries are malleable and fluid across time and culture.

Radical queer visibility emphasizes the power of seeing the sexual as part of the continuous reconstituting of the broader sexual imaginary. In contrast to the visibility opposition of acceptance through the educative power of visibility, or backlash through the damaging results of visibility, radical queer visibility seeks to challenge, deconstruct, and transform the naturalness of the identificatory binaries associated with hegemonic categories of normalcy. This approach was exemplified by the founding in the late 1980s of queer radical activist groups Queer Nation and ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) followed by the Lesbian Avengers in 1992. The visibility actions of these radical
groups were characterized by an “in-your-face tribalism” (Bronski 78). Queer radical visibility was distinguished by grassroots activism with sexual displays that included kiss-ins in banal public spaces such as supermarkets along with or different modes of education such as condom distribution at elementary schools. ACT UP was involved in well-publicized protests expressing confrontational anger over the Reagan administration’s lack of response to the AIDS crisis (Bronski; Epstein, Impure; Shilts). Instances of radical queer visibility were in sharp contrast to the pro- v. anti-assimilationist visibility strategies of educating the public through pride marches or through increasing positive imaging in media portrayals. The ACT UP rallying cry of “Silence = Death” exemplified the queer challenge to conventional assimilation and put the strategy of radical visibility into public view.

Many perceived radical queer visibility as counter to both pro- and an anti-assimilationist perspectives (Bawer; Andrew Sullivan; Vaid; Walters, All). Queer sexual activism was a rebuke to the pro-assimilation approach of educating the public through positive images with the goal of subcultural absorption through emphasizing the normalcy of and similarity to heterosexuals of LGBT people. Overt sexual actions worked against the fear of backlash through visibility, especially, an in-you-face sexual visibility. The repercussions of same-sex public displays of sexuality have been noted as causal of the anti-gay harassment and violence including, as we have seen, of the 1980s Northampton anti-lesbian backlash (Bawer; Bronski; Andrew Sullivan; Vaid; Walters, All). Such concerns converged in the awareness of highly publicizing the racial queer activism by the escalating anti-gay conservative movement.
Thus, queer radical visibility strategies were not only in conflict with the conservative religious right, but also with the goals and strategies of both pro- and anti-assimilationist approaches. These approaches in regulating and even censoring certain expressions of sexual visibility belie the understanding, as developed in the work of Michel Foucault, that expressions of sexuality are always in proliferation. While knowledge about certain sexual behaviors and identities such as lesbian sexuality may not always be explicitly visible, sexuality is always in proliferation as part of any performance of either social or media subjectivity. The queer assimilationist approach to sexual visibility disturbs the interrelations of visibility and invisibility and, moreover, challenges the power relations of regulating sexual visibility and identity. While some sexual expressions become explicitly visible or invisible at different times, sexuality is always in deployment as regulated by variable definitions of sexual normalcy. According to Foucault, power and language are intertwined within discourses about sexuality and normalcy which operate as regulatory forces within specific time periods. Eric Savoy’s notion of a “queer incoherence” is useful for conceptualizing the changing terms of sexual visibility and invisibility across time:

The extraordinary usefulness of queer incoherence for consolidating, paradoxically, lesbian and gay specificity will emerge most clearly in analytic situations in which such ‘specificity’ can be articulated as historically emergent [italics in original], on the threshold of tentative definition. (154)

As part of the 1980s queer crossover, the proliferation of knowledge about lesbianism in Northampton exemplified what Michel Foucault envisioned as a “a new regime of sexual discourse,” a time when the mechanisms of sexual visibility and invisibility were transformed. Foucault writes, “Not any less was said about it; on the contrary, but things were said in a different way, it was different people who said them from different points
of view, and in order to obtain different results” (27). Sex has great symbolic meaning, Gayle Rubin contends, and historical periods when the terms and definitions of sexual categories are renegotiated contribute to contemporary understandings of sexuality (Thinking Sex). Shane Phelan suggests that “queer theory’s ultimate target is identity itself” (“The Shape” 56-57) and the changing terms proffered by queer radical visibility had both positive aspects and detrimental repercussions in the disturbance of stable lesbian identity and communal continuity.

There were a series of radical queer events in the Northampton region that straddled the queer crossover cusp of the late 1980s and early 1990s. A public coming out was staged at the nearby Hampshire Mall in 1991 with queer people kissing and walking around hand-in-hand in purposeful, politically oriented displays of public same-sex affection. Grassroots grapevines promoted a recurring queer supermarket night at the Hadley Stop and Shop during that same time period where queer people could meet and greet while still challenging heteronormativity. These political actions were meant to demonstrate the sexual visibility of queer people, and, moreover, to disrupt the presumption of heteronormativity in public spaces. Young queer students at area colleges were largely responsible for these empowering actions that made visible different types of sexual and gender identities. The subcultural lesbian community, however, was challenged through the entrance of queerness into the Northampton area in the late 1980s.

As a catalytic instigator of the 1980s queer crossover the definitional negotiation of lesbian feminism was destabilized through what have been infamously consolidated as the “Sex Wars” (Bensinger; Duggan and Hunter; Glick; Henderson, "Lesbian”; Hirsch and Fox; Hunter; Vance). Conflicts about sexual identities such as bisexual, and
transgendered, and practices such as S & M, penetration, and butch-femme role playing were linked with sexual visibility, specifically pornography, and manifested in inflammatory conflict among feminists, and, especially, lesbian feminists. In the Northampton region, the “Sex Wars” extended into full-blown discords as part of the end-of-the-decade-cusp of the 1980s queer crossover, foreshadowing communal conflicts in the 1990s over lesbian sexual practices, subjectivities, and representations (Forsyth, “NoHo”; Forsyth, “Nonconformist”; Hemmings). lxxxix

The disruption of the stability of lesbian identity, and, thus, of communal continuity was negotiated through a series of sexual and gender articulations. The distancing of sexuality from lesbian identity had been a particular discursive movement in the 1970s that continued into the 1980s and which supported other aspects of the subcultural separatism. Instead of a focus on sexual freedom, lesbian feminist politics stressed resistance to what was viewed as the dominant patriarchal sexuality. From the vantage point of 1997, Arleen Stein wrote:

Centering lesbianism upon female relationality and identification, . . . transformed lesbianism into a normative identity that over time came to have as much – and sometimes more – to do with life-style preferences (such as choice of dress or leisure pursuits) and ideological proclivities (anticonsumerist, countercultural identifications) as with sexual desires or practices. (“Sisters” 382)

The disarticulation of sexuality from lesbian identity had been significant in defining and regulating normative lesbian identity and lesbian community through the articulation of lesbian with feminist. That emphasis on normative identity was disrupted through the rearticulation of sexuality with lesbians as negotiated through the 1980s backlash as well as through the symbolic materials proffered by 1980s symptomatic films.

The disruption of stable identity that emerged as the 1980s transitioned into the 1990s circulated through a series of sexual and gender articulations as detailed in
discussions of the dual comings out of, respectively, a lesbian social community and a
lesbian social audience in Chapters Three and Four. Both sets of articulative movements
were somewhat distinct, yet interactive though the common discursive strand of
regulating normative lesbian sexuality. Chapter Three’s discussion of the coming out of
the social community argued that while the discursive rearticulation of lesbian identity
with sexuality as well as with maleness produced the backlash, those same articulations
also contributed to hospitable aspects of a city environment that offered assimilative
potential. Chapter Four’s examination of the coalescing of a lesbian social audience
suggested that the additional symbolic materials provided through symptomatic textuality
also offered additional lesbian subject positions through which to construct self and
desiring lesbian identifications. Those subject positions were constituted through the
disarticulation of lesbian identity from some aspects of feminism, and, in turn, the
rearticulation of sexuality with lesbian. Moreover, via these articulative exchanges,
individuals constructed alternative gender subjectivities through film viewing. These
articulative movements destabilized models of lesbian authenticity and subcultural
separatist community that hinged upon feminist politics and normative definitions of
lesbian sexuality, and prefigured the provocative debates about pornography as well as
both sexual and gendered behaviors and identities which queered normative definitions of
lesbian identity and communal continuity in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Following from the queer insistence on the disruption of normative categories of
identity, the rearticulation of sexuality with lesbian identity was a particularly charged
transformation that was in concert with the articulation of sexuality with lesbians in the
context of the interrelations of the constituting of a hospitable versus hostile environment
for assimilation in 1980s Northampton. Accordingly, the identificatory articulations of film viewing were discursively in correspondence with the articulative movements of the anti-lesbian backlash. Important to note, however, is that similar to the constellation of factors that produced both the hospitable versus hostile assimilative environment in 1980s Northampton, such basic communal tenets as lesbian authenticity and subcultural separatism became redefined, yet still retained previous subcultural meanings. That retention of subcultural separatism was further challenged by the impact of the entrance of queer politics and radical visibility into the Northampton region.

There were several specific incidents that loomed large in participant discussions of the 1980s queer crossover as that decade transitioned into the 1990s. For instance, interviewees described contentious debates in the Northampton region over selling anything that was defined as pornographic, including lesbian erotic made by lesbians, in the feminist bookstore, Womonfyre (Forsyth; Hemmings; Phelan; Stein, Sex). These debates were in clear opposition to the lesbian feminist dictum that pornography caused violence against women, and moreover, the lesbian separatist premise that lesbian sexuality should be constructed through anti-patriarchal conventions and viewed by women only. In addition, in downtown Northampton in 1992, an art exhibit, “Drawing the Line,” with explicit photographs of female-female sexuality was open to the public at the Thorne’s Marketplace Gallery (Carton). The photographs depicted two women engaged in a series of sexual activities and behaviors including s/m, sex with men, and butch-femme role playing and was a controversial site for the disturbance through queerness of subcultural beliefs about lesbian sexuality. These sites of contention validated previous research into communal conflict over beliefs about normative lesbian
sexual identities and practices as well as normative portrayals of lesbian sexuality (Bensinger; Burstyn; Franzen; Green; Phelan) and reflected the broader fragmentation of lesbian sexuality as part of the lesbian Sex Wars (Esterberg, Lesbian; Krahulik; Christine Robinson; Stein, Sex; Summerhawk and Gagehabib; Jillian T. Weiss).

As part of the queer crossover, by the late 1980s and early 1990s, the subcultural separatist formation existed side-by-side with a queer community. The queer scene in the Valley during that time period was comprised largely of young college students with gay males the predominant participants. Lesbian feminists, however, viewed the local queer activists as disruptive at best and dangerous at worst to the continuity of the subcultural community. There was an intense battle, propelled by queer activists, over the inclusion of “bisexual” in the title of the annual Northampton Lesbian and Gay Pride March in 1989. Community meetings were held that pitted younger queers including bisexuals, against lesbian feminists, and moreover, brought to the surface and further underscored the separateness between many lesbians and gay males in the region. The bitter battle over the inclusion of bisexual in the pride march title continued at the 1991 tenth annual pride march as a prominent lesbian feminist distributed a pamphlet titled, “Lesbophobia,” that detailed how lesbians were becoming marginalized in the Valley due to the increasing presence of queerness. Moreover, in response to the march title change and the marginalization it symbolized, lesbians held an alternative separatist event from 1991-1995. The Annual Northampton Lesbian Festival was a separatist event with women vendors and performers that was one of the last visible hurrahs of subcultural separatism in the region.
Although the above events did more than disturb the boundaries of subcultural separatism, those boundaries were already in flux by the entrance of queer activism into the Northampton area in the late 1980s. A number of participants in the lesbian community in the 1980s did not feel the subcultural separatist formation was a hospitable environment. Moreover, by the time queer activism emerged, the subcultural community was already in engagement with the mainstream city culture through a number of trajectories that reflected the multiple dimensions and conflictual aspects of the assimilative process. As both a stable lesbian identity and subcultural community transformed, so did the heterosexual population of the city. In the next section I envision a mitigated assimilation that encompasses and in some ways, resolves the contradictions between the pro- and anti-assimilationist perspectives along with incorporating some elements of a queered assimilation.

**Mitigated Assimilation**

As part of the 1980s queer crossover, the pro- versus anti-assimilationist dichotomy was disrupted in Northampton, partially through the inclusion of some aspects of a queer assimilation, and, consequently, the emergence of what I term, a mitigated assimilation, an approach that encompassed aspects of all three types of assimilation. As Walters writes “This new historical period cannot be simply boiled down to the narrow terms of positive or negative images, or the equally narrow political debate about assimilation versus separatism” (All 26). Instead, just as there is a continuum of queer visibility and identity formations, there is a continuum of queer assimilationist positionings. Mitigated assimilation takes into account the various visibility strategies,
the goal of acceptance through visibility, the concerns about backlash through visibility, and the disruption of heteronormativity through queer visibility.

Mitigated approaches to LGBT assimilation stress that cultural integration, while not fundamentally an undesirable end-point, needs to be approached with both resistance and trepidation (Bronski; Chase; Harris; Sender; Vaid; Walters, All; Warner). Such analyses state that even as there are social, media, and political transformations, aspects of homophobia are transformed (Bronski; Vaid; Walters, All). The contradictions between an appearance of acceptance versus experiences of backlash in 1980s Northampton were negotiated through the disturbance of the boundaries between the regional lesbian population and the heterosexual citizens of the city. That disturbance of the line between heterosexuality and homosexuality resulted in a shifting of the boundaries on both sides allowing for the emergence of different forms of community and subjectivity by the end of the 1980s. Although negotiated through the tensions between the constituting of a hospitable versus hostile assimilative environment in the city, all in all, the coming out of the lesbian population into the everyday fabric of Northampton was manifested in the potential for members of the lesbian population to live more fully as citizens.

The major distinction of a mitigated assimilation, as opposed to say, a moderate or cautious approach to assimilation, is that both subcultural and mainstream groups use some aspects of each other in reconstituting both. Therefore, a mitigated assimilation creates an assimilative model of exchange across boundaries while still retaining some elements of separateness. Urvashi Vaid states, “Rather than seeing this opposition as a war between two strategies, we should consider the relationship as a dialectic between
two poles that propels our progress. To synthesize these contradictions requires clarifying the contradictions inherent both in ourselves and the mainstream" (205). In a mitigated assimilationist position, the exchanges between the subculture and the mainstream are regarded as mutually interactive, and, even, at times, productive. Thus I have investigated the constructedness of a mainstream or dominant culture as another construction that can be examined alongside the constructedness of a subculture community. Following from queer theory, the commonsensical appearance of the mainstream as the hegemonic culture is dismantled and instead revealed as another cultural formation with ideological seams including cracks in the naturalized category of heteronormativity.

Thus, a mitigated assimilation makes use of an amalgam of the pro-assimilationist position on desiring cultural tolerance and protection, the anti-assimilationist position on apprehension about the limits of assimilation and the potential for backlash, and the queered assimilative position on subversion through disrupting normative identity categories. A mitigated assimilation supports a movement into mainstream engagement through increased visibility yet expresses concerns about not only the potential for anti-gay backlash but also about the loss of LGBT identity and subcultural politics (Bronski; Chase; Harris; Sender; Vaid; Walters, All; Warner). Daniel Harris warns that the promises of assimilative equality might result in the end of the uniqueness of gay culture, including the safety in privacy, along with the accompanying erasure of the politics of lesbian feminism. As part of the 1980s queer crossover, subcultural identity and politics were transformed through the movements from subcultural separatism to mitigated assimilation.
The 1980s anti-lesbian backlash angered many Northampton citizens. Ironically, the backlash became a vehicle for strengthening lesbian coalitions and alliances with gay males and heterosexual allies. In response to the visibility of the anti-lesbian harassment and violence, both liberal and moderate heterosexuals were mobilized into support of the lesbian population with even moderate citizens outraged that these events were occurring in their city. Allies responded by organizing grassroots demonstrations and protections including patrolling lesbian businesses under attack, further strengthening coalitions with the lesbian community. While the backlash disturbed the city’s “liberal veneer,” as a result of the backlash, Northampton also became more of an environment for the assimilative movements of acceptance of and protection for all citizens. In correspondence with the strategy of acceptance through visibility, the entrance into mainstream visibility via both the march as well as the backlash functioned as a type of pedagogy about the city’s lesbian population for gay males as well as heterosexual citizens. That changing awareness on the part of Northampton’s moderate and liberal citizenries disrupted the conventional assimilation model. Instead of a subcultural absorption into mainstream culture with the subculture becoming similar, in this context the mainstream changed.

In addition, the political terms of subcultural feminism shifted through the transforming dimensions of assimilation. On the one hand, the lesbian community was sustained by the added protections of cultural acceptance through coalition building with other Northampton residents. On the other hand, the politics of lesbian feminism, which were contingent on a separatist identity, were disrupted through the mainstream engagement of building grassroots alliances and more formalized coalitions with gay
males and heterosexual people. Those feminist politics were first and foremost invested in a model of institutional change in the patriarchy through creating a separate subculture, yet that separatist model was disturbed by the constellation of transforming events in the context of 1980s Northampton. In contradiction, feminist politics were the entry points for mainstream engagement through political alliances and coalition building. Ironically, while the feminist model of changing the patriarchy was successful in changing the mainstream through the interactions between the subculture and the mainstream, the feminist model of change also required changing the terms of the subculture. Consequently, in counterpoint to the assimilative dictum of subcultural absorption, the moderate and liberal citizenry of the city as well as the lesbian population were disrupted and transformed through mutually productive and interactive exchange. Urvashi Vaid proposes "Assimilation not as a force to be resisted, but as a force to be harnessed, we can see a provocative relationship between the margin and the center" (206).

The apprehension about the assimilative erasure of subcultural identity and politics from lesbian identity through cultural absorption was complicated in the context of the 1980s anti-lesbian backlash through the exchange of terms on both sides of the subcultural and mainstream equation. It is interesting to consider the transformation of lesbian politics in the 1980s from the vantage point of this quote from Becker, et al. written for the 1981 special issue of Jump Cut on “Lesbians and Film”: “The lesbian imagination is certainly not limited to the traditionally political” (20). A mitigated assimilative approach considers how rather than a loss of subcultural identity and political emphasis, there can be a transformation of both lesbian community and identity through the movements into cultural assimilation. The assimilation process, Rimmerman
suggests, is a gradual and tentative process with change happening in cycles and at
multiple levels that takes the best of both an assimilationist strategy and a more
grassroots coalition building strategy: “What might be done in the future to expanded the
traditional notions of democracy and citizenship” (3). In 1980s Northampton, these
transformations were contextualized on multiple levels including space for individuals
who might not fit into the stable model of lesbian feminist identity.

Respondents reported that the sense of cohesive subcultural lesbian community
was beginning to fracture by the late 1980s. In accord with previous research into lesbian
communal formation, conflicts over race and class (Franzen; Green; McKenna, “The
Queer”; Rothblum; Stein, “Sisters”; Whittier) as well as tensions over lesbian sexuality
(Esterberg, Lesbian; Franzen; Green; Hemmings; Krahulik; Phelan; Christine Robinson;
Stein, Sex; Summerhawk and Gagehabib; Jillian T. Weiss; Whittier) and gender identity
(Crawley; Hemmings; Halberstam, Female; Jillian T. Weiss) manifested in communal
discontinuities. The lesbian community became more widespread throughout the region
as the lesbian populations continued to increase in sheer numbers. Moreover, in 1980s
Northampton as part of the movements between subcultural separatism and mitigated
assimilation, lesbians did enter into the mainstream fabric of the city and this movement
does raise questions about the loss of subcultural identity and community. However,
similar to the reworking of lesbian politics through strengthening coalitions with
mainstream allies, lesbian community was reworked as well as part of the 1980s queer
crossover.

Informed by the theories of queer space, in a model of mitigated assimilation such
communal formations have been envisioned as discursively- versus physically- located
communities (Esterberg, Lesbian; Krahulik; Phelan; Christine Robinson; Rothblum). A
discursive community is constructed through what Sarah Green has termed the
conceptual markers of community. Conceptual makers form interrelated discursive
linkages across the ideological negotiations of social community, social audience, and
representational space as well as the ideologies of the mainstream. Thus, even as broad
cultural beliefs about identificatory stability and communal continuity run across various
media venues and social contexts, those discursive movements will disrupt the
naturalizing of such beliefs. As we have seen, reworkings of lesbian identity and
community were mediated through public sites including coalition building, film
consumption, and economic participation in 1980s Northampton.

A reconfigured knowledge about both lesbian and heterosexuality circulated
across those multiple public sites and was negotiated through cultural oppositions about
defining and regulating normative identities and behaviors. As part of the queer
crossover, the stability of lesbian identity and subcultural community were disturbed
through a series of articulative movements involving sexuality and gender. In
 correspondence, those articulative movements circulated through mainstream beliefs
about categories of identity. George Chauncey writes about historical gay male urban
communities, “The relationship between gay subculture and the dominant culture was
neither static nor passive: they did not merely coexist but constantly created and re-
created themselves in relation to each other in a dynamic, interactive, and contested
process” (25). Accordingly, in constituting a discursive communal formation, each side
uses the materials of the other to re-constitute identity and community; each side self-
defines in relation to, even when in opposition to, as in broader cultural negotiations of
normalcy. There is no inside/outside separation, but instead a co-mingling that Vaid
reminds us, envisions the breaking down of the “dialectic” dichotomy between the pro-
anti-assimilative positions through transforming that dichotomy into “synthesis” (205).

In some ways, the discursive community is held together by the interrelations of
visibility and identity, by the interrelations of “seeing the sexual.” As one participant,
Gina, stated:

It’s about looking. People watching and being out on the streets, that’s kind of
what the community is. Like seeing other lesbians. Networks, friends, groups, but
it’s this sense of seeing everybody and recognizing. That is probably the way that
I feel a part of the community, or that I’m in the community. Just from looking
and being seen. Being visibly queer.

Gina’s vision of a queer community held together through the discursive interrelations of
“seeing the sexual” was in accord with researchers writing in the 1990s and 2000s about
the discursive significance of the codes of lesbian and queer physicality, dress, and
appearance to constructing self- and community-identifications (Atkins; Carr; Esterberg,
“A Certain”; Eves; Reina Lewis; Nicholas; Walker). Seeing lesbians on the streets in
downtown businesses, in film audiences, and on the film screen constitutes a discursive
community that while held together partially by the materials of the mainstream, retains
aspects of the history of lesbian subcultural separatism.

Although some question the efficacy of the use of community to characterize
LGBT coalitions (Joseph; Phelan, Identity; Jillian T. Weiss), others emphasize the
durability of that term in reworked configurations (Carr; Eves; Halberstam, In A Queer;
Munt; Nicholas). Additional studies even question the viability of the use of lesbian
(Farquhar; Vincent). Taylor and Rupp address that questions about the political durability
of lesbian and community:
These communities have forged a rich and complex resistance culture and style of politics that nourishes rather than betrays the radical feminist vision. . . . the lesbian feminist community intersects with many contemporary struggles for political and institutional change and carries a feminist legacy that will shape the future of the women’s movement itself. (50)

Such visions suggest it is possible to retain the politics of subcultural identity while still reworking transformation through using the materials of the mainstream. Arlene Stein adds to this discussion by suggesting that instead of focusing on the “death of community scenario,” it is important to envision a community that in “Reflecting this more decentered sense of community, today’s lesbian ‘movement,’ if one can call it that, consists of a series of projects, often wildly disparate in approach, many of which incorporate radical and progressive elements” (“Sisters” 379). Moreover, Stein suggests that “the history of lesbian feminism” can be interpreted “as a series of identity reconstructions that are partial and strategic” (“Sisters” 380).

This discursive reconfiguration of lesbian community is in line with the idea of the multiple dimensions of a mitigated assimilation as well as the notion of crossover as resistance. Crossing over suggests an exchange between subcultural and mainstream gender codes that envisions the traversing of borders and binaries as reciprocal process with change occurring on both sides. Thus, a queer crossover can be conceptualized as a realignment of the boundaries of cultural identity including the cultural oppositions between male and female as well as heterosexual and homosexual. The influence of a queering of assimilation on the conceptualizing of a mitigated assimilation can be found in Bernstein and Reimann’s expanded model of queerness:

Queer “implies a self-conscious deconstructions of heteronormativity and a breaking down of arbitrary boundaries based on sex, gender, and sexual orientation. By destabilizing categories and focusing on a politics of inclusion rather than exclusion, ‘queer’ helps to build coalitions among disparate groups and to break down barriers that demarcate identities such as transgendered,
lesbian, or bisexual. Theoretically, the concept ‘queer’ can be marshaled to mean anything that challenges heteronormativity. (3-4)

Bernstein and Reimann offer a more moderate consideration of the queering process of interrupting the seemingly stable categories of identity that might also take into consideration the goals and fears of the pro- and anti-assimilationist positionings. Rimmerman is also in line with questions about the possibility of a mitigated assimilation: “Should the goal be a more assimilationist, rights-based approach to political and social change, or should movement activists embrace a more liberationist, revolutionary model, one that might embrace a full range of progressive causes?” (4-5).

**Conclusion**

My intention in this study has been to contribute to inquiries into lesbian community studies and audience reception research. I expand upon previous studies of lesbian audiences – largely text based with a universalized and hypothesized spectator – and employ the insights of queer theory to complicate previous understandings of a homogenous subcultural lesbian audience. While there has been considerable research in cultural studies on how multiple audiences construct identifications through cultural texts, there is still a need for further research that examines how lesbian viewers construct meanings. Although the proliferation of scholarship on queer popular culture has begun to redress this omission, the majority of these studies are textually focused with understandings of the interactions between audience and text only hypothesized. In addition, while there have been exhaustive debates in feminist film criticism about how to fit understandings of lesbians into a psychoanalytic framework as well as a number of textual analyses, there is still limited inquiry into how actual lesbian viewers engage with popular texts.
The critical insights of queer theory have utility for exploring malleable identity and communal formations, and, thus, have utility in the conceptualization of a 1980s queer crossover from subcultural separatism to mitigated assimilation. In examining the constitution of both social community and social audience in 1980s Northampton, I stress how both subcultural and heterosexual populations were transformed through the emergence into public visibility of new lesbian subject positions. I consider the negotiation in this localized environment of the powerful contradictions between visibility for social change and visibility for backlash and how these negotiations were complicated by the disruption of stable lesbian and identity and heteronormativity through queer radical visibility in the late 1980s. These discussions extend previous examinations of lesbian communities through considering how oppositional and dominant cultures were both conceptually marked by each other in the 1980s.

The focus on geographic- and gender- specificity adds to the underdeveloped presence of lesbian visibility in analyses of LGBT visibility. Moreover, this study examines issues of significance to feminist cultural studies that intersect with LGBT political misgivings about lesbian visibility. Much previous inquiry into the interrelations of queer visibility and identity has focused on gay males and the gender-specificity of this study adds to the relatively underdeveloped discussion of lesbian visibility. The notion of gender-specificity raises distinctions that complicate broader issues surrounding LGBT visibility including questions about consumerism and assimilation as well as desexualization and depoliticization. For instance, the seeming lack of lesbian consumer acknowledgement in the 1980s can be complicated through the presence of lesbians as
consuming citizens, particularly as film consumers, in the downtown Northampton revitalization.

The geographic-specific context of Northampton enables a more in-depth and applied analysis of the changing terms of lesbian visibility and identity. Previous inquiries into lesbian community do not take into account the impact of reception on communal formation. Moreover, research on lesbian audience and spectatorship has not been contextualized. The investigation into the coalescing of both social community and social audience has the potential to expand understandings of community and audience by elaborating on such key concepts as articulation. Through asking what popular culture might mean for lesbians, and for gay and lesbian politics, this study incorporates the suggestion that film audience research consider the socio-political dimensions of text and audience interactions. Community studies typically take into account media reception as a factor in community formation, media studies seldom consider the geographic, historical, and cultural locatedness of place. In the study, I have considered how aspects of both social community and social audience are implicated in the coalescing of each.

The ways that lesbian and lesbian community are experienced, defined, and recorded are bound with historical and cultural specificity. In 1972 Charlotte Bunch defined lesbianism as “the primacy of women relating to women, of women creating a new consciousness of and with each other, which is at the heart of women's liberation, and the basis for the cultural revolution” (qtd. in McDermott 35). In the 1980s, the homogenous definition of “woman-identified-woman” began to be disrupted and by the 1990s began to be conceptualized as variable, fluid, and unstable. In 1995, Valerie Traub wrote, “Whatever a ‘lesbian’ ‘is’ is constantly negotiated - a matter of conflicting and
contradictory investments and agendas, desires and wills” (115). The queer crossover from a 1980s model of stable and homogenous lesbian identity to the emergence of an identificatory mutability by the end of that decade was anticipated in the interviews as respondents constructed multiple self-identifications both in spontaneous assertions as well as in response to specific questions.

Although approximately half of the respondents interviewed for this study identified solely as “lesbian,” other sexual and gender identities were reflected in a variety of self-descriptions including “queer,” “bisexual,” “butch lesbian,” “lesbian feminist,” and “queer-identified femme.” Others clarified how “lesbian” did not elucidate fully their self-identifications through reference to interactive variables such as age, race, class, ethnicity, and religion. Respondent self-identifications suggested the crossover from a 1980s stable lesbian identity to a queering of the category of lesbianism by the end of the decade. The multiplicity and subtlety of the self-identifications enunciated during the interview process exemplified the cultural fragmentation of lesbian identity that facilitated the changing terms of the 1980s queer crossover as reflected in the late-1990s to early-2000s as the time period when the interviews for this study took place.

A range of assimilation positions have impacted on this conceptualization of the 1980s lesbian visibility cultural moment as a unique constellation of factors that instigated a queer crossover from subcultural separatism to mitigated assimilation. The four assimilation positions, pro-assimilation, anti-assimilation, queered assimilation, and mitigated assimilation, encompass different, yet interactive, aspects of the multidimensional and conflictual processes of assimilation. That conflictual multidimensionality was reflected in the queering of both lesbian and heterosexual
identity in 1980s Northampton. Nevertheless, in spite of the emphasis on queering the model of stable lesbian identity, the deeply held communal investment in a model of identity stability and conformity circulated through catalogings of lesbian sexual and identity. Those interactive catalogings manifested in a queering of lesbian subject positions that prefigured the explosion of expressions of lesbianism that began to emerge in the 1990s through the framework of lesbian chic. I do wish to note, however, that while searches for authentic identity and pure subcultural community have been refined though the insights of queer theory, it is still important to stress the centrality of the search for the “real lesbian.” Nevertheless, the transformations of identity and community through the 1980s queer crossover from subcultural separatism to mitigated assimilation provided opportunities for all citizens to live more fully in Northampton, Massachusetts.
Notes

i I italicize lesbian as an acknowledgement of the complexities and instabilities involved in the term lesbian, and, thus, in lesbian community. I italicize lesbian in homage to Roland Barthes who proposed in 1973 that writers occasionally employ a strategy that disturbs the flow of reading.

ii I use the LGBT notation (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) to generally encompass sexual, gay, lesbian, and queer politics, however, I note some groups and organizations use GLBT. In the 2000s, I have come to use LGBTQ to encompass queer-identities, and sometimes, LGBTQI, to include intersexed individuals.

iii The question of periodization involves the dividing of history into discrete and exclusive time periods. My focus on the 1980s as a distinctive cultural moment takes into consideration a number of factors that reflect the changing terms of lesbian visibility and identity on national and local levels. Although the identification of a 1980s lesbian visibility cultural moment does not always clearly follow the parameters of the decade, the convergence of social and political events as well as media portrayals indicated the early-1980s to late-1980s as a time period that exemplified a unique transitory era for conceptualizing a queer crossover from the 1980s to the 1990s.

iv Ann Forsyth compares Northampton census data to Stoesen’s 1994 research on other “gay meccas” including Fort Lauderdale (Florida), Key West (Florida), Oakland (California), Palm Springs (California), Provincetown (Massachusetts), Sussex County (Delaware), Tacoma Park (Maryland), and West Hollywood (California). Although some of these are small cities comparable to Northampton, others are upscale vacation and retirement meccas for affluent gay males. Forsyth writes “only Northampton and Oakland were mentioned as locations where females constitute a significant group, and although Oakland was larger, it also had more men: in Oakland, 55% of same-sex unmarried-partner couples were female, compared with 91% in Northampton and around 77% in the three-county Valley area” (“NoHo” 632).

v An interpretive community is understood to be a shared consciousness constituted through interpretive practices and identifications. Although the shared consciousness of an interpretive community may be only symbolically located (Ellsworth), there is also a model of an interpretive community among viewers who share a geographic locale (Radway, Reading). Previous understandings of interpretive community have focused on how different communities such as Star Trek fans (Jenkins), romance novel readers (Radway, Reading), or lesbian film viewers (Ellsworth; Straayer, “Personal”) have read against the grain of textual hegemonies such as heterosexuality or used the textual ideologies such as romance to negotiate aspects of their daily lives. Moreover, some fans, famously Star Trek fans, have created their own textual forms as part of the resistance of textual hegemony (Jenkins).

vi Data from eight individuals were not used for this study due to lack of reference to the Northampton lesbian community or social audience in the 1980s. These omissions were because of age or because interviewees had moved to the region during the 1990s. I have made extensive use of these data in other discussions (McKenna).

vii Key informants were included in the twenty-four selected for this study.
Out of the 24 participants used for this study, only 4 were unable to participate in a second interview. However, these 4 participants were able to allot more time for the initial interview.

An interview guide, according to Patton, “helps make interviewing across a number of different people more systematic and comprehensive by delimiting in advance the issues to be explored” (283). Following an interview guide allows the researcher to include the positive aspects of the informal interview such as spontaneity, yet retain some degree of a systematic approach to gathering interview data. See Appendix for Interview Guide.

My emphasis on 1980s film viewing and on these four particular film texts was partially determined by the awareness that this time period was the last heyday of collective film viewing in theaters. The 1980s prefigured the ubiquitous presence of VCRs in almost every home in the 1990s, and the dramatic changes in social viewing rituals in the 2000s through the widespread availability of DVDs, cable television, and digital technology. Moreover, these changes were accompanied by an increase in the production of innovative content for television. The four 1980s films — Personal Best, Lianna, Entré Nous, and Desert Hearts — were additionally important to the lesbian film lexicon by individuals who described watching them on video in the 1990s, either in the privacy of the homes or in the public context of a college classroom.

In a study of an urban lesbian community in London in the late 1980s, Sarah Green uses the terms continuities and discontinuities to refer to communal conflict.

Place and space, Gillian Rose explains, have specific theoretical histories in geography studies. In general, place is viewed as a more human concern than space that is open to interpretation. In contrast, the conventional geographic usage of space is associated with rational scientific measurement (43). Furthermore, place, in geographic literature, is allied with the feminized realm of the private, whereas space is allied with the masculinized public sphere (Rose 62). The awareness of the identificatory constitutions of place and space has been central to theorizing feminist geography in the breaking down of the dichotomy of public/private and the accompanying gender binary of male/female. For further discussion, see the concluding chapter, “A Politics of Paradoxical Space,” of Gillian Rose’s 1993 book, Feminism and Geography: the Limits of Geographical Knowledge.

Feinberg now identifies as male.

Respondents also described reading against the grain of televised classical Hollywood films. However, none of these references carried the salience of the three 1960s films, The Children’s Hour, The Fox, and The Killing of Sister George.

Such constructions of pleasurable and critical interpretations have been variously terms against-the-grain readings, subcultural readings, and resistive or oppositional readings (Condit; Hall, “Encoding”; Justin Lewis; Morley, The Nationwide). Although it is not a goal of this analysis to provide in-depth insight into the distinctions among these variations, the concept of reading textually against the hegemonic grain has been instrumental in both feminist film theory and critical cultural studies. Of note is Stuart Hall’s seminal work on the encoding-decoding model. Moreover, the notion of lesbian viewers as savvy deconstructors who read against the grain has been central to feminist cultural studies research on how real women resist, use, negotiate, and transform cultural
products in their daily lives (Baumgardner and Richards; Long; McRobbie; Radway; Tricia Rose; Roman; Walkerdine).

The first Western Massachusetts Take Back the Night March was held Northampton in 1978.

Respondents did not cite any films with manifestations of lesbianism as especially pertinent to the 1970s. It’s not that experiences of film viewing and recollections of specific film texts, and even of several television programs were not recalled, but rather that they did not carry the salience of films from the 1960s such as *The Children’s Hour* or from the 1980s such as *Personal Best*.

Kristen Esterberg writes that there are two different types of cues—“visual/presentational” cues and “interactional” cues—that lesbians use for everyday identifications of other lesbians (“A Certain” 270).

In the 1980s being “politically correct,” or “PC,” was viewed as an affirmative goal for those involved in progressive politics. Only in the 1990s did the term take on a pejorative and mocking association in popular usage via a conservative appropriation and redefinition.

As exemplified in the work of Adrienne Rich, the understanding that being a lesbian, at least a political lesbian, was something that any woman could choose was in contradiction to the ideological frameworks of a lesbian, subcultural, separatist community based on a belief in some essential, even biological difference between men and women.

Ferguson lived in the Northampton region during the 1980s, and, until her retirement in 2007, was a professor in Philosophy and Women’s Studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Interestingly, several respondents referred to her courses as part of their coming out processes. professor emeritus in the Philosophy Department and Women’s Studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Cultural feminism is sometimes distinguished as a depoliticized outgrowth of radical feminism that was linked with lesbian feminist politics in the 1970s and 1980s, and, thus, with lesbian subcultural communities. However, cultural and radical feminism have been frequently conflated with the cultural feminism that has been associated with lesbian feminism and viewed as a continuation of radical feminist political tenets (Taylor and Rupp).

The Gay Pride events that became de rigueur by the late 1980s in many large and even some small cities across the United States and other parts of the world morphed into celebratory events, variously termed marches or parades. These events focused on identificatory pride with titles such as LGBT Pride that reflected the diversity of sexual and gendered identities (Herrell).

Such sexual distinctions were impacted by less access to public contexts for sex such as bars. For instance, what D’Emilio terms, “transitional opportunities” for sexual behaviors such as public sex or public cruising, which would lead to additional and more public sexual encounters, were nonexistent for women during earlier time periods (*Sexual 98-99*).

Acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) first entered into medical knowledge in 1981 through reports from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) about a collection...
set of symptoms that seemed to be occurring among gay men (Epstein, Impure). By 1982, AIDS was being used in publications for the general public including the Daily Hampshire Gazette. Very few of the individuals I interviewed for this study spoke about AIDS in recollections of the 1980s, or for that matter, of the 1990s. There were several respondents, however, who spoke poignantly about the loss of friends and relatives.

Second-wave feminism was commonly acknowledged as beginning in the early 1960s as part of the Civil Rights Movement and continuing until approximately the early 1990s. In contrast to emphasis of the late 1800s, early 1900s first-wave of feminism on attaining equal rights for women including the right to vote, second-wave feminism also focused on challenging broader structural inequalities of sexism. Moreover, second-wave feminist stressed the presence of structural discrimination in personal lives, hence, the feminist adage, “the personal is political.”

Countless nineteenth-century travelers made the pre-automobile pilgrimage to the Mount Holyoke summit and to view the sinuous Connecticut River, the lush forestry, and the fertile meadowland was romanticized in the paintings of Thomas Cole and other nineteenth-century landscape artists as “surpassingly lovely” and “the epitome of the picturesque.” Northampton’s geographically descriptive appellations have been conflated regularly with Northampton’s repute for artistic and literary sophistication.

The charming two-block Main Street follows 17th century paths that are bordered by the 19th century character of buildings such as the City Hall with its four castle-like turrets, the Academy of Music movie theater with its glowing orange-sienna “ornate classical façade,” and, at the head of the town, one of the city’s crown jewels – the elaborate towering iron gates of Smith College.

For a complete discussion of who owned downtown Northampton in the 1980s, see Ann Forsyth’s “NoHo: Upscaling Main Street on the Metropolitan Edge.”

Northampton’s life-long residents, some of them descendants of the pioneers and settlers of the 1700s or the entrepreneurs and millworkers of the 1800s, classified themselves as “the locals” who were the “real Northamptonites.”

Forsyth notes that between 1980 and 1990 assessments of downtown buildings increased to six times the “original total value in current dollars, at a time when the general consumer prices index rose by only 66% in the Northeast united States” (“NoHo” 637-638)

Downward mobility factored into the economics of housing and employment in Northampton. In a 1980 article, “Many Now Major in Shopkeeping,” the Gazette summarized the comments of Bob Sojka, the manager of the regional office for the Massachusetts Division of Employment Security Office, who noted that in many service jobs in the Valley such as waitressing or janitorial, the workers had at least a bachelor's if not more advanced degree. Termed “survival jobs,” Sojka acknowledged while that these individuals made the choice to be downwardly mobile professionally in order to remain in what the Gazette termed, “the comfortable lifestyle of Hampshire County and the Connecticut River Valle,” (Freeman 10).

The following summary was enhanced by the inclusion of several recollections of the 1980s from interviews conducted by Ken Kirkey and Ann Forsyth for their research into the gay male community in Northampton in the 1990s. I also relied on informal
interviews with gay male friends who were long-time Northampton residents, activists and business owners. The regional Northampton gay male population was distinguished from other gay male communities during the 1980s by several factors. First, the rural quality of the region was distinct from urban areas such as the Castro in San Francisco and Greenwich Village in New York City in which gay subcultures had flourished. The Valley’s mix of rural and urban qualities as well the educated and progressive demographic made the region appealing to gay male migrants for the same reasons that lesbians and others migrated to the area. In the 1980s, Northampton gay men were involved in informal networks that met regularly, even weekly, for potlucks, sports activities, and other social events. A gay population that spread from Brattleboro, Vermont to Hartford, Connecticut and men from all these areas mixed at larger sporadic parties. While, the majority of the Northampton regulars were in couples, there was a sexual network that many of the men in couples participated in that coincided with the larger regional gay population.

These two articles foreshadowed the more overt and explicit 1990s mainstream interpellation of Northampton, which continues today in the city’s national repute for lesbians.

Anyone familiar with the lesbian baby boom will chuckle at this prediction.

Individual “Women’s Music” events morphed into the annual “Wendell Country Women’s Music Festival” that was held in the rural small town of Wendell, Massachusetts for four years in the early-1980s.

The reference to racial profiling was part of a longer recollection of such experiences in both 1980s and 1990s Northampton. Although a consideration of those experiences is beyond the scope of this study, I do include some discussion in my 2002 essay, “The Queer Insistence of Ally McBeal: Lesbian Chic, Postfeminism, and Lesbian Reception.”

Another site for lesbian alliances with gay men was the Program for Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Concerns established in 1985 at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Founded in response to campus incidents of homophobia in the 1980s, the Program with resources and programming geared toward gay and lesbian students was only the third such at the time in the United States. In 1995, the name was changed to the Stonewall Center: A Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay and Transgender Educational Resource Center. None of the individuals I interviewed made reference to the Program or to the Stonewall Center.

It was widely known that Pamela Kimmel, the Lesbian Calendar publisher, would only accept advertisements for services for women and initially for lesbian- or women-owned businesses. In addition, advertisements with certain forms of sexualized content such as s/m were not acceptable. Moreover, the Calendar would not publish advertisements for transgendered support groups and events.

For a literature review on the sexual- and gender- specificities of these distinctions, see Ann Forsyth, “Nonconformist Populations and Planning Sexuality and Space: Nonconformist Populations and Planning Practice.”

Gay male-owned businesses occupied several prominent storefronts in downtown Northampton including J Rich, an upscale clothing store for men, and Pinch Pottery, a
pottery store with fine goods from national artisans. Another successful gay male owned business was Hair Phanatix, which, while located in one of the second floor spaces, was highly visible from the street. Moreover, a gay man, Duane Robinson, along with his partner, David Jenkins, managed the Academy of Music for thirty-five years. In comparison to the service-oriented lesbian-owned businesses, gay men were more visibly involved in the economic revitalization of the downtown.

While the Forbes Library search engine for the Gazette is very rudimentary with copies on microfilm, the reference librarians were extremely helpful. We conducted a thorough search of past issues and were not able to locate references to homosexual or lesbian in the newspaper prior to the first pride march in May 1982.

Northampton pride marches were and are fairly conservative, especially in comparison to marches in large cities, some of which are notorious for the over-the-top displays of sexuality.

The sanctioning of lesbians who “flaunt their sex in public” was in contradiction to the highly desirable heterosexual male fantasy of watching two women having sex.

During this time period, the Gazette referred to the sensationalized 1978 arrest of a local gay man at a rest stop on Interstate 91 for “open and gross lewdness and assault and battery.” Moreover, the same article made mention of men’s visits to the gay bars in nearby Springfield and a public bath located down the Interstate in Hartford. In counterpoint, the Gazette quoted a local gay man, Joseph LaMott, who offered a different perspective on gay men in the Valley as being “much more relationship oriented . . . this is a much smaller community. . . . There is just not the opportunity for that type of lifestyle here [promiscuity]” (Fitzgerald, “Homosexuals” 9).

I want to be clear I am not suggesting the local gay male population was to blame for the 1980s anti-lesbian backlash. I include these examples to demonstrate the discursive factors that contributed to the backlash as well as to the broader disruptions of stable identity and subcultural continuity. None of the interviewees explicitly blamed the Northampton gay male population for the backlash.

Subcultural separatism during this time period was partially contingent on a belief in two distinct genders (Brooks; Pearlman). Writing in the 1983, influential feminist philosopher Marilyn Frye defined lesbianism as “a reorientation of attention as kind of ontological conversion” that rejected the female role, and, thus, the cultural construct of femininity that existed in duality with masculinity (172). As Sarah J. Pearlman argued in 1987, a rejection of the duality of gender roles through lesbianism was a rejection of the institutionalized power structures of the patriarchy. Moreover, Pearlman theorized in accord with Frye, lesbianism arouses psychologically primitive fears of exclusion and loss that may underlie the male compulsion to dominate and control (313).

As another articulative variation, gay males and transgendered men and women are regularly attacked (“1999”) when they are perceived as not conforming to normal gender roles. The Chapter Two reference to Leslie Feinstein supports this belief as do the experiences of violence and harassment described by some of the butch-identified respondents.

Several respondents recalled going to the University of Massachusetts Amherst for three nights of viewing Two in Twenty (Because One in Ten Sounds Lonely, a lesbian
soap opera made in 1988 by Boston filmmakers Laura Chiten, Cheryl Qamar, and Rachael McCoullum. While a low budget video production with sentimental content, Two in Twenty was recalled as a memorable viewing experience because of the largely lesbian audience. According to the Valley Women’s History Project, a number of well-known feminist documentaries were shown in the Northampton region in the 1980s. One participant recalled viewing feminist documentary films such as Women in Arms along with films by lesbian filmmakers such as Barbara Hammer.

Both Pleasant Street and the Academy continue as significant venues for screenings of alternative or independent films. The Academy of Music, owned by the City of Northampton, is one of the jewels in Northampton’s national renown as a mecca for the arts. The Academy has a historic stage on which Jenny Lind famously appeared as well as Anna Pavlova, John Philip Sousa, and Harry Houdini. From 1971 to 2007, under the management of Duane Robinson, and his life-partner David Jenkins, who also worked at the Academy, the theater screened independent, alternative, and documentary films. Since 2007 the Academy has operated as a community center providing intermittent film screenings and occasional theater and musical events. A few individuals in their recollections of film viewing also cited the Amherst Cinema, a large, damp, and rather dingy movie theater, defunct between 1999 and 2006. In May 2006, the nonprofit Amherst Cinema Arts Center, Inc. broke ground to build a new, state-of-the-art three-screen cinema. The theater opened November 22, 2006.

As an expansion of the Pleasant Street Theater, Pleasant Street Video opened in 1988. Although not referenced in interviews, Amherst’s first video store, Video To Go, was opened in 1984. Lesbian owner, Kitze McCormick offered an extensive LGBT inventory. Video To Go moved to Greenfield, Massachusetts in May 2005 and closed in 2007.

These films included Silkwood (1983), James Cameron’s Aliens (1986), and Bob Rafelson’s Black Widow (1987). In addition, more than a few individuals noted a potential for lesbian and queer interpretations of a sequence of independent and foreign-made films including Claude Jutra’s film, By Design (1981), Tony Scott’s, The Hunger (1983), Margarethe von Trotta’s Sheer Madness (1985), Jill Godmilow’s Waiting for the Moon (1986), Sheila McLaughlin’s She Must Be Seeing Things (1987), Percy Adlon’s Baghdad Café (1988), and Patricia Rozema’s I’ve Heard the Mermaids Singing (1987). Several 1980s television programs with depictions of female friendship or strong women that could be read against the grain as lesbian – Kate and Allie, Cagney and Lacey, Designing Women, Murphy Brown, and The Golden Girls – also made occasional appearances in the cataloging of symptomatic textuality.

Hollywood encoders were incorporating feminist ideologies into film and televisual texts in the 1980s. These textual modifications were a response to social change, and also an effort to appeal to the newly identified and highly desirable female consumer (Dow). Feature films with portrayals of lesbianism such as Personal Best and television programs with independent career women such as Cagney and Lacey were seen as part of that appeal, given that feminism was also conjoined with lesbianism, albeit negatively when coupled with feminism, in the image banks of such encoding decisions (D’Acci;
Douglas). Moreover, it is a well-known cultural tenet that depictions of same sex sexuality with two females have been a central fantasy image of heterosexual pornography, and, thus, it is also possible to conjecture that the production decisions regarding *Personal Best* were also an attempt to appeal to the heterosexual co-audience member.

By cultural scarcity I make use of a common term used to describe the invisibility and stereotyping traditionally associated with portrayals of underrepresented groups such as lesbians. Larry Gross terms this cultural scarcity a type of “symbolic annihilation” that has impacted both individual lives and collective politics (Gross and Woods, “Introduction”). An interconnected and pertinent concept is burden of representation, which refers to a text that carries subcultural currency for viewers who have been previously invisible or portrayed only through stereotypes of pathology.

The presence of Sigourney Weaver in the 1979 *Alien* continued to be read by several interviewees as a lesbian icon through the codes of feminist empowerment – strength, violence, and control over men – in the 1986 *Aliens*.

As against-the-grain codes moved into a film lexicon that now included more overt portrayals of lesbian characters and sexuality, previous stereotypes of non-conventional femininity such as criminality, pathology, and masculinization also took on different dimensions. The criminality of a filmic femme fatale such as Barbara Stanwyck in various noir films previously read-against-the-grain as lesbian might resurface as Theresa Russell in *Black Widow*; there was a distinction in that Fred MacMurray was now Debra Winger and the female relationship could easily be accessed as an against-the-grain reading of lesbian coupling. Moreover, the noir black widow might be viewed as a postfeminist independent woman whose full-time career was killing husbands for monetary advancement. In a film such as *Black Widow* (1987), the previous subtextual codes of female relationships took on the reading of lesbian coupling in ways that might be interpreted as an intentional awareness on the part of the encoders at the level of cultural production. The incorporation of female criminality in *Black Widow* and the extreme female violence in *Aliens* reflected the 1980s encoder inclusion of feminist ideologies with a touch of lesbianism.

Each of the four 1980s symptomatic films included characters identified as lesbians either explicitly, through the coming out plotline, or, implicitly, through subtextual codes: in *Personal Best*, the older elite runner who “brings out” the younger athlete only to have her leave at the end for a man; in *Lianna*, the married woman who struggles to leave her marriage and find herself as a lesbian; in *Entré Nous*, the two Frenchwomen who leave their husbands in the early 1950s to spend the rest of their lives together; and, in *Desert Hearts*, the older heterosexual professional who is seduced by and falls in love with a young lesbian in 1950s Nevada. Additional out characters and variations on the coming out journey were to be found in other 1980s films. In the Hollywood feature, *Silkwood*, an against-the-grain reading of the female friendship of the two lead characters was up-for-subtextual grabs with Cher, as the lesbian character, and Meryl Streep, as the heterosexual friend with the expected boyfriend. The Canadian film, *I’ve Heard The Mermaids Singing*, offered a subtle insight into a character’s awakening to the possibility of coming out through her infatuation with her lesbian employer.
Silkwood and Black Widow were particularly cited for against-the-grain readings of the female friendship between the central characters, played by several major stars including, respectively, Meryl Streep and Cher, and, Debra Winger, and the lesser known, Theresa Russell. The star power of these films along with the explicit sexuality between vampires played by Susan Sarandon and Catherine Deneuve in The Hunger illustrated additional dimensions of the fledgling acknowledgment of a potential lesbian consumer in the 1980s.

Robert Towne won a 1974 Oscar for writing Chinatown.

John Fiske extends Pierre Bourdieu’s important analysis of cultural capital to a representational capital – my term, not Fiske’s – of media portrayals to suggest that underrepresented groups such as queer people might be empowered by gaining some of the representational capital that is typically attributed to dominant groups (Television).

Lesbian sexuality has been traditionally understood to be hinted at through narrative ambiguity while subverted or limited through a heterosexual recuperation in the narrative film structure (Moritz, "Old Strategies” 318). Each of the four 1980s symptomatic texts had a dissimilar relation to previous models of recuperation. In Entré Nous, although the characters never “come out” and there was no explicit lesbian behavior, the two female characters’ love and devotion for one, another along with a director’s notation at the end of this film that these women were together for life, was read-against-the-grain as an unambiguous resolution of lesbian coupling. Whereas the Hollywood feature Personal Best still had the conventional heterosexual narrative resolution, the independents, Lianna and Desert Hearts, both rejected the traditional narrative thrust of heterosexuality, suicide, or isolation. In Lianna, although unceremoniously discarded by her female professor-lover, the protagonist doesn’t go back to her husband or end up with a man. While both Personal Best and Lianna portrayed characters rejected by their female lovers, the heterosexual recuperation finale of Personal Best, in which one member of the lesbian couple ends up in love with a man, was distinct from the narrative ambiguity of the Lianna conclusion. In contrast to the isolated and embittered rejected lesbian athlete in Personal Best, the title character in Lianna sets forth on a journey of personal self-discovery that presumably will include future, female lovers with an endpoint of lesbian identification that reflected “the reality of women’s lives” and that was in counterpoint to the myth that historically queer people end up being alone and unhappy (D’Emilio, “Capitalism”).

See Arleen Stein’s discussion of the sexual vagaries of lesbian social identity (Sex).

The encoding negotiations of television programming is well illustrated in Julie D’Acci’s discussion of Cagney and Lacey, in which the encoding negotiations of femininity and feminism converged in the production need to have the female characters clearly encoded as heterosexual through production codes such as costuming and casting as well as narrative devices including giving the unmarried Chris Lacey character regular romantic interests.

For comprehensive discussions see, Cathy Schwichtenberg, (“Feminist Cultural Studies”), and Elizabeth Long, (“Feminism and Cultural Studies”).

Critical assessments of lesbian viewers as savvy deconstructors began to be formulated in the 1980s with feminist researchers such as Elizabeth Ellsworth ("Illicit
Pleasures”) and Chris Straayer (“Personal Best”) conceptualizing against-the-grain readings of Personal Best as central to the formation of a feminist interpretive community, in the former, and a lesbian feminist audience, in the latter.

I do not mean to suggest that Hollywood films equaled complexity and variety in the 1980s. In recollections of 1980s films, respondents often equated “quality” with Hollywood films through production codes such as the casting of well-known actors. Independent films or foreign films with lesbian content such as Lianna and Entré Nous were also equated with evaluations of “quality.” The equating of “quality” with 1980s symptomatic textuality was in contrast to the concurrent development of a lesbian separatist lexicon.

Entré Nous, was in a different film category than the Hollywood studio feature, Personal Best, or the independents, Lianna and Desert Hearts. Along with the aesthetics of a French film, Entré Nous was situated in the 1940s-1950s and featured two French film stars, Isabelle Huppert and Miou-Miou, who portrayed the two friends, Lena and Madeleine, whose lifelong relationship read subtextually as a lesbian coupling.

Desert Hearts was screened at the Academy of Music, and subsequently, most likely due to its popularity among lesbian audiences, according to this interviewee and several others, screened at the Pleasant Street Theater.

A number of variables such as the hegemony of media production and the processes of signification and reception impact on definitions of what counts as positive or negative imaging (Branston and Stafford, “Case”; Walters, Material). Suzanna Danuta Walters explains, “to argue for less stereotyped images avoids an attack on the deep structures of the signifying practices that produce such images in the first place” (Material 46).

It is beyond the scope of this study to provide an overview of the distinctions between categories of gender and sexual identities. In general, gender refers to the socially prescribed roles of masculinity and femininity and sexual identity refers to sexual attraction or orientation. These distinctions have been vastly complicated since the 1980s through queer theory and the application of those theories in everyday lives. For an extensive overview of the distinctions between sex and gender, including the legal implications, see, Francisco Valdes, “Queers, Sissies, Dykes, and Tomboys: Deconstructing the Conflation of ‘Sex,’ ‘Gender,’ and ‘Sexual Orientation’ in Euro-American Law and Society.”

As first, a Rogers and Hammerstein musical, and then, a film, Flower Drum Song’s depiction of Chinese American immigrants in San Francisco in the 1950s carried a burden of representation as one of the few films with a storyline about Asians as well as one of the few films with almost all Asian cast. However, as part of film history, the film has also been criticized for contributing to the stereotyping of Asian Americans.

This discussion was influenced by José Esteban Muñoz’s notion of disidentification. Muñoz conceptualizes the performativites of queer and raced identificatory trajectories as both interactive and contradictory.

Waiting to Exhale focused on the relationships of four black women and was based on the 1992 book of the same name by Terry McMillan.

This respondent’s discussion mirrored some of Jacqueline Bobo’s well known analysis of how black women read against the negative stereotyping of The Color Purple.
In an interesting extension of the interview process, and I would suggest, of the idea of film community, after the interview I sent Earlene a copy of the article.

Ferguson lived in the Northampton region during the 1980s and was a professor in Philosophy Department and Women’s Studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Several respondents referred to her courses as the context for their coming out processes. Ferguson is now a professor emeritus at the University.

Questions about sexual objectification and the male gaze have been key to theoretical debates surrounding representations of the female body (de Lauretis; Doane; Mulvey) as well as to the constitution of subcultural separatism communal formations (Becker, et al; Brownmiller; Dworkin). The codes of sexual objectification were articulated with social practices of male power and violence in 1980s feminist arenas that saw portrayals of sexuality such as pornography as intricately connected to these social practices (Ferguson; Dworkin; Kappeler; MacKinnon).

The subversive potential of a queer crossover can be found in various forms of cross-dressing (Garber; Shaw). Performances of drag, which include both drag queens and drag kings, are frequently employed as subversive acts meant to disturb hegemonic gender and sexual categories (Halberstam; Robertson; Shaw and Ardener; Whitehead). In these instances, crossing over suggests an exchange between subcultural and mainstream gender codes that envisions the traversing of borders and binaries as reciprocal process with change occurring on both sides. Thus, a queer crossover can be conceptualized as a realignment of the boundaries of cultural identity including the cultural oppositions between male and female as well as heterosexual and homosexual. In addition, crossover has been interconnected with the idea of racial passing, of presenting oneself as a member of another racial group or ethnic identity as in passing for white (Beltrán; Willard). Passing can also be related to sexual identity as in passing for heterosexual (Gross).

For a comprehensive overview of these controversies in the 1990s and 2000s, see Craig A. Rimmerman’s The Lesbian and Gay Movements: Assimilation or Liberation?.

Peter Skerry’s discussion of the multiple dimensions and conflictual aspects of assimilation has inspired my analysis. Although Skerry is investigating Latinos, his distinctions between the interactive trajectories of assimilation has been particularly influential. Moreover, my conceptualization was informed by Ann Forsyth’s distinction between economic and cultural revitalization (“NoHo” 623).

Although the interrelations of consumer culture have been central to understanding how meaning and identity are constructed, many stress that consumption exploits people’s aspirations and anxieties, and, moreover, leads to broader social, economic, and moral breakdown (Ohmann; Scanlon; Spigel and Mann; Williams). Female consumption has carried a particularly pejorative association (Nava; Scanlon; Spigel and Mann; Sparke).

In the 1990s, consumer expressions of lesbianism were most likely to be found in the celebrity-driven, consumer stylized, and hyper-sexualized images of lesbian chic or embodied in heterosexual female figures playing with the codes of lesbianism in fashion magazines and in televisual programming. Critics of lesbian chic and other 1990s and 2000s formations of lesbian visibility share the broader LGBT concerns about the
depoliticizing dimensions of consumer visibility. Other criticisms focus on the gender specificities of consumer culture such as the commercially-driven beauty ideals and body norms, which constitute the codes of sexual objectification that feminists have long critiqued (Danae Clark; Cottingham; Hamer and Budge; Inness; McKenna, “Queer”; Moritz; Walters, All).

Most evaluations have largely focused on the gay male consumer and advertising campaigns geared toward what many have acknowledged as the new gay demographic (Chasin; Gluckman and Reed; Sender; Walters, All). The visibility of an affluent gay population has been fuel for the fire of the conservative backlash. The perception of gay wealth, termed by Lee Badgett the “myth of gay affluence,” has been coupled with the perception of gay political clout (Brons). Constructed beliefs about the universality of gay male economic and political power, as used by the right-wing, have been at best rhetorical arguments against the need for civil rights and at worst, buzz words for discrimination, especially when coupled with the hyperbole of a prejudicial discourse about gay sexuality. That perception of gay male economic and political power along with the “myth of gay affluence” correspond with my conceptualization of a myth of economic causality in the constitution of the anti-lesbian backlash in 1980s Northampton.

The harassment and discrimination directed toward lesbians by an organized group of the city’s working class Northampton men disrupted the city’s surface appearance of offering cultural acceptance and providing legal protection for all Northampton citizens. Many believed the Northampton police, the city government, and the local paper, the Daily Hampshire Gazette were somewhat complicit in, if not partially responsible for, the atmosphere of fear and harassment. While one arrest was made, more than a few city residents viewed the arrestee as a scapegoat since it was obvious there was systematic harassment of and organized violence toward lesbians.

Jeffery Weeks’ overview of the regulation of sexuality since 1800 provides background for my discussion of the displacement of economic tensions in 1980s Northampton onto the lesbian population.

The violence against lesbian in the 1980s, which while certainly part of broader violence against women, was also a rearticulation of lesbian with the gaybashing behavior that might have been directed toward gay males in an urban context with a less visible and uniquely concentrated lesbian population.

The common belief during this time period was that there were two distinct and clearly identifiable genders in the most deep-rooted and pervasive cultural systems of oppositional thinking. Prior to Judith Butler’s highly influential work, feminist philosopher Marilyn Frye suggested in 1983 that the concept of two distinct dimorphic sexes was a construct (25). 1980s feminism theorized that conventional gender roles were deeply rooted in institutionalized power relations (Brooks; Frye; Pearlman). A rejection of these roles is a form of resistance, psychologist Sarah J. Pearlman argued, that arouses psychologically primitive fears of exclusion and loss that may underlie the male compulsion to dominate and control. Because the control of women is basic to patriarchy, and capitalism as well, heterosexuality must be mandatory and enforced, and, thus, lesbians must be penalized (313).
The 1982 Barnard academic conference on gender and sexuality has been acknowledged as the starting point for what has become known variously as the Feminist Sex Wars, Lesbian Sex Wars, the Porn Wars, or, most widely, as the Sex Wars (Bensinger; Duggan and Hunter; Glick; Henderson, "Lesbian"; Hirsch and Fox; Hunter; Vance). As a consequence of the conference, expressions of lesbian sexuality – identities, practices, and portrayals, specifically portrayals associated with pornographic conventions – became highly contested sites in the 1990s (Stein, Sex 124).

The Sex Wars were not as visible as in urban contexts in the conservative Northampton region in the 1980s. The full impact of the Sex Wars on understandings of sexual and gender identities and behaviors in the regional community did not begin to come into play until late in the decade. As noted in the Gazette, “Northampton may be viewed as a microcosm of the gay rights movement around the country, although a step behind” (Fitzgerald, “Assessing” 9). Ann Forsyth's research confirmed that Northampton regional lesbian population was more conservative in the 1980s than urban lesbian communities.

For an comprehensive discussion of the politics of the Northampton pride march titles, see Claire Hemmings’ Bisexual Spaces: A Geography of Sexuality and Gender.

A queer crossover carries the possibility of resistance. For example, the subversive potential of a queer crossover can be found in various forms of cross-dressing (Garber; Shaw). Performances of drag, which include both drag queens and drag kings, are frequently employed as subversive acts meant to disturb hegemonic gender and sexual categories (Halberstam; Robertson; Shaw and Ardener; Whitehead).
APPENDIX

INTERVIEW GUIDE

General Information

Overview And Topic – I am doing a research project about lesbian identity and lesbian community. I am asking questions about what makes a community, and how that happens in relationship to the media, most particularly in relation to lesbian visibility. I am interested in hearing about your memories of going to the movies. I am also interested in how you might or might not define yourself as a lesbian or as a member of a lesbian community. What is important to me is how you see yourself and what that has to do with what you think about community.

Confidentiality and Taping – I want to reassure you that whatever comments you make will be confidential, and will not be used in any way or in any context that might identify you. Instead I will use a pseudonym. As you know, I will need to tape our interview so I can be accurate when I quote your responses. I am interested in this project, and have been looking forward to hearing what you have to say. Since this as a conversation between us, I will from time to time tell you what I think. Feel free to bring up things that I might not have thought about. As in all give and take dialogues, I hope to learn from you.

Questions and Answers There are no right or wrong answers. What I am interested in again is getting a range of feedback from different individuals. I expect that your comments might be different from other interviewees and from my own opinions. Some of the ideas we talk about are personal. Again, this discussion is confidential, and I hope you will feel free to be frank in your opinions. If we do talk about anything that makes you uncomfortable, please let me know, and we can stop, and talk about something else. I hope that you will enjoy this conversation. Do you have any questions before we start?

Movie Questions
In this section, I am interested in what you remember about going you the movies. I would also like to find out if your experiences and preferences have changed over time.

1. General questions about movies going

- How often do you go to a movie in a theater?
- Do you remember any particular movie going experiences?
- Do you remember anything about the audience?
- How do you typically find out about movies?
- Do you talk about movies with anyone else?
• Do you remember movies from your childhood or from your teens?

2. General questions about movie content and characters

• What types of movies do you make a point of going to see?
• What types of characters do you enjoy most?
• Do you remember seeing characters you thought might be lesbians?
• What is your definition of a lesbian movie?
• What is your definition of a lesbian character?
• Do you see characters in movies that are like you?
• Have you ever copied characters in movies?
• What types of characters do you find attractive?
• What do you think about sex in movies?
• Do you think movies play a role in how people see lesbians?
• Do you feel you are the kind of person that people making movies think about?
• What would you like to see done differently in movies?

Identity and Community Questions
In this section I am interested in your experiences of living in the Northampton area. I would like to hear about how you define yourself and how you define community. I would like to know more about how individuals who live in this area perceive the idea of a lesbian community.

1. General questions about self-identifications

• How do you define yourself?
• How would you describe that identification?
• In what other ways do you identify?
• How would you define lesbian identity?
• Was there a time when you first realized you were a (lesbian, bisexual, etc.)?
• Do you feel you were born this way?
• Who are you attracted to?

2. General questions about community

• What is your perception of a lesbian community in the Northampton area?
• How do you see yourself in relation to a lesbian community?
• What is a lesbian community?
• Do you participate in lesbian community events?
• Where do you hear about lesbian community events?
• Do you belong to lesbian organizations or groups?
• Based on your experiences, what are the strengths/weaknesses of a lesbian community?
• What do you think about Northampton in relation to other lesbian communities?

3. General questions about Northampton

• How long have you lived in the Northampton area?
• Why do you live in the Northampton area?
• Are you aware of Northampton’s lesbian visibility?
• Do you think lesbians are accepted in Northampton?
• Are you aware of incidents of discrimination or violence?
• In what ways do you participate in Northampton city life?
• What would you like to see done differently in Northampton?
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