

A black and white photograph of several hands overlapping. One hand in the foreground has a ring on the ring finger. The hands are positioned in a way that suggests connection or support.

lesbian
potentiality
& feminist
media in
the 1970s

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in the 1970s

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For all my mentors
with boundless gratitude

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contents

ix	acknowledgments
i	introduction Living in the Lesbian's Former Future. A Media Historiography of Imagination for When the Present Is Past
39	one Feminist Media in Movement. The National Women's Film Circuit and International Videoletters
90	two Producing Freedom. 1970s Feminist Documentary and Women's Prison Activism
138	three Raising Fannish Consciousness. The Formation of Feminist Science Fiction Fandom
179	four Tip/Alli. Cutting a Transfeminist Genealogy of Siblinghood
216	epilogue Potentiality Born in Flames
231	notes
267	bibliography
281	index

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introduction

living in the lesbian's former future:
a media historiography of imagination
for when the present is past

/lezbiən/

Lesbian. The first syllable of the word always feels like molasses. Pressing my tongue into the roof of my mouth before dragging it down and back in a movement that seems almost imperceptibly slower than it ought to, the first syllable is swallowed by the second and third as time returns to its conventional speed. I have gotten more than enough practice, tasted many a spoonful of lavender molasses, writing a book on lesbian existence and feminist media in the 1970s. “Lesbian existence,” as opposed to the more clinical “lesbianism,” Adrienne Rich writes, “suggests both the fact of the historical presence of lesbians and our continuing creation of the meaning of that existence.”¹ The work that went into creating this meaning by the time Rich’s essay was published in 1980 was no small matter. More than a simple identity category, the lesbian was taken up by scores of feminists in their activism, scholarship, and creative and cultural work in broad attempts at reimagining gender and sexual existence.²

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It is my contention that the lesbian sign achieved its most robust work in feminist media and feminist media cultures of the second half of the 1970s. During the height of cultural feminism in the United States and Canada, lesbian feminism—the set of political praxes valuing women’s emotional and erotic connection with one another as central to the overthrowing of patriarchy—flourished alongside feminist presses, bookstores, record labels, film distributors, and visual art and video collectives. Feminist art, literature, music, and films circulated through feminist communities, encouraging the mass-imagination of what being lesbian might entail and could come to mean. This project turns specifically to feminist experimental and documentary film and video and feminist science fiction (SF) literature, as the two facilitated this work of imagination in an exceptional manner. Feminist experimental and documentary films and videos of the 1970s introduced diverse audiences to the lives of others, past, present, and future, at once making familiar what was previously unknowable to most, from lesbian love-making to women’s prison experiences, and defamiliarizing the all too well known—namely, heterosexuality and the everyday exploitation of women. Likewise, 1970s feminist SF literature transported readers to entirely other times and places, envisioning what life may be like under different societal conditions and, in turn, making the limitations of the here and now more apparent. Across these texts, the lesbian sign—sometimes spoken, sometimes written, other times connoted, coded, or inferred—enabled the imagination of how women might live and love differently. Due to widespread feminist interest in seeing women’s cinema and the formation of feminist SF fandom as a counterpublic, this cultural work of creating the meaning of lesbian existence was undertaken not by a select and elite few but by thousands—in post-screening discussions and the pages of fanzines, at SF conventions and women’s prison video workshops. Approaching the history of lesbian feminism by way of feminist media and feminist media cultures opens up the 1970s lesbian sign and expands our conception of what counts as lesbian feminism.

In the early 1970s, feminists naming themselves lesbian feminists reclaimed the anachronistic and diagnostic “Lesbian” (often with a capitalized “L,” harking back to Sappho’s ancient island of Lesbos) to become visible, thinkable, and imaginable as women-loving women.³ Contrary to psychoanalysts, who claimed women’s sexual desire for other women to be symptomatic of their desire for male power in a patriarchal world, lesbian feminists insisted that lesbians sought one another out for sex, romance, friendship, and antipatriarchal comradery.⁴ Rather than gaining power, in reorienting themselves

toward fellow women, they often lost the social and economic protections of the family and heterosexual partnership. *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman: A Liberated View of Lesbianism* (1972), one of the first book-length statements on lesbian feminism, signaled this with its dedication to “those who have suffered for their sexual preference, most especially to Sandy, who committed suicide, to Cam, who died of alcoholism, and to Lydia, who was murdered; and to all who are working to create a future for Lesbians.”⁵ In *Sappho*, Radicalesbians and lovers Sidney Abbott and Barbara Love detail the joys of gaining a gay consciousness and living an openly (capital “L”) Lesbian life dedicated to women’s liberation.⁶ They write that they and their lesbian feminist peers are contributing to the “new set of values based on an appreciation of both the differences and the common humanity existing between individuals and groups” being developed by coterminous social movements.⁷ In changing societal attitudes, *Sappho*’s authors hoped Lesbians (and, implicitly, all sexual, gender, and racial minorities) could “become most ordinary people,”⁸ modeling a theoretical move that would characterize much of identity politics for the following decades.

Come the 1990s, queer theorists would start to question the use of the lesbian sign.⁹ Aims at normalcy had seemingly calcified the lesbian sign into something not especially interested in a potential world wherein people could love, fuck, reproduce, and otherwise live differently. Instead, those operating under the lesbian sign, like many operating under the gay sign, often appeared more invested in carving out a place within the unjust world around them in which white cisgender monogamous lesbians and gay men would be tolerated.¹⁰ During the 1990s, lesbians became a niche market that corporations such as Absolut and Subaru could cater to without risking the loss of their broader straight market.¹¹ As early as 1991, Judith Butler predicted that the gay and lesbian signs would cease to produce the erotic practices so long enabled by their very instability.¹² In another act of reclamation, the “queer” of queer activism, queer culture, and queer theory became an attempt to keep such gender and sexual possibilities open.¹³

Despite the prevalence of normalizing rhetoric such as Abbott and Love’s, “lesbian,” for much of the 1970s, maintained an amorphous shape. How and why one became a lesbian and even what being a lesbian entailed varied greatly from person to person. For some women, it was a political decision, a way to free themselves from heterosexual society’s prescribed gender roles.¹⁴ For others, it enabled them to express and pursue sexual desires that they had been repressing for years.¹⁵ Often, however, it was not so simple. Instead, as the lesbian historian Amy Kesselman points out, “As the idea of love between

women emerged in the women's movement, many women looked critically at the limitations they had imposed on their relationships with women and opened themselves to sexual feelings towards each other."¹⁶ Like much feminist thinking, these conscious decisions "challenge[d] the mystifications and silence that often made it difficult for women to experience or pursue pleasure" and revealed "the power of the women's liberation movement to enable women with a range of sexual experiences to reconfirm, reconfigure, or change their sexual desires."¹⁷ This reconfiguration extended from sex to all aspects of social life. By the mid-'70s, feminists who had not identified as lesbians just years before were organizing, cohabitating, corresponding, making art, making love, working, and raising animals and children in ways previously unimaginable—all under the sign of "lesbian."

What "lesbian" in the 1970s signified included these tangible and immediate possibilities, but it also signaled something more: the potential that gendered and sexual life could and would someday be substantially different, that heteropatriarchy may topple, and that women would be the ones to topple it. The eradication of sexism, misogyny, and homophobia would not simply mean a world where lesbian existence was normalized—where lesbians, too, could get married, make babies, and achieve the privileges of white middle-class domesticity. In the absence of compulsory heterosexuality—the ideological presumption, shared by most feminists, of men and women's innate attraction¹⁸—society itself would be entirely reconfigured. And in such a lesbian future, the continued creation of the meaning of lesbian existence would not cease but would look, sound, and feel entirely different than it did in the 1970s present.

In naming this felt sense, this signification of futurity, lesbian potentiality, I draw from Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's essay "On Potentiality," in which he argues that Aristotle's concept—potentiality—is integral to understanding human struggles for survival and expression. Potentiality refers to when a person has the faculty to do something, whether or not they ever in fact do it. It is a mode of existence defined by just such a privation—the sensation of a faculty ironically present most palpably in its absence. Potentiality is political, Agamben argues, because it serves as a constant threat and is most keenly felt where power exerts itself.¹⁹ But it also flourishes when freedom is fought for, during moments of revolution and resistance. Agamben's primary example is poet Anna Akhmatova's recounting of the origins of her *Requiem* collection about Stalin's Great Purge of the Communist Party in the 1930s. Standing outside the Leningrad prison, awaiting news of her son arrested on political grounds, Akhmatova is asked by another woman

who recognizes her, “Can you speak of this?” “Akhmatova,” Agamben writes, “was silent for a moment and then, without knowing how or why, found an answer to the question: ‘Yes,’ she said, ‘I can.’”²⁰ This “I can” is about more than Akhmatova’s abilities as a poet to skillfully represent her and others’ adversity through language. Agamben explains, “For everyone a moment comes in which she or he must utter this ‘I can,’ which does not refer to any certainty or specific capacity but is nevertheless, absolutely demanding. Beyond all faculties, this ‘I can’ does not mean anything—yet it marks what is, for each of us, perhaps the hardest and bitterest experience possible: the experience of potentiality.”²¹ For countless feminists in the 1970s, lesbian existence was that formidable force shining a light on the way to a better future.

In bringing together many women of disparate backgrounds, both physically and virtually (in instances of written, audio cassette, or video cassette correspondence), feminist media not only offered representations of lesbian potentiality but facilitated experiences of it. There is a scene near the end of Joanna Russ’s science fiction novel *The Female Man* (1975) in which the protagonist Joanna describes acting on her fantasies about her friend Laur as tantamount to creating her own reality—“an impossible project.” After kneeling behind Laur’s chair as she reads, Joanna kisses Laur’s neck and then over her ear and cheek to her mouth, knowing that at any second Laur will rebuke her and “the world will be itself again.” Except Laur kisses her back. In this moment, reality for Joanna is torn wide open, and she tells the reader, “If this is possible, anything is possible.”²² Such experiences of potentiality were incredibly common in the 1970s due to lesbian feminism’s growing luster. In Russ’s novel, Joanna and Laur eventually get stoned and make “awkward, self-conscious love,” but “nothing that happened afterward,” Joanna tells us, “was as important to me (in an unhuman way) as that first, awful wrench of the mind.”²³ In the 1970s, feminist film and video and feminist SF literature provided many such lesbian “kisses” across the United States and Canada, engendering entire feminist media cultures. And while I, over the four chapters of this book, explore the awkward “lovemaking” that followed—feminist audiences’ and fans’ excited delineation of certain possibilities, sometimes to the neglect of others—it is also important to identify the potentiality of these first, awful wrenches of the mind.

In turning to the lesbian realities created by these feminist media cultures and the media they circulated, I flash a light on a history of lesbian existence that “could have been but was not.”²⁴ Not only had “lesbian” in the late 1970s yet to cohere into what the sign would come to mean to Butler and other queer scholars writing in the 1990s and 2000s; it also pointed toward lesbian

futures that queer politics and queer studies have conveniently forgotten in favor of their own, lesbian futures that would not come to be but whose sensation on the horizon was nonetheless crucial to so many. The Lesbian, under the purview of potentiality, becomes the mode of existence of a certain privation—a heuristic for illuminating the contingency of history.

Potential Interventions

As a historical concept that roughly aligns with a period in the United States and Canada previously identified as the height of cultural feminism (between radical feminism of the late 1960s and early 1970s and the dissolution of the “second wave” in the early 1980s),²⁵ lesbian potentiality distinguishes a function of the lesbian sign missed by sweeping feminist histories attendant exclusively to activism and scholarly theory. Like Greg Youmans’s *Word Is Out* (2011), Kristen Hogan’s *The Feminist Bookstore Movement* (2016), and Cait McKinney’s *Information Activism* (2020), this study of lesbian potentiality takes the cultural work of cultural feminism seriously.²⁶ Characterizations of cultural feminism as a means of seeking refuge from male supremacy miss the forms of creative thinking cultural texts and their media cultures enabled.²⁷ Lesbian potentiality also points to the diffuse work the lesbian did across cultural spheres not always aligned or completely in sync with the feminist political coterie named lesbian feminism. It reveals how the creation of the meaning of lesbian existence in the 1970s was not confined to the work of activist leaders or scholars but undertaken by countless people of many genders and sexualities through the production, distribution, exhibition, and reception of feminist media.

Rarely have 1970s feminist film and video and feminist SF literature been studied together.²⁸ This is no doubt partially due to the fact that the two media cultures themselves hardly ever intersected or overlapped. Science fiction film in the 1970s was largely the stuff of New Hollywood and either blockbuster or extremely low-budget exploitation special effects, its feminism the celebration of a few strong female characters and the creative reading of camp fans.²⁹ As video became an increasingly domestic medium, women began recording their favorite SF television series—most notably, *Star Trek* reruns—and remixing them to craft texts more to their liking, erotically and politically.³⁰ Meanwhile, robust feminist media cultures burgeoned separately around experimental and documentary film and video and SF literature—the queer progeny of lesbian potentiality and each medium/genre. In studying these two feminist media cultures here, I allow the two to bump

up against each other, the variance in lesbian potentiality's work across each materializing in the gaps and the breadth and wealth of the imagination of lesbian existence cumulating through their conjunction.

As a historiographical concept, lesbian potentiality provides feminist, queer, and transgender media studies with a way of connecting potentialities past and present that neither obfuscates nor reifies their differences. It is a method of illuminating social movement history that also attends to its privations—the what was *and* the what could have been. “The here and now” might at times *feel* like “a prison house,” but that need not mean casting it away in favor of idealized pasts or futures yet unknown.³¹ There are historiographical alternatives to simply converting past potentialities into a resource in the service of our imagined future. As I explain over the course of this introduction, the queer aesthetics of the past do not contain the map to queer futures. We may be of a future, but we are not living in a lesbian feminist future, nor shall we ever have the opportunity. This does not mean that the potentialities of the past are not worth thinking with, not worth understanding in the context of the quagmires of their own presents even as we also pursue the project of confronting the challenges of our own time. Lesbian potentiality as historiographical methodology means not losing the historical subject in favor of either the contemporary or the futural. Only in doing as much might we, in turn, recognize ourselves as historical subjects, acknowledging that our own work in the pursuit of potentiality will look, sound, and feel totally different from that of the unknowable potentialities to come.

Attuned to the contingency of history, one discerns that lesbian existence (or what I call, building on Agamben, “being lesbian”) might have led to not-being lesbian—which is not to say to heterosexuality, bisexuality, or androgyny, but to a not-lesbian that exceeded late twentieth-century understandings of gender and sexuality. Rich supplements her term “lesbian existence” with “lesbian continuum,” which she uses to name the range of emotional and political bonds between and among women occluded by the most common understandings of “lesbianism.”³² In the not-being lesbian that might have followed being lesbian, the lesbian continuum could have extended beyond woman identification, letting go of compulsory heterosexuality's part-and-parcel cishnormativity. Rather than being extended, however, the lesbian continuum was cut short. This project, as I explain, does not offer yet another history of the women's movement's failure. But “LGBT,” “LGBTQIA,” or any such identitarian appellation—however expansive—is not an extension of the lesbian continuum. For this very reason, in every conference presentation and

campus lecture I still feel the weight of “lesbian” on my tongue. Perhaps I should not admit this. Perhaps it is poor advertising, as they say.

Cunnilingus jokes notwithstanding, the problem is not purely physiological. In that stalling of the oratory metronome, history has taken hold. This book works against a guiding impulse of queer studies: its rejection of the possibility of women’s and gay liberation thinking in concert with queerness. This working against takes work. Kadji Amin contends that *queer*—unlike *gay* or *lesbian* or *feminist*—appears slick, almost infinitely mobile, and unbound from any particular identity, historical context, set of objects, or methods because of its historical stickiness. Its emergence in the US scene of the 1990s has ensured that “*only certain* forms of nonnormativity, *only particular* sex acts seem to attach to it.”³³ In an attempt to distinguish itself from gay and lesbian studies before it, a field very much the product of 1960s and ’70s social movements, queer studies of the 1990s declared a primary interest in the discursive production of sexual identities, a project cast as at odds with the essentialisms of cultural feminism and gay liberation. Guided by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s contention that the closet served as the structuring metaphor of twentieth-century sexualities,³⁴ queer scholars interested in historiography and theories of temporality have returned time and again to the pre-Stonewall period, to eras more or less long before US gay and lesbian cultures “came out” en masse,³⁵ seeing in the liberation movement era’s speaking of homosexuality—its “reverse discourse”—an erasure of nonnormative genders and sexualities’ problematizing of hetero-homo and male-female binaries.³⁶ Critiquing lesbian feminists who lamented the relative invisibility of lesbian sexuality before women’s liberation, Jack Halberstam claims that attending to discourses of sexual acts and desires uncovers “sexual scenes and sexual practices and pleasurable identifications that are often rendered invisible by the homosexual-heterosexual continuum.”³⁷ In *Cruising Utopia*, José Esteban Muñoz both narrowly and amorphously limits his study to “a historically specific nexus of cultural production before, around, and slightly after the Stonewall rebellion of 1969.”³⁸ Shortly after 1969, it is implied, utopian feelings sufficient for a critical methodology that looks backward to enact a queer future dissipate. A too-close past, the 1970s and its liberation movements are not queer enough to get us to the queerness that is not yet here.

Within queer studies, the lesbian feminist has served as a figure particularly deserving of derision. The lesbian feminist, as Sara Ahmed has so eloquently explained, “is without question a killjoy figure; so often coming up as being anti, antisex, antifun; antilife. The investment in her misery needs to be understood as just that: an investment.”³⁹ This investment is shared by

heteropatriarchy and queer studies. As the movement for women's liberation grew increasingly visible to the broader public, cisgender straight male misogynists regularly derided lesbian feminists for being humorless, a pain, and a bore. Sadly, such charges have been taken up more recently, if more artfully, by others. "In some queer literatures," Ahmed writes, "lesbian feminism itself appears as a miserable scene that we had to get through, or pass through, before we could embrace the happier possibility of becoming queer."⁴⁰ For this reason, queer historiographies that do address lesbian feminism—and, drawing on the metaphors of queer studies' affective turn, think about what it feels like to "touch" this era from the present—foreground the bad feelings of such lesbian feminist contact. In *Time Binds*, Elizabeth Freeman describes the gravitational pull that "lesbian" exerts on "queer" as a form of "temporal drag."⁴¹ Whereas the queer gets to be performative and deviant in the name of a radical future, the lesbian feminist is constantly cast as an anachronistic drag. And in an attempt to hold on to the historical feeling of the lesbian, to not cut it loose as much of queer studies would have her, Freeman transforms lesbian feminist temporal drag into a queer methodology of historiographical media analysis, a way of "connecting queer performativity to disavowed political histories."⁴² Freeman's case in point is Elisabeth Subrin's experimental video *Shulie* (1997), a shot-by-shot remake of a 1967 documentary about the radical feminist Shulamith Firestone. As Victoria Hesford points out, Firestone, though an influential thinker to a range of 1970s feminisms, neither openly identified as a lesbian nor had much to say about lesbians or lesbian feminism.⁴³ Her exemplary lesbian drag, in fact, a lesbian precursor, Freeman yet again situates the moment of queer political possibility prior to the emergence of lesbian feminism in the 1970s.

In *Feeling Women's Liberation*, Hesford explores how feminism's concern with its own history and the queer desire for history have passed each other like ships in the night, leaving each other "untouched and often unnoticed by the other."⁴⁴ For Hesford, much like myself, the lesbian feminist 1970s would make a logical site for such an encounter. Hesford takes it upon herself to theorize why this has not come to pass. She compellingly claims that "instead of approaching the archive [of 1970s feminisms] as an array of rhetorical materials that sought to persuade and enact a new political constituency and world into being, it has instead largely been read as evidence of specific and coherent theoretical and ideological standpoints, which are then defended or criticized in a more knowing present."⁴⁵ The deep entanglement of feminism and lesbian existence at this time and the mass media's perception of their coconstitution are integral to this process. If in the nineteenth and early

twentieth centuries the lesbian was a ghost that haunted popular and “high” culture, threatening to disrupt the bland homogeneity of heterosexual society, “the feminist-as-lesbian,” Hesford argues, became a ghost of women’s liberation, haunting the present so forcefully that we can see neither how she was produced nor how she might interest us.⁴⁶ First conjured by dyke-baiting antifeminists and anti-lesbian feminists but ironically kept afloat by queer studies’ attempts to distinguish itself from the social movements that immediately preceded it, the feminist-as-lesbian has become an image memory, distorting how the women’s movement is remembered and felt today.⁴⁷ Her spectrality shields how 1970s feminisms challenged postwar American heteropatriarchal hegemony, even as her hypervisibility serves as a constant reminder of the endurance of gender and sexual oppression.⁴⁸ Studying the feminist-as-lesbian’s emergence in the year 1970, Hesford makes a case for folding her back into the ongoing elaboration of feminist symbolic space so that she becomes “a sign of the possibilities—unrealized as well as realized—of women’s liberation.”⁴⁹

Lesbian Potentiality and Feminist Media in the 1970s is in many ways a response to Hesford’s call. It follows the feminist-as-lesbian through the archives of two feminist media cultures, studying the plentiful and at times surprising and less recognizable forms through which she takes shape. Whereas Hesford focuses her attention on the emergence of the feminist-as-lesbian across mass-media stories and early feminist theory published in the year 1970, this book lifts the record player stylus and places it on the 1974–79 period to follow the dissemination of lesbian potentiality through diverse discourses within the movement, as well as at various intersections between the women’s movement and preexisting media cultures. It dives squarely into the fray—that messy temporal territory so carefully avoided by earlier queer scholars. It does so believing that, if one wishes to understand the queerness of lesbian existence, the threat the feminist-as-lesbian posed to heteropatriarchy in the 1970s, one needs to look to her influence—the breadth of thinking, imagining, organizing, and community building the lesbian sign made possible.

A Short History of Lesbian Potentiality

Lesbian potentiality permeates radical feminist theory of the early 1970s, and it is partially responsible for the development of lesbian separatism in the years immediately thereafter. One early statement of lesbian potentiality, widely cited and well circulated through the women’s movement, was Anne

Koedt's "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm." First delivered in 1968 and then published in 1970, Koedt's essay offered feminists, by way of lesbian sexuality, a sort of collective "we can." In the essay, Koedt extends radical feminist claims about male supremacy to the sexual sphere and argues that straight men (whom today we would also identify as cisgender) have controlled the dialogue about sex to sustain the fulfillment of their own sexual pleasure and maintain their social dominance of (again, cisgender) women.⁵⁰ She outlines scientific studies on female sexual pleasure, which conclude that cisgender women experience climax predominantly through the clitoris, rather than the vagina, as Freud and others had previously claimed.⁵¹ With this knowledge, she writes, straight cisgender men could become sexually expendable, since whom cisgender women receive sexual pleasure from becomes divorceable from their partners' sexes. This is Koedt's "we can" moment. Cis women can satisfy one another sexually, which may even be more desirable, Koedt claims, as they (unlike cis women and men under patriarchy) are also able to relate to one another "on a full, human basis."⁵² Although incredibly limited in its articulation of what produces sexual pleasure, Koedt's essay is important because it supplements critiques of the structural oppression of cis women with the proposal of an alternative that considers their pleasure paramount.⁵³ She concludes the essay by arguing that this knowledge could change society profoundly: "The establishment of clitoral orgasm as fact would threaten the heterosexual institution. For it would indicate that sexual pleasure was obtainable from either men or women, thus making heterosexuality not an absolute but an option. It would thus open up the whole question of human sexual relationships beyond the confines of the present male-female role system."⁵⁴ In this way, though initially articulated in relation to cisgender women's sexual freedom, lesbian potentiality, for Koedt, would inevitably expand to the imagination of a more equitable sexual future in which everyone would be bisexual, androgynous, and freer.

For Koedt and many other radical feminists in the early 1970s, lesbian potentiality existed first and foremost as a refusal of heteropatriarchy's insistent exertion of its own potentiality. According to Agamben, while other animals have the specific potentiality to do this or that, humans are the only creatures with the potentiality to not-do, the only ones capable of their own impotentiality, and thus freedom, as they have the power of refusal.⁵⁵ Being lesbian, for many radical feminists, meant refusing (at least temporarily) the heterosexuality integral to male supremacy. "The lesbian," as Hesford explains, "became a figure that provided a form for thinking women's liberation as the freeing of women from the obliged affections and affective obligations of

the 'sex-caste system.'"⁵⁶ Because of this, radical feminists expressed lesbian fantasies for women's liberation and did so with a surprisingly projective and creative force.

"The Woman Identified Woman" (1970), written by the Radicalesbians (of which Abbott and Love were members), offers another notorious example of one such fantasy.⁵⁷ The manifesto was first distributed as part of a "Lavender Menace" zap action at the Second Congress to Unite Women. As Alice Echols and Dana R. Shugar have chronicled in great detail, its authors' primary goal was to create a space for lesbians within radical feminism by articulating lesbian existence in their terms.⁵⁸ With it, the Radicalesbians position the lesbian as the vanguard of feminism for having already gone through the "torturous journey" of "the liberation of the self."⁵⁹ What begins as a personal necessity (coming out, finding other women like them, and so on), they write, becomes political as lesbians are forced to confront the limitations placed on them in being female and are driven to question the world around them. Though it might take them decades, lesbians inevitably reject the self-hatred and guilt they have learned and replace it with self-love and, in turn, the love of all women. In doing so, the Radicalesbians argue, lesbians have all already gone through the process of challenging patriarchy and heterosexism and thus have years of insight to offer radical feminists, who had only recently begun to argue for the transformation of gendered society. In fact, men's labeling of certain women "lesbians" or "dykes," the Radicalesbians claim, is exactly what allows men to define "women" as those who "get fucked by men" and thus as existing under the "male grid of role definitions."⁶⁰ They offer "woman identified woman" as a way to open and extend possibilities for sisterly commitment and solidarity across the "sexist" and "male supremacist" categories of "homosexual" and "heterosexual." Instead of trying to change men, which, they claim, preoccupies too much of feminists' energy, they will change themselves, and they will do so together. As women-identified women, they will "create a new sense of self" through which they will "achieve maximum autonomy in human expression."⁶¹ The lesbian potentiality of becoming "woman-identified" radiated across feminism in the following decade. It was women-identified women with whom Audre Lorde in 1978 claimed that she had found others "brave enough to risk sharing the erotic's electrical charge" and "pursue genuine change within [their] world" together.⁶² And it was woman-identification that Rich in 1980 claimed to be a specifically lesbian "source of energy" that could challenge the falseness, hypocrisy, and hysteria of compulsory heterosexuality and lead to the liberation of all women.⁶³

However, under radical feminism this potentiality was repeatedly curbed or redirected so that the sexuality of such lesbian potentiality was left behind. One can see this most clearly in the speeches of women's movement figure-head Ti-Grace Atkinson that circulated through the movement for years before being published in *Amazon Odyssey* in 1974. For Atkinson, lesbian potentiality was strategic. In her speeches she defines lesbian existence as a "commitment, by choice, full-time, of one woman to others of her class."⁶⁴ She extends this with the analogy, "Lesbianism is to feminism what the Communist Party was to the trade-union movement."⁶⁵ Thus, for Atkinson and other "political lesbians" of her ilk, lesbian potentiality's value lay in its class solidarity, and commitment to lesbianism will bring women together to work toward revolution. It had little to do with sexual desire or romance between women or even how same-sex relationships could change the oppressive social structures of straight romantic partnership.

Politicized this way, lesbian potentiality did not share potentiality's most exciting characteristics, nor could it perform its full political function. According to Agamben, experiences of potentiality are dependent on knowledge or ability. Unlike *generic potentiality*, which is what we mean when we say a child has the potential to become a great artist or leader, *existing potentiality*, such as that of the architect to build or the poet to write, means that, unlike the child, the architect or poet need not suffer an alteration but instead already is potential.⁶⁶ For Atkinson and other "political lesbians," lesbian potentiality was a generic potentiality. It did not precipitate from the lived experiences and knowledges of lesbians in the present. Such a radical feminist approach to lesbian existence becomes a temporal problem, the lesbian existing almost outside of time itself and therefore not truly existing as anything more than a concept. By remaking the lesbian into a figure for feminism "both Koedt and Atkinson invest[ed] her with a futurity that is also, at the same time, an attempt to free her from her own historicity."⁶⁷ In "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Rich writes about these and other likeminded feminists' assumptions that, in a world of equality, everyone would be bisexual: "Such a notion blurs and sentimentalizes the actualities within which women have experienced sexuality; it is the old liberal leap across the tasks and struggles of here and now, the continuing process of sexual definition which will generate its own possibilities and choices."⁶⁸ Radical feminists in the early 1970s conveniently ignored that, for many, sex between women and the romantic and kinship structures of lesbian partnership or communal living were not merely stepping stones toward more equitable relations with men but desirable in and of themselves for

both the present and foreseeable future. In doing so, radical feminists delimited lesbian potentiality's political function, as lesbian existence served but one purpose, losing all possibility of continued instigation thereafter.

Within a year of the writing of these radical feminist lesbian imaginings, lesbian separatism emerged as a lived political practice. Taking radical feminists' calls for women to unite together as a class seriously, separatists believed that, by segmenting themselves off from heterosexual society either by moving to "lesbian lands" outside metropolitan centers or creating women-only collectives within cities, they could direct the entirety of their energy toward one another and, in doing so, foster new ways for women to be in the world.⁶⁹ The initial goal for most separatists was to create safe spaces where women could escape the physical, sexual, and social violence they regularly experienced as a result of misogyny.⁷⁰ As Carol Anne Douglas writes in *off our backs* (1974), her call for a feminist nation, "Such a free society for women could provide the greatest possible opportunity for women to develop themselves, their relationships with each other, and their own politics and culture."⁷¹ In such separatist spaces, many believed they would finally be able to shed their patriarchal conditioning and create new definitions of womanhood that did not hinge on their relation to men.⁷² The Killer Dykes articulated this vision most forcefully in a 1971 poem, the last three stanzas of which read:

You don't have much time to reform anyway
The Killer Dykes have already set the date
 when at the stroke of midnight
 we'll change all you back into pumpkins
 or maybe into welcome mats for our sisters; and then

 take over Clark St. for the lesbians
 take over the world for the lesbians
 rename it Isle of Lesbos
 drop Isle
 for our world will no longer be an island
 we'll unite with our sisters all over the galaxy

 and turn you all into fertilizer
 so your masculinity-proving fertilization
 all your sexist shit
 can be put to good use.⁷³

Whether they put it mildly, as in the case of Douglas's careful argument for the benefits of a feminist nation, or forcefully, as exemplified by the Killer

Dykes' angry but broad ("sisters all over the galaxy") poetic charge, many lesbian feminists in the early 1970s believed that separatism was necessary to spark revolution. Invested in love as well as comradeship among women, separatists saw lesbian potentiality as more than temporarily withholding sexual access from the oppressors. Lesbian existence provided the starting point for eradicating misogyny, sexism, and homophobia. Separatism thus expanded the temporality of radical feminism's lesbian potentiality, valuing the present tense nature of same-sex romantic, sexual, and kinship relations while also looking ahead to the futures that its sociality and politics could make possible. As lesbian separatists created the collectives and lesbian lands where women might gain the experience, knowledge, and skills necessary to create meaningful structural change, they sought to transform lesbian potentiality from generic into existing potentiality.

This is apparent in the example of the Washington, DC, collective the Furies. Founded in the spring of 1971, the Furies initially consisted of twelve white women age eighteen to twenty-eight of working-class, middle-class, and upper-middle-class backgrounds (including Ginny Berson, Joan E. Biren [JEB], Rita Mae Brown, and Charlotte Bunch) who chose to break away from the DC Women's Liberation Movement to escape homophobia within the organization and create lesbian leadership for the women's movement.⁷⁴ Although young and white, nearly all of the Furies had experience organizing against racial discrimination and for the New Left.⁷⁵ And while they did believe sexism to "be the root of all other oppressions," they were also inspired by the Black Panther Party and the Weathermen to contribute to radical groups' incitement of a global revolution for all.⁷⁶ Moreover, in the pages of the nationally distributed newspaper they edited together, *The Furies*, they advocated for feminist theories by women of color, working-class women, and lesbians: "Feminist ideology must be created by those with the greatest stake in the male system or it will be reformist and sell less privileged ones down the river."⁷⁷ In *The Furies*, they also theorized what they put into practice in their collective in the hope that sharing what they learned from the experience would help eradicate all oppression of women in the future. In a 1972 memo to the rest of the collective, Bunch described her vision of fifty years out in which the United States has dissolved completely, its various regions being run by different minority groups, including "A Federation of Feminist States" governed by a lesbian feminist party. It is then, she claims, that lesbian feminism, still separatist and still implicitly white, would be able to build alliances with racial minority and gay male groups.⁷⁸ Lesbian potentiality, for the Furies, would deliver women's freedom. However, it would

also eventually lead to a complete restructuring of society in which new ways of relating to others would have been made possible. Lesbian existence would continue; however, it would no longer call for divisions but would flourish within a reconfigured field of relationality.

To build toward this future in the present, the Furies, like many other lesbian feminists, believed that all women should become lesbians. As Berson wrote in the editorial for the first issue of *The Furies*, “Lesbianism is not a matter of sexual preference, but rather one of political choice which every woman must take if she is to become woman-identified and thereby end male supremacy.”⁷⁹ For Berson and her cohort, unlike Atkinson, however, this was more than dogma. For them, it meant the immediate rejection of traditional middle-class family structures in favor of experimenting with new models of collective living. The Furies created “a kind of laboratory where each member tried to overcome patterns of behavior that reflected both her class status and her internalized hatred of women.”⁸⁰ As Anne M. Valk documents, they pooled their wages, redistributed their resources to correct for past class and heterosexual privileges, and shared all possessions and responsibilities, including, for some time, the care for three children from members’ past heterosexual relationships.⁸¹ Coletta Reid detailed in an article published in June–July 1972, “In addition to working on political projects, [they] tried to get in better physical and mental condition.”⁸² One of their members taught the others karate, and together they formed weekly study groups devoted to researching how past revolutions took meaningful action.⁸³ Through their community outreach projects (which included self-defense and mechanical skills workshops, political theory discussion groups, poetry readings, and film screenings) and their publication of *The Furies*, the collective shared what its members learned through separatism with the women’s movement at large.⁸⁴

With each of these endeavors, the Furies acted on the sense of potentiality that their lesbian existence granted them and sought to make possible what they felt themselves to be collectively capable of. After the collective disbanded, its members continued to put out *The Furies*. While the collective living/working setup did not turn out to be sustainable for the twelve of them, the Furies remained committed to leading by example. Alongside their theoretical essays and personal accounts of collective living they published articles on lesbian history; poetry; strength training and martial arts exercises; directions and diagrams for how to relieve a “lesbian headache” through massage; and JEB’s beautiful photography of the Furies and other DC lesbian feminists organizing, playing sports, and embracing. The fifth

issue of *The Furies* included a full two-page newspaper spread of such photographs. Atop the black-and-white collage of women chopping wood, climbing trees without shirts on, playing softball, talking in a garden, and straddling each other in a park, the playful title reads, “Come Outside (On a Queer Day You Can See Forever).”⁸⁵ Here and elsewhere, the Furies used humor and affection, alongside abstract thinking and more practical survival skill sets, to articulate their very felt, embodied sense that in confronting their own oppression and building their own worlds they might contribute meaningfully to the kinds of changes society so desperately needed.

The Furies anticipated Muñoz’s claims for queerness as a horizon. In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz describes queer aesthetics as providing audiences and readers affective access to queer futures.⁸⁶ Through quotidian images of indeterminacy, gesture, and performativity, gay men’s poetry and performances from the decade before Stonewall, such as Frank O’Hara’s “Having a Coke with You” (1966) and Amiri Baraka’s *The Toilet* (1964), Muñoz claims, make queer futures palpable as if present. Queerness, as this potentiality for Muñoz, exists in a perpetual futurity that enables those of us in the present to “dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds.”⁸⁷ Muñoz draws on Agamben in his theorization of queerness as potentiality, but he does not address the evolving nature of potentiality by way of impotentiality. Potentiality, for Agamben, is defined by its simultaneous impotentiality. Agamben quotes Aristotle, who writes: “A thing is said to be potential if, when the act of which it is said to be potential is realized, there will be nothing impotential.”⁸⁸ This, Agamben explains, means more than possibility’s ruling out of impossibility. Instead, with true potentiality, the potentiality to not-be no longer lags behind actuality but “passes fully into it as such.”⁸⁹ Potentiality, by way of impotentiality, is thus not annulled in actuality but both destroyed and preserved; it “survives actuality and, in this way, gives itself to itself.”⁹⁰ Lesbian potentiality is the mode of existence of just such a privation. While radical feminism’s thinking of lesbian existence as heterosexual impotentiality meant a temporary refusal of male sexual supremacy, lesbian impotentiality meant a commitment to rethinking lesbian sex, romance, and collective living with social change. In the metaphor of queer horizon, as lesbian feminists brought new ways of being into the world, lesbian (im)potentiality would reilluminate the same sky but with slightly different colors, the rosy pinks of yesterday’s future lesbian morphing into the swirling pumpkin oranges and violet blues of today’s.

While lesbian potentiality for radical feminist theory was more akin to what Agamben describes as generic potentiality, and lesbian separatism tried

to convert this generic potentiality into something more, many feminist cultural texts of the second half of the 1970s consign the lesbian with an existing potentiality. Through the imagination of what could be and what such alternatives might look, sound, and feel like, the lesbian potentiality of feminist film and video and feminist SF literature maintain Agamben's defining characteristic of potentiality: impotentiality or the potentiality to not do, to not pass into actuality or to preserve itself when it does do so.⁹¹ Put another way, these cultural texts engender new space-times from which women might love and live differently than they do in the present but also suggest that the lesbian existence they envision need not come to be, or stay as it is should it come to be. Being lesbian does not demarcate who lesbians are once and for all or even who they are for now. Their lesbians are the lesbians who could be but are not. Their potentiality is such that they give themselves to themselves so that their imagination might continue. These texts conceive of the temporality of lesbian potentiality differently from the theory and praxis before them, not situating the past, present, and future as distinct, successive moments but, in varying ways, coexisting, co-constituted temporalities. As a result, audiences get to live in time differently and experience lesbian (im)potentiality in a manner inaccessible via activism proper and only gestured to by feminist theory.

Lesbian feminist SF literature of the 1970s juxtaposes heterosexual pasts and presents with potential lesbian futures, using the genre's temporal flexibility to narrativize the meeting of different temporalities and, in turn, provoke questions about their desirability. Russ's "When It Changed" (1972) and *The Female Man* (1975), James Tiptree, Jr.'s "Houston, Houston, Do You Read?" (1976), Suzy McKee Charnas's *Motherlines* (1978), and Sally Miller Gearhart's *The Wanderground* (1978) depict women's societies or worlds that have either left men behind or lost the male half of the species through natural disaster or war. The narrative conflict of these stories occurs when these societies contact remnants of heteropatriarchal pasts. Characters from pasts more like our own present cannot believe what they find in the future. Sex has become completely divorced from reproduction. Women (they do usually hold on to this gendered designation, if also ridding it of its contemporary connotations) have developed entirely unrecognizable erotic networks, as their romantic, sexual, and kinship ties disentangle and rebraid themselves in unpredictable patterns. Over decades or centuries of such processes, what it means to be a woman and what defines the human have radically altered. Like "women identified women," these fictional folks from the future have created new senses of self. These stories thus work backward, in a way, as

they explore lesbian potentiality in actuality, otherwise impossible, and lesbian potentiality gets extended in multiple directions across time.

Counterintuitively, these stories do not grant readers full access to these new ways of living. The stories perform what Ursula K. Le Guin calls science fiction's "thought-experiment" heuristic, as readers travel to these futures and experience what it could mean to be born into those bodies that today would most likely be assigned female at birth under totally different social conditions.⁹² However, more often than not, readers are situated alongside a protagonist who occupies a liminal position on the border of past, present, and future societies. Readers, like the stories' protagonists, may find the future they travel to appealing but are also unclear about whether they belong, experiencing a sort of ambivalence about any desire for such a lesbian feminist future. These are not lesbian feminism's futures. They are not predictive, and yet in their accounting for the process of (im)potentiality, their fictionalized constituents continue to work toward more equitable futures and, in doing so, come to resemble 1970s lesbians less and less.

"Houston, Houston, Do You Read?"—Tiptree's Hugo and Nebula award-winning novella (and the last the author would publish before his name would be revealed as one of two pseudonyms of sixty-one-year-old Alice B. Sheldon)—takes place approximately three hundred years in Earth's future after an epidemic put an end to the reproduction of infants with XY chromosomes more than two hundred years earlier. Earth's population has drastically declined to two million, and its exclusively XX chromosomal inhabitants have developed the means to reproduce the human species through cloning. Each person refers to those of their same genotype as "sisters," and they each typically give birth to two "sister" or clone babies (after becoming pregnant through a form of in vitro) during their teenage years to contribute to the growth of the population. They all write journals, and they keep a central library of each genotype's memoirs. Every ten years they read their "book" from start to finish, learning from those who shared their genes and lived before them, noting similarities in personalities, health risks, and interests but also tracking the unique contributions of each person as someone not solely defined by her genetic makeup. No longer autonomous individuals, humans have come to understand themselves through their "sisters" and their collective histories. They continue to evolve as a society and culture, the books of older clones becoming increasingly "unrealistic," by which they mean they cannot imagine living as they did then. In this future, sisterhood serves not as a solution but as a starting point. The human has become lesbian, but their potentiality as such is renewed, as these humans-as-lesbians continue

to build toward an even better world for those to come. Humanity might be free of compulsory heterosexuality, but they do not assume human struggle to be extinct.

As readers, we are not privy to this information immediately but come to learn it piece by piece as the story's male protagonist puts the clues together. "Houston, Houston" is narrated by a physicist, Dr. Orren Lorimer, one of three twentieth-century astronauts to have traveled by accident to this future. Unknown to the reader, and even to Lorimer, the story is his verbal recollection to the crew of the spaceship *Gloria* after they have given him and Major Norman "Dave" Davis and Captain Bernhard "Bud" Geirr, the two other male crew members of the broken-down 1970s spaceship *Sunbird*, a tell-all drug. After spending months with these three men, the *Gloria* crew remain uncertain as to whether they ought to take them back to Earth and drug them to observe their uninhibited speech and behavior and thus learn their true nature—or so Lorimer suspects once he discovers he has been drugged. Much of the story is focused on the past: Lorimer's thoughts about his, Bud's, and Dave's rescue and time aboard the *Gloria*, as well as about his time aboard the *Sunbird* and his life on Earth before that. All his memories and observations, which move in and out of the relative past and present tenses, are not happening in his head, as he thinks, but, in fact, are being narrated to his hosts aboard *Gloria*. Situated this way, we (like Judy Paris, Judy Dakar, Lady Blue Parks, Connie Morelos, and Andy Kay) are Lorimer's audience. Like these twenty-third-century crew members, we analyze how Lorimer thinks. Unlike to them, however, he is relatively familiar to us as someone from a time similar to our own. And like him, we exist in a near state of privation when it comes to knowledge of the future down on Earth. As readers we pick up clues in the *Gloria* crew's language and rely on Lorimer's thoughts and reflections to figure out what is going on and what we think of it.

Lorimer thus serves as a very particular conduit between the present as past and the future as present. Forming a link between the two times, he is also constantly locating himself somewhere between the sexes on board. Aboard the *Sunbird* he was always the odd man out—the scientist, not the astronaut, and thus the smallest, least athletic, and nerdiest of the group. He inadvertently tells his observers that he has never felt like a normal guy, and the story opens with a memory of being bullied into using the girls' bathroom in junior high. While Lorimer, like his two compatriots, was married with children, he does not express the same attitude of male supremacy toward the crew of the *Gloria* as Bud and Dave do. He is attracted to the crew

and watches them touch one another, wondering what they do in their quarters together at night, but he is also friendly with them, especially the two “sister” Judys, in a way that he is not with Bud and Dave. When he figures out that all “sisters” are clones and says, contrary to their fear, that he is not offended, the Judys tell Lorimer that they think of him as “more hu—more like us.”⁹³ The members of the *Gloria*’s crew are willing to share with Lorimer information about how they live on Earth and why they have organized life in this way, because they consider him different from the others. Unlike Bud and Dave, Lorimer makes a life among them aboard *Gloria*, twentieth-century patriarchy having not served him well as a not particularly masculine man.

Through drugging the men and observing their behavior, the crew of *Gloria* receive a rich history lesson, as the misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia of the past are enacted before them. Tension between Bud and Dave and the *Gloria* crew builds, and Bud’s frustration with living under a woman’s command culminates in his sexual assault of Judy Paris, an act inconceivable in the reality of this future. When Bud first makes his advances, Lorimer tries to warn the crew of what he expects will happen. They do not heed his warnings and say that Judys can take care of themselves; instead, they observe the event like anthropologists, filming them and collecting Bud’s sperm as a sample. Andy (who is named for his clone line’s taking of androgens, a.k.a. testosterone, and has been passing as a cis man to deflect the suspicions of Bud and Dave as to what awaits them down on Earth) is the only crew member to try to help Judy. When Bud hits Andy, Lorimer finally reveals the secret, yelling at Bud to stop hitting him because “he” is really a “she” like all the others. Bud rages about the subservience he expects to encounter when they land and belittles Andy as a “bull dyke” incapable of pleasing the female population as he will, starting now with Judy Paris. While shockingly little is done to stop Bud, the story soon ends with each of the three cis men being administered an antidote for the drug, which, Lorimer tells the reader, “tastes cool going down, something like peace and freedom . . . [o]r death,”⁹⁴ suggesting that all three are being terminated. This ending might read like a separatist out-and-out rejection of half of the species as inherently misogynist and domineering. Interestingly, Sheldon, after Tiptree’s outing, felt the need to assuage readers upset by the implication that assassinating men was the solution to women’s problems.⁹⁵

While what we do know about the ways these humans in the future live generates a certain level of curiosity, at the end of the novella we, along with Lorimer, are still in the dark. As readers we can only begin to guess what we

may have in common with those living down on Earth. Theirs is not 1970s lesbian feminism's future. These future lesbians are not separatists, and they are not simply creating lesbian lands. For one, their restructuring of society is global (governments and capitalism no longer exist). Still, theirs is a lesbian feminist future, and this future's concern for Lorimer as a feminine man, inclusion of transgender Andy, and hinting at thousands of ways to be human expand the gendered bonds of the lesbian continuum. While drafting "Houston, Houston," Tiptree would write quite polemically in letters to feminist fanzines that he believed a ratio of fewer men to women would be productive to correcting many social woes. For this, the self-presenting male feminist received criticism from men and women alike, the former accusing him of reverse sexism and the latter castigating him for binary thinking.⁹⁶ However, this proposal's fictionalization in "Houston, Houston" reveals that the creative exercise of envisioning a world without twentieth-century men facilitated the imagination of more genders, not fewer, and opened the potential for more to come.

Due to the substantial economic barriers women filmmakers faced in the 1970s, as well as feminist critiques of the patriarchal dangers of narrative cinema, feminist film and video was typically short, experimental, or documentary, rather than long-form fiction. As a result, lesbian potentiality in these films is not so much narrativized as connoted through cinematography, editing, and music. Lesbian feminist classics such as Jan Oxenberg's *Home Movie* (1972) and *A Comedy in Six Unnatural Acts* (1975) and Barbara Hammer's *Dyketactics* (1974), *Superdyke* (1975), and *Women I Love* (1976) bring audiences into lesbian domestic and communal spaces and, through their various formal means and structures, explore what being lesbian felt like to their out lesbian filmmakers. Each of these films also gestures toward "how it could be," the sense of potentiality that accompanied everyday lesbian existence. In Oxenberg's autobiographical *Home Movie*, this sense of potentiality rushes in with the film's pivot from Oxenberg's past as a teenage lesbian cheerleader to her present as a member in Los Angeles's lesbian feminist community, pictured through the crosscutting of documentary protest footage and a lesbian football game in which she is no longer on the sidelines but part of the team. As the footage of Oxenberg as a cheerleader winds down through slow motion, her voiceover states, "All the time I was doing this kind of thing, you know, 'Rah, Rah, Jim Smith, he's our man,' there was this secret place inside of me that really knew what was best for me, that was building my real self this whole time, and maintaining my real feelings. It just feels really good now to have broken through the façade." A slow piano chord ushers in the

first shot of grown-up Oxenberg, now dressed in a Lavender Menace T-shirt and throwing the football. The piano's tempo picks up, and soon Oxenberg is lost in a lesbian huddle, a close-up tracking embracing arms. The camera pulls back as the group breaks apart, and, intercut with the slow-motion game in which whole bodies become entangled, legs wrapping around waists and faces nuzzling into bottoms, are quick black-and-white shots from women's and gay liberation actions. On the soundtrack, folk artist Debra Quinn sings, "We are not alone, we are together, we are together, we have each other, so don't tell us what to be // We are not helpless, we are women, we are women, and we're not waiting any longer to be free, to be free, to be free." It is not only Oxenberg's closeted childhood that is now past but also a politics of seeking acceptance. This pack of Brown and white lesbians are rolling, grabbing, caressing, and laughing their way into a lesbian future defined by freedom. The film ends mid-action. The football game is not over; nor is the process of creating the meaning of lesbian existence. Just as there are no clear teams, scores, or clock, when, where, and with whom being lesbian might lead is entirely up for grabs. A sense of something else being possible leads these lesbians here, and the feeling has not dissipated. It continues to move and to motivate, reaching out to other ways of being, if not an end zone.

Films such as Oxenberg's did more than capture or document the feeling of potentiality so keen for so many lesbians at this time; they created such an experience for viewers, adapting it to cinematic form and externalizing what was often quite internal and therefore unverifiable. But moments of lesbian (im)potentiality were not confined to the screens of out lesbian filmmakers. In 1979, the Los Angeles-based experimental and ethnographic documentary filmmaker Chick Strand made two films that, I argue, offer two of the most poignant affectations of lesbian potentiality. In the first, *Cartoon le Mousse* (1979), lesbian potentiality is more generic, proffering a refusal of heterosexuality, not unlike Atkinson's and Koedt's from the start of the decade. The film contrasts lesbian subjects with heteronormative structures of desire through the juxtaposition of imagery and sound. However, in *Cartoon le Mousse* and even more so in *Fever Dream* (1979), lesbian potentiality's refusal of heterosexuality is imbued with an eroticism and playfulness absent from both the desexualized (Atkinson) and hypersexualized (Koedt) writing of their feminist theory counterparts. The films are not prescriptive of a properly lesbian form of sexuality. Instead, with just the faintest suggestion of what could be or could come to be, these films' lesbian potentiality maintains that it could not come to be. In doing so, they ask those they engage to think about whether they offer desirable alternatives and for whom.

Cartoon le Mousse can also be understood as a project of re-vision. In 1972, Rich called for a feminist critique of literature to study how women have lived and how language has trapped them so that they might “begin to see—and therefore live—afresh.”⁹⁷ Whereas Oxenberg did as much with the home movie format, looking back at herself as a child and teenager and at how her parents pictured her before offering a vision of her lesbian adulthood and what could come, Strand takes on the sensual pleasures of Hollywood cinema. Through the crafting of two distinct parts of her film—one remixed footage and one original photography—Strand contrasts the banal terror of seventy years of heteropatriarchal cinema with a brief and murky glimpse at the lesbian cinema that could come to stand in its place. The film begins with a woman walking onto a stage and announcing to her audience, of which the viewer is a part, first in English and then in French, that the theater is “proud to present a re-enactment of defective facsimiles and counterfeits.” These defective facsimiles and counterfeits turn out to be found animated and live footage from Classical Hollywood, which Strand remixes in the first, longer portion of the film. The montage’s black-and-white images dwell on empty spaces. Combined with eerie organ music, which at times mixes with voice-overs, lyrics, and sound effects, these empty spaces appear as if those of a haunted house, and their various “scenes” are given titles such as “Rituals Involving the Meditation of Pure Light Trapped in a Ridiculous Image” or “Variation on a Bourgeois Living Room in which the Shadow Woman Hangs Herself.” Domesticity, on- and off-screen, Strand suggests, has never been safe for women; it has always been a horror. This first half of the film ends with a series of violent images: an animated rabbit swinging by a brook and singing “Someday My Prince Will Come” explodes as the film cuts to a thunderstorm; a big fish consumes a school of smaller fish; back inside, drapes catch on fire. A music cue, not totally unlike that in *Home Movie*, ushers in a distinct second passage of the film, which consists of original black-and-white footage of women undressing and caressing each other shot by Strand at her home in Tujunga Valley, just north of Los Angeles.

On the other side of bourgeois heteropatriarchy, for Strand, are not men and women cohabitating on more equal terms, as Koedt or Atkinson would have it, but sensual lesbian existence. Re-vision includes “the challenge and promise of a whole new psychic geography to be explored.”⁹⁸ It can be difficult and dangerous, Rich cautions, to try to find “language and images for a consciousness we are just coming into.”⁹⁹ The first passage of the film consists largely of long shots of empty spaces with animated creatures and few other figures inhabiting the frame, suggesting that women, if not Woman,

in Hollywood were nowhere to be found.¹⁰⁰ The second, meanwhile, is shot in extreme close-up, and barely discernible bodies, which are nonetheless present and coded as both female and feminine, fill the frame. A separate instrumental track, more relaxed but still a bit strange, runs over this footage. It is not austere and forceful like that of the first passage but sensual and passionate. Due to the proximity of the figures and the lack of lighting other than backlighting, one can tell little more about who they are. Their ages and races, even how many there are, are all unclear. One cannot tell exactly what they are doing, but it is apparent that they are close and touching. On occasion, long hair falls down across the frame, the horizontality to their positions evoking lovemaking.

From behind the lights, across the 180-degree line from the camera, must appear a well-lit lesbian scene, but this is not what Strand films. Instead, she offers viewers an experience of lesbian potentiality without letting them cross with the lesbians into their actuality. That Rich was right in her caution about the difficulty of re-vision is attested to in the struggles of lesbian separatists to create sustainable new ways of living, and it offers one account for why Tiptree let neither Lorimer nor the reader see what those aboard *Gloria* did in their quarters at night. But that they did things is not a question, and here Strand eroticizes this unknowing knowing through her striking cinematography. Darkness and shadows are important figures of potentiality for Agamben and for Aristotle before him. The potentiality of sight is located in darkness.¹⁰¹ Sight is as dependent on its privation as its actualization in light. Through filming lesbian existence in silhouette, Strand's film shows viewers what they cannot see. Exactly who and what being lesbian might entail is kept ambiguous in its nonbeing. However, such nonbeing is not the same as nonexistence. Strand's potential lesbians exist in a space-time on the borders of present and future, visible and close enough to touch but also, paradoxically, unseeable and out of reach.

Strand devoted an entire seven-minute film to this sort of lesbian filmmaking that same year with *Fever Dream*, in which she filmed two lesbian friends massaging each other's nude bodies and then kissing in the rain. Described by Strand in an interview with the documentary film scholar Irina Leimbacher as "a dream I once had," *Fever Dream*, if still not explicit in that it does not show genital sexual contact, is more elaborate in its representation of lesbian erotics.¹⁰² The film is again shot in black and white and extreme close-up but this time with significantly less contrast and more extended shots, which allows viewers to become familiar with its two performers' torsos, backsides, and hands. Most of the film is framed so that the

women's faces are off-screen, and the camera instead follows their hands as they massage each other's bodies with oil, squeezing, caressing, and teasing each other's breasts, bottoms, stomachs, and shoulders. The extreme close-ups make it sometimes unclear as to which body parts are being massaged—the fleshiness and wetness of the image itself becoming erotic regardless (see figures I.1–I.3). As in *Cartoon le Mousse*, these two women at times appear to be facing each other. At other times, however, they approach each other from behind, above, and below. The lyrical editing, which is accompanied by a haunting soundtrack that conjoins George Crumb's "Voice of the Whale" with an Indonesian lullaby, gongs, and spacy tape effects, moves viewers from position to position in a rhythmic fashion that is neither rushed nor drawn out. In the last minute of the film, the two appear in a medium close-up for the first time. Now largely obscured by a thick wall of rain, rather than an extreme close-up, the two face each other, framed from the neck up (see figure I.4). The woman with shorter hair moves her head down, nearly out of the frame, so that she appears to be mouthing the other's breasts. After a while, the woman with longer hair moves her lover's head up. The two kiss each other deeply, and the film cuts to black. Across the film, the two women remain unperturbed by outside forces. They are instead enveloped in each other's bodies. For viewers, they are both there, in front of us on the screen, and thus in a way here with us, but also, because of the film's minimalist set and lighting, nowhere. Whereas for Muñoz, avant-garde performances of queer citizenship in the 1960s contain "an anticipatory illumination of a queer world, a sign of an actually existing queer reality," Strand's lesbians exist almost as if outside of time itself.¹⁰³ The darkness that surrounds them is not that of a dimly lit domicile. Rather, they cannot be located spatially or temporally. Their image does not signify the same certainty of their possibility to be in the future. Like Muñoz's queers, these lesbians prompt us to imagine, but the sort of lesbian existence we might imagine with or through their representation is less directed. If being lesbian has become fuller and more fleshed out than it was in *Cartoon le Mousse*, it nonetheless names a mode of existence that is both potential and impotential at once.

Strand's films have never been written about in lesbian media contexts, as they were made by a filmmaker who did not openly identify as lesbian and held only a tangential relationship to the women's movement.¹⁰⁴ Literally dark and difficult to discern, they were not taken up by early gay and lesbian cinema studies scholars interested first and foremost in matters of visibility and identification. In the decades since, queer media studies has come to question such paradigms, demonstrating that they fail to account for the

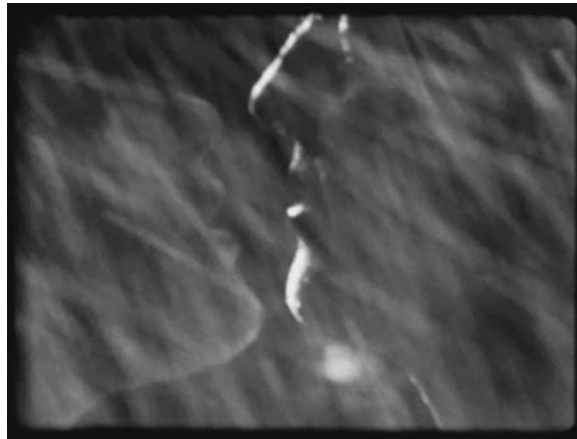


1.1-1.3 Close-up massaging in *Fever Dream* (Chick Strand, dir., 1979). Images courtesy of the Strand Family Estate and the Academy Film Archive.

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1.4 Just before the kiss and cut to black in *Fever Dream* (Chick Strand, dir., 1979). Image courtesy of the Strand Family Estate and the Academy Film Archive.



varied ways in which queer people participate in cinema's structures of desire and arguing that they can even be destructive, as they often concede to hegemonic notions of gender and sexuality.¹⁰⁵ Significantly, the creative and critical forms of lesbian spectatorship so rich in Classical Hollywood did not disappear with gay liberation. When asked about the sexual politics of *Fever Dream*, Strand rather frustratingly but also knowingly turned over the work to her audience: "You know I have no message for you. None. Unless you want to make it up. Unless you want to. But it's not my message to you, it's the message you get out of it." When pressed by Leimbacher, "So giving the responsibility to . . .," Strand interjected, "the viewer. Or giving the gift to the viewer."¹⁰⁶ In taking seriously such a gift and analyzing the work of a lesbian film not made by an out lesbian filmmaker but nonetheless made and circulated when lesbian existence was on so many people's minds, I reveal lesbian representation in the 1970s to have been about more than visibility in a positivist sense. Attempts in the 1970s to represent queer women's sexualities across media did more than simply ask their viewers to identify with their lesbian characters or celebrate the lives of particular identitarian subjects. While occasionally ontological, lesbian representation was also epistemological, interested not only in what "lesbian" was but also in thinking through what "lesbian" could *do* to divert and subvert patriarchy and heterosexism. More than mere negation, "becoming lesbian," for many feminists, precipitated "a welcome and joyful expansion of their sexual and emotional vocabularies."¹⁰⁷ Both of these films and these SF stories suggest

that such an expansion need not end there but could continue to extend with the imagination of new ways of being lesbian.

In the Archives of Lesbian Potentiality

This process of potentiality was not limited to that of the filmmaker or author. Because of feminist interest in feminist media, literature, and culture, stories such as Tiptree's and films like Strand's moved through feminist communities where their visions were taken up by audiences who articulated their own in response. While this project is invested in the imagining that creative texts uniquely made possible, the book that follows is more interested in how such lesbian potentiality circulated through the women's movement, engendering new media cultures in the process. As a result, this is a necessarily archival project.

I occasionally take up a more theoretical queer studies conception of archives, curating my own collection of cultural texts constructing the subject in question.¹⁰⁸ More often, however, I am interested in sharing research conducted in physical archives, including institutional archives (the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America at Harvard University; the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College; Special Collections at the University of Oregon; the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Film Archive; the Getty Research Institute; and the British Film Institute); noninstitutional archives (Lesbian Herstory Archives); and, on a few occasions, collections still located in participants' basements and attics. In the 1990s, queer theories of the archive were partly motivated by a distrust of institutions, whose acquisition of feminist and queer collections were feared to threaten the end of community-based collections or the straightening of history.¹⁰⁹ Like Kate Eichhorn, I have found this not, in fact, to have been the case, and like Regina Kunzel, Rachel Corbman, and other queer historians, I believe this more theoretical queer conception of the archive could only be strengthened by periodical tethering to material collections and institutions.¹¹⁰ In the mid-1990s and early 2000s, dozens of feminist collections from the 1970s were taken in by institutions such those listed earlier. This archival turn in feminism, as Eichhorn names it, has moved scholars beyond clichéd generational debates.¹¹¹ Earlier generations' feminisms have not been hurled into a scrap heap, as straight cisgender feminists such as Susan Faludi would have us believe, but have been preserved at no small cost in dollars or labor.¹¹² Far from serving as the dutiful daughters straight cis

feminists envision, researchers of younger generations, such as Eichhorn, Corbman, and I, have become active agents in such archives. How we thumb through a collection's files and receive what we find can, in fact, be quite divergent and queer. In short, the millennial archival turn has finally facilitated the meeting of feminism's concern with its own history and the queer desire for history.

In this tête-à-tête, feminist archives become plentiful sites of potentiality, lesbian and queer and yet unnamable. They produce "a space to imagine an encounter that otherwise may have remained unimaginable."¹¹³ Like a 1970s reader of a feminist SF novel or novella or a 1970s viewer of a feminist experimental film, an archival researcher occupies many space-times at once. Poring over manuscripts, correspondence, photographs, and videos, often for many hours at a time and many days in a row, one is both of one's own time and of the past, getting lost in dramas now long over and enraptured by visions of futures that never came to be. In some cases, these queer archival trysts are invited. As early as 1979, Sheldon had decided to donate materials to an archive someday and, attempting to dissuade a concerned correspondent, the author wrote, "So relent; think of that far-off PhD candidate, reverently fingering your yellowed pages with green furry fingers, and feeling you live again in the facets of her huge nocturnal eyes."¹¹⁴ This archival proximity, for many feminist, queer, and trans scholars, carries an affective dimension, as one does not simply gather information about the past but becomes caught up emotionally in the physical touch of historical matter.¹¹⁵ More than forty years later, my green furry fingers and huge nocturnal eyes have made many trips to visit Sheldon's papers in the University of Oregon's Special Collections, first as, yes, a doctoral candidate, and later as a postdoctoral scholar, assistant professor, and documentary filmmaker.¹¹⁶ Each time I leave more convinced of such collections' importance to those feminist and queer historiographies that are also transgender historiographies.

The force of lesbian potentiality and its stakes for working-class and poor women, closeted lesbians, lesbians of color, and trans and gender-nonconforming people—lesbian, out, and otherwise—became apparent when I turned away from writings of women's movement figureheads and canonical representations of lesbian existence and delved into the imaginative archives of feminist film and video organizations and feminist SF fandom. In these archives, "lesbian" attaches itself to the strangest of bedfellows, literal and figurative. Hesford argues that central to queer studies' production of the feminist-as-lesbian ghost was her figuring as whiteness.¹¹⁷ Racism remains a problem in both movements for, and in theories of, gender and sexual

liberation. This is a point lost in queer studies scholarship that capitalizes on feminist historians' writing about the women's movement as a white middle-class project and naturalizes it exclusively as such, suggesting, in contrast, that the lessons of intra-movement racism have been fully learned by later generations of scholars and activists. As historian Maylei Blackwell and sociologist Becky Thompson make clear in their histories of women of color and multiracial feminisms, the histories cited by queer studies in its dismissal of lesbian feminism are histories of hegemonic feminism that ignore the centrality of women of color to the women's movement in the 1970s, as well as contributions of white antiracist feminists.¹¹⁸ Queer studies' production of the figure of the feminist-as-lesbian has simultaneously produced women's liberation as a cisgender women's movement. Trans men and women, including trans lesbians, were active lesbian feminists and contributors to lesbian feminist cultures, including lesbian separatist spaces, as Finn Enke, Emma Heaney, and Cristan Williams demonstrate.¹¹⁹ As Enke notes, the transphobic and white-supremacist tidying of social movement histories often go hand in hand, so that, among other things, feminism might pass as a coherent subject.¹²⁰ That many queer and trans scholars do not know about such transfeminist histories is a result of a few transphobic feminists, who, because of their celebrity, have come to dominate the popular discourse about the 1970s.¹²¹ Contrary to those who reference the transphobic famed members of the movement time and again, extending their platform even in criticizing it, gender-nonconformity in 1970s feminisms abounded. That "lesbian," "feminist," and "women's" appear insufficient at marking this is partially a result of the challenges trans existence poses to historical records and archiving.¹²² It is also largely a result of the discursive work of queer studies' feminist-as-lesbian ghost.

Rather than further theorizing the hold such a past and its ghosts might have on such a present, my project pursues the past potentialities located in less familiar archives of lesbian existence, exposing ideas and imaginations contemporary feminist, queer, and trans media studies may want to imagine within the ongoing project of forging freer futures. The four chapters that follow accompany lesbian potentiality through the archives of feminist film and video and feminist science fiction. In these archives, lesbian potentiality meets the potentiality of these media, engendering new media cultures and extending the process of (im)potentiality.

Chapter 1 looks to the labor of feminist film and video distributors and feminist audiences that put lesbian potentiality into movement. At the 1975 Conference of Feminist Film and Video Organizations in New York City,

feminist media workers gathered to discuss how they might use film and video to change a society that they identified as heterosexist, classist, racist, ageist, and imperialist.¹²³ The answer lay partially in building a feminist media network through which feminist media could circulate and resources on distribution and exhibition could be shared. The chapter focuses on the National Women's Film Circuit (NWFC) and International Videoletters, two projects that emerged from the conference (and its "sister conference," the Feminist Eye Conference in Los Angeles), both of which were run by lesbian feminist media workers. As NWFC packages and International Videoletters traveled to dozens of locations, the two projects circulated the lesbian impressions of their organizers and initiated a series of intimate intellectual exchanges between US feminist communities unique to film and video. In watching and discussing feminist films and videos together, feminist spectators perceived differently together and were moved to think and feel more expansively. The individual's perception of lesbian potentiality—that internal sense that gendered and sexual life could and would someday be substantially different—gained momentum through the virtual creation of such a world within and among local feminist communities.

Chapter 2 focuses on a specific subset of documentaries that circulated through this feminist media network: feminist prison documentaries. In these documentaries, made in collaboration with lesbian feminist media workers (who took cameras into prisons under the auspices of documenting the supposed success of prison reform or as a part of the feminist-led arts programs made possible by such reforms), Black feminist theorizing of the prison-industrial complex, its racialized and gendered violences, these violences' histories, and their future abolition took on an embodied audiovisual form. Lesbian potentiality radiates out from those in front of the camera, connecting those before the camera and those behind it, as well as those in the audience, and giving their freedom dreams of futures without prisons affective force. In many 1970s "women's prisons," lesbian relationships were forbidden, and physical expressions of affection could be written up as homosexual activity, which, in turn, might lead to increased harassment, denial of parole, or nonconsensual psychiatric "treatment."¹²⁴ Lesbian existence is barely named across this small cohort of feminist prison documentaries. However, the looks, smiles, and fleeting touches between prisoners pictured often appear as if the stuff of lesbian fan fiction, connoting romantic love and sexual attraction, if not naming them outright. These intimacies around which the lesbian sign hovered are not minor, as they are inseparable from the era's fight to abolish the racist neoliberal carceral state. For those imprisoned in

the few “women’s prisons,” cisnormative segregation, spun as a matter of prisoner safety, often meant increased isolation from the public and thus greater vulnerability to abuse, including sexual violence. These documentaries contextualize lesbian potentiality as integral to the fugitive freedom dreaming and Black feminist love politics of 1970s Black feminist theory.

Chapter 3 turns to the formation of feminist science fiction fandom as a counterpublic, documenting how feminist SF writers and fans took the potentiality of the genre and made it their own. Individuals dipped in and out of feminist fandom, but the counterpublic was sustained through the regular circulation of fanzines (soon supplemented by feminist SF conventions and feminist spaces at more general conventions and, eventually, online activity). In the pages of these fanzines, as well as in the pages of the SF literature they discussed, lesbian potentiality fused with that of the genre as a whole, their collective visions of feminist futures often centering lesbian existence. Feminist SF authors and fans claimed the genre for 1970s women but also for those folks of future genders who would continue to reconfigure social life. WisCon, the international feminist SF convention, first convened in 1977 and—as of 2020—continues to meet annually. The chapter focuses on how feminist SF fans questioned, critiqued, and parodied the processes of community formation to allow, ironically, feminist SF fandom’s institutionalization. I demonstrate how, through blending practices common to lesbian feminist activism and SF fandom, complete with a specifically feminist sense of humor, feminist SF fans renewed their commitments to thinking through differences over the decades and welcoming new participants as they moved from fanzines to conventions and online spaces.

Chapter 4 examines the life, work, and influence of one very special feminist SF author, James Tiptree, Jr./Alice B. Sheldon. Studying Tip/Alli (as the author would sign SF fandom letters after being outed in *Locus* in January 1977) necessitates a rewrite of the family drama around trans inclusion in feminist genealogy as a science fiction. In studying how Tip/Alli did gender across Sheldon’s life, Tiptree’s epistolary relationships, and Tip/Alli’s reckoning with feminism, queerness, and fandom after coming out, Tip/Alli teaches us that the story of gender in the 1970s was not so simple or straightforward. This era does not belong to transphobic feminists, and trans and queer scholars should not cede it to them. That Sheldon would claim “Lesbian” late in life in conversation with both cisgender and transgender lesbian feminist authors supports my argument that in the late 1970s “Lesbian” signified something far more nebulous and dynamic than it has come to signify in more recent decades. Its potentiality, for Sheldon and

others, included exploring gender in ways that may look nonbinary or trans-masculine to us today. In writing this story of Tip/Alli and the author's influence on younger science fiction authors and fans, including via the two prizes created in the author's name, I delineate one especially generative line of descent from 1970s feminisms to twenty-first-century transfeminism.

Here, as well as in the book's epilogue on an early progeny of these two feminist media cultures—*Born in Flames* (Lizzie Borden, dir., 1983)—I model how we might rethink intergenerational relationality without rejecting it outright. Holding on to Rich while adapting and expanding on her models for lesbian feminist genealogy is central to this project. As noted earlier, Rich describes lesbian existence as that which “suggests both the fact of the historical presence of lesbians and our continuing creation of the meaning of that existence.” In her reading of Rich's 1980 essay, Hesford shifts the “our” of “our continuing creation of the meaning of [lesbian] existence” from the implied “lesbians” to “feminists,” writing immediately after quoting the line above, “It is up to us as feminists to articulate and make connections between different women in different times and spaces.”¹²⁵ This fits with Rich's own theorizing of the lesbian continuum, but it also shifts the meaning of the possessive pronoun in a fashion that facilitates the extension of Rich's work to the present. In my chapter on Tip/Alli and the epilogue that follows, I underscore the necessity of such a shift. I contend that the liberating re-imagination celebrated in Rich's essay continues, but to see it in the arguably expansive shift from “lesbians” to “feminists,” one must be open to linking the freedom of women (trans and cis), nonbinary people, trans men, and folks of other—including future—genders. The writing of feminist historiography need not stall in the face of trans existence. Trans existence does not erase, replace, or diminish cis lesbian existence. In the 1970s, those who did not conform to sexual and gender norms were working to find a vocabulary that fit, just as many are doing now. Often that was “lesbian” and “woman-identification.”¹²⁶ At other times, it was a more amorphous constellation of words, images, and affects that orbited “lesbian” and “woman identification.” Not only were trans people there all along, but we also continue to augment the forms of imagination that lesbian existence in the 1970s made possible.

Temporal Asymmetry

As a nonbinary queer scholar whose lovers have included people of many genders, I find that my embarrassing struggle to speak another generation's word stems not solely from the questionable applicability of the term for myself.

Instead, it arises from my awareness that, while we are living in the lesbian's former future, this future—our present—is not the future that 1970s lesbian feminists imagined (or, more accurately, it is not one of the futures they imagined). That such futures did not come to pass does not mark past social movements' failure. Studies that want to dismiss social movements' histories and radical imaginations for not sufficiently altering society's basic structures seemingly forget what Morgan Bassichis, Alexander Lee, and Dean Spade remind us in *Captive Genders*: "There are two major features of the second half of the twentieth century that shaped the context in which the queer and trans movement developed: (1) the active resistance and challenge by radical movement to state violence, and subsequent systematic backlash, and (2) the massive turmoil and transformation of the global economy."¹²⁷ Systemic backlash and neoliberalism have been displaced onto the critical limitations of earlier movements, whose histories are then written as tales of moral failure. I briefly explore the effects of the systemic backlash of the New Right and the rise of neoliberalism on feminist media, feminist media cultures, and lesbian potentiality in the book's epilogue. Doing as much bears witness to the breadth of the forces with which 1970s movements were contending, and within and against which social movements continue to work, at the time of this book's writing.

Lesbian Potentiality and Feminist Media in the 1970s offers a media historiography of imagination for when the present is past. That the 1970s drag for some and not for others is due to the contingency of history and the asymmetry of temporal modes.¹²⁸ Just as the future remains uncertain to those of us in the present—an anxiety that, as Kara Keeling demonstrates, motivates corporate formulations of future scenarios in addition to stimulating radical imagination¹²⁹—the past held many potentialities, its former futures including the forging of not-lesbian futures that would eclipse the era's often exclusionary lesbian lands. I am thus asking something odd of you in our reconsideration of the history of 1970s feminisms: that we think not only about what was but also about what Agamben articulated as the contingency of the past—namely, the mutual existence of what happened and what did not happen, or what could have not been but was and what could have been but was not.¹³⁰ Such attempts at thinking about history in a contingent fashion, Agamben writes, have been tempered by the irrevocability of the past or the unrealizability of the past's potentiality; by conditioned necessity or the belief that something cannot both be and not be; and by retroactive influence of future events' predictions.¹³¹ The difficulty for historians and philosophers of history to think outside of such frameworks

has caused history to have been written as a matter of will, which overrides contingency or potentiality by emphasizing agency in action and actuality.¹³² Queer studies has described lesbian feminism from the perspective of Nietzschean “counterwill,” angry that what was done cannot be undone and thus stuck with the resentful declaration of “what was.” In doing so, it ironically joins those who would rather not see this past differently, including those who are proud of how the New Right contained the era’s radicalism and transphobic feminists nostalgic for the time’s “simple” essentialisms. In acknowledging that the past could have been different, we can better see the potentiality of our own present. Lesbians, young and old, remain integral members of ongoing movements for social change. But the moment of the Lesbian as the privileged sign for the toppling of heteropatriarchy, the eradication of misogyny and homophobia, and the evolution of gender and sexual existence has closed. The ease with which “queer” itself is now being thrown in with “lesbian,” “gay,” and “bisexual” in movements toward inclusion within the institutions of marriage, military, and the prison-industrial complex suggests that the queer is likely hot on the former’s bare heels. However, the potentiality that binds even as it exceeds these names remains open to renewal.

Past, present, and future are not clearly demarcated partitions of time. They are in constant movement in relation to one another, being invoked by a historian located in time and read by a reader who, in turn, inhabits a slightly different temporal location (or many, upon rereading). In each case, the past is a former present (as well as a former future), and the future is a future present. How we affectively relate to former presents, now past, is going to constantly change (as is the “we” invoked and the “former presents,” which include “our” present). Rather than linger on the theorizing of one period’s relationality to another, the interdisciplinary methodology of potentiality proffered by the current study is intended to model an approach to social movement histories that can be adapted for future historical studies, including historical studies of former futures. In attending to the imaginations of past movements, we make more apparent the potentiality of our own present. The self-knowledge gleaned in this revised re-vision need not demand the survival of one’s identity as its reward. “We” are fighting for a freer future, just as “they” were, but what this ultimately means is sparking change in the present. Like Keeling, I do not believe utopia can be mapped through the poetic knowledge of imagination.¹³³ Nothing is more precarious than futurity. But that does not mean imagination is not imperative. In the face of activist burnout, factional divisiveness, and everyday futility and

resignation, the imagination can be that force which is most clarifying, most sustaining. Imagining with others, this project proposes, can only grow more radiant if extended from those one currently organizes with, in person and online, to include those who came before and imagined futures now past.

I invite readers to engage with *this* historiography of the Lesbian's former futures as they imagine their own futures for today. The Lesbian might get left behind in the process, our tongues turning to other namings of freedom and desire, but that need not mean potentiality is lost. It is regenerated, transformed for futures when our present is past.

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Introduction

- 1 Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," 648.
- 2 Katie King similarly refers to lesbianism as a "magical sign to feminists." In the late 1960s and early 1970s, according to King, feminism and lesbianism rubbed off on each other as a result of contiguity, lesbianism offering new senses of change or possibility for lesbians and non-lesbians alike. While King's primary cases in point are the theories of radical feminists, she quickly acknowledges women's music and writing as "offer[ing] lesbianism as a sign in a way that non-lesbians are certainly able to enjoy": King, *Theory in Its Feminist Travels*, 135. This book takes seriously the cultural work of cultural feminism and looks to two media cultures in which this signifying power of the lesbian did its most creative work.
- 3 See, e.g., Abbott and Love, *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman*; Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, 377–91; Julia Penelope Stanley and Susan J. Wolfe, "Introduction," in Stanley and Wolfe, *The Coming Out Stories*, xv–xxiv.
- 4 Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, 314–31. See also Abbott and Love, *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman*, 185–239.
- 5 Abbott and Love, *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman*, dedication.
- 6 Abbott and Love, *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman*, 217–39.
- 7 Abbott and Love, *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman*, 16.
- 8 Abbott and Love, *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman*, 16.
- 9 Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," 19.

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- 10 Warner, *The Trouble with Normal*.
- 11 Sender, *Business, Not Politics*, 174–99.
- 12 Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” 14.
- 13 Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 226–30; de Lauretis, “Queer Theory”; Warner, *The Trouble with Normal*, 33–40.
- 14 Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men*, 386–88.
- 15 Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 164–66.
- 16 Kesselman, “Coming Out, Coming In and ‘Be-Coming.’”
- 17 Kesselman, “Coming Out, Coming In and ‘Be-Coming.’”
- 18 Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” 648.
- 19 Agamben, *Potentialities*, 177.
- 20 Agamben, *Potentialities*, 177.
- 21 Agamben, *Potentialities*, 178.
- 22 Russ, *The Female Man*, 208.
- 23 Russ, *The Female Man*, 208.
- 24 Agamben, *Potentialities*, 270.
- 25 Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, 243–86.
- 26 Hogan, *The Feminist Bookstore Movement*; McKinney, *Information Activism*; Youmans, *Word Is Out*.
- 27 I am especially thinking of Alice Echols and her grouping together of feminist presses, bookstores, music labels, and credit unions as examples of cultural feminism: Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, 269–81.
- 28 A rare example of the two being even being mentioned in the same piece is Teresa de Lauretis, “Rethinking Women’s Cinema: Aesthetics and Feminist Theory” (1985), in de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender*, 127–48, which I study at length in the epilogue.
- 29 See, e.g., de Bruin-Molé, “Space Bitches, Witches, and Kick-Ass Princesses”; Sobchack, *Screening Space*, 223–305; Wood, “Feminist Icons Wanted.” Meanwhile, Judith Newton has argued that, despite its strong female hero, *Alien* (Ridley Scott, dir., 1979) is best read as an anxious response to the rise of feminism as a collective force disruptive of traditional gender roles, the sexual division of labor, and late capitalism: Newton, “Feminism and Anxiety in *Alien*.”
- 30 Coppa, “An Editing Room of One’s Own”; Henry Jenkins, “‘Layers of Meaning’: Fan Music Video and the Poetics of Poaching,” in Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 223–49; Penley, *NASA/Trek*, 113–16.
- 31 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.
- 32 Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” 648–49.
- 33 Amin, *Disturbing Attachments*, 183.
- 34 Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*.
- 35 See, e.g., Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*; Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern*; Halperin, “Forgetting Foucault”; Love, *Feeling Backward*; Nealon, *Foundlings*.
- 36 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 101.
- 37 Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 117.

- 38 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 3.
 39 Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 22.
 40 Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 222.
 41 Freeman, *Time Binds*, 62.
 42 Freeman, *Time Binds*, 65.
 43 Hesford, *Feeling Women's Liberation*, 230–31.
 44 Hesford, *Feeling Women's Liberation*, 6.
 45 Hesford, *Feeling Women's Liberation*, 2.
 46 Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian*. See also Patricia White, “Female Spectator, Lesbian Spector,” in White, *Uninvited*, 61–93. Hesford, *Feeling Women's Liberation*, 15.
 47 Hesford, *Feeling Women's Liberation*, 14–15, 23–24.
 48 Hesford, *Feeling Women's Liberation*, 16.
 49 Hesford, *Feeling Women's Liberation*, 248.
 50 “Cisgender” demarcates a person whose gender has remained consistent with that assigned at birth. I add it here for specificity. Anne Koedt did not herself use it. It was not a term available to her for use at the time.
 51 Koedt, “The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm,” 199–202.
 52 Koedt, “The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm,” 206.
 53 Koedt recognizes the importance of fantasy to sexual pleasure as well as many women’s enjoyment of vaginal penetration, but their significance gets downplayed in her emphasis on physical climax.
 54 Koedt, “The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm,” 206.
 55 Agamben, *Potentialities*, 182.
 56 Hesford, *Feeling Women's Liberation*, 132.
 57 While Abbott and Love are not commonly credited as authors of “The Woman Identified Woman,” Artemis March, who is, has credited Abbott with its perhaps most famous line: “A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion”: Humm, “Sidney Was a Right-on Woman.”
 58 Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, 215–19; Shugar, *Separatism and Women's Community*, 26.
 59 Radicalesbians, “The Woman Identified Woman,” 241.
 60 Radicalesbians, “The Woman Identified Woman,” 242.
 61 Radicalesbians, “The Woman Identified Woman,” 245.
 62 Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” (1978), in Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 59.
 63 Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” 657.
 64 Atkinson, *Amazon Odyssey*, 132.
 65 Atkinson, *Amazon Odyssey*, 134.
 66 Agamben, *Potentialities*, 178–79.
 67 Hesford, *Feeling Women's Liberation*, 145.
 68 Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” 637.
 69 Shugar, *Separatism and Women's Community*, 57–58.
 70 Shugar, *Separatism and Women's Community*, 90–91.
 71 Douglas, “A Feminist Nation,” 22.

- 72 Shugar, *Separatism and Women's Community*, 91.
- 73 Killer Dykes, "Sexist Pig Oppressors . . . Beware!," 3.
- 74 Ginny Berson, untitled editorial, *The Furies*, vol. 1, no. 1, January 1972, 1. For further details of the collective's founding, see Beemyn, *A Queer Capital*, 193–204; Valk, *Radical Sisters*, 135–57.
- 75 Valk, *Radical Sisters*, 139.
- 76 Berson, untitled editorial, 1; Valk, *Radical Sisters*, 139.
- 77 Coletta Reid, "Ideology: Guide to Action," *The Furies*, vol. 1, no. 3, March–April 1972, 6.
- 78 Charlotte Bunch, "Notes for the Cell Meeting, January, 1972," Joan E. Biren Papers, box 1.
- 79 Berson, untitled editorial, 1.
- 80 Valk, *Radical Sisters*, 150.
- 81 Valk, *Radical Sisters*, 150–51.
- 82 Coletta Reid, "Details," *The Furies*, vol. 1, no. 5, June–July 1972, 7.
- 83 Reid, "Details," 7.
- 84 Valk, *Radical Sisters*, 136–49.
- 85 JEB, "Come Outside," *The Furies*, vol. 1, no. 5, June–July 1972, 10–11.
- 86 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*.
- 87 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.
- 88 Aristotle, quoted in Agamben, *Potentialities*, 183.
- 89 Agamben, *Potentialities*, 183.
- 90 Agamben, *Potentialities*, 184.
- 91 Agamben, *Potentialities*, 183–84.
- 92 Le Guin, "Is Gender Necessary?," 132.
- 93 Tiptree, "Houston, Houston, Do You Read?," 79.
- 94 Tiptree, "Houston, Houston, Do You Read?," 98.
- 95 Phillips, *James Tiptree, Jr.*, 312. Examples of Sheldon's assuaging letters to male fans and critics can be found in Alice B. Sheldon, Pen Name James Tiptree, Jr., Papers (hereafter, Sheldon Papers), boxes 61–83. However, on October 23, 1976, Tiptree (before being outed as Alice B. Sheldon) privately wrote to Joanna Russ, "I'm not afraid of male irrelevancy; I believe in it. It was the *point* of my HOUSTON story": Joanna Russ Papers, box 10.
- 96 James Tiptree, Jr., in Smith, *Symposium*, 22. For more on the *Khatru* symposium, including the chastising of Tiptree by Russ and others for his binary thinking, see chapter 3. For letters from male fans and critics, see Sheldon Papers, boxes 61–83.
- 97 Rich, "When We Dead Awaken," 18.
- 98 Rich, "When We Dead Awaken," 19.
- 99 Rich, "When We Dead Awaken," 19.
- 100 Even as I critique the essay elsewhere in this manuscript, my analysis here is indebted to Claire Johnston's writing on Woman as a sign and myth of Classical Hollywood: Claire Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema," in Johnston, *Notes on Women's Cinema*, 24–31.

- 101 Agamben, *Potentialities*, 180–81.
- 102 Leimbacher and Strand, “An Introduction to the Films of Chick Strand,” 131.
- 103 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 49.
- 104 Perhaps due to avant-garde film studies’ indebtedness to art history and literary studies, biography plays an integral role in much of avant-garde film scholarship. When combined with traditional understandings of feminist and gay and lesbian politics, whereby declaring allegiance and identification with such causes (or, at least, knowledge of filmmaker’s sexual practices, despite any disavowal, as in the case of Kenneth Anger) is given precedence, many women’s experimental films that might otherwise be read as “lesbian” have not been. David E. James has done work to contextualize Chick Strand’s feminism: James, *The Most Typical Avant-Garde*, 357–67.
- 105 See, e.g., Keeling, “Joining the Lesbians”; White, *Uninvited*.
- 106 Leimbacher and Strand, “An Introduction to the Films of Chick Strand,” 148.
- 107 Kesselman, “Coming Out, Coming In and ‘Be-Coming.’”
- 108 See, e.g., Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*; Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*.
- 109 In addition to *An Archive of Feeling*, see Cvetkovich, “In the Archives of Lesbian Feelings.”
- 110 Regina Kunzel, in Arondekar et al., “Queer Archives,” 229; Corbman, “Does Queer Studies Have an Anti-empiricism Problem?”
- 111 Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism*, 31.
- 112 Faludi, “American Electra.” I also owe much here to Eichhorn’s critique of Faludi: Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism*, 21–27.
- 113 Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism*, 60.
- 114 “The Three Faces of Sylvester Mule” (Sheldon) to Charles Brown, letter, March 23, 1979, Sheldon Papers, box 63.
- 115 Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism*, 60–61. See, e.g., Cifor, “Presence, Absence, and Victoria’s Hair”; McKinney, *Information Activism*.
- 116 I am currently in production on *Tip/Alli*, a documentary about the life, work, and influence of James Tiptree, Jr./Alice B. Sheldon.
- 117 Hesford, *Feeling Women’s Liberation*, 17–19.
- 118 Blackwell, *¡Chicana Power!*, 20; Thompson, “Multiracial Feminism,” 337–60.
- 119 Enke, “Collective Memory and the Transfeminist 1970s”; Heaney, “Women-Identified Women”; Williams, “Radical Inclusion.”
- 120 Enke, “Collective Memory and the Transfeminist 1970s,” 12–13.
- 121 Enke, “Collective Memory and the Transfeminist 1970s,” 18; Heaney, “Women-Identified Women,” 139.
- 122 Rawson, “Introduction.”
- 123 “An Ongoing Manifesto,” February 2, 1975, Ariel Dougherty Papers, box 15; Biren Papers, box 64.
- 124 Thuma, *All Our Trials*, 112–13.
- 125 Hesford, *Feeling Women’s Liberation*, 247.
- 126 Heaney, “Women-Identified Women,” 137–45.

- 127 Bassichis et al., "Building an Abolitionist Trans and Queer Movement with Everything We've Got," 25.
- 128 Gaines, *Pink-Slipped*, 43–44, 95–131.
- 129 Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures*, 1–13.
- 130 Agamben, *Potentialities*, 243–71.
- 131 Agamben, *Potentialities*, 261–64.
- 132 Agamben, *Potentialities*, 267–68.
- 133 Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures*, 84.

Chapter One. Feminist Media in Movement

Epigraphs: Villarejo, *Lesbian Rule*, 6–7; Joan E. Biren, "Moonforce Media Interview," Feminist Radio Network, May 1978, Biren Papers, cassette 225.

- 1 A few of the feminist media organizations that contributed to this range of work were the Just Us Video Collective, Berkeley, California; the Feminist Videotape Collective, New York City; Lesbians Organized for Video Experience (LOVE), New York City; the Rochester Women's Video Collective; the Santa Cruz Women's Media Collective; the Tucson Feminist Media Collective; and the Spectra Feminist Media Project, Washington, DC.
- 2 The Women's Film Co-op of Northampton, one such early distributor, described its work by saying, "Our priority is for feminist films to get seen and made. We are non-competitive and therefore more than willing to refer women/community groups to other sources, and suggest ways in which films can be combined in order to present different facets or historical developments of issues. Many of the groups that rent our films are poor (unless they're universities)—and we often waive the rentals in this case. Filmmakers, therefore, don't get a huge return on being distributed by us, though we do think it's important for people to get paid for their labor. But women filmmakers have had a hard time getting their films distributed (and often when they have been accepted by a distribution company, their films are buried)—we get the films to women's audiences while the films are relevant—and we are also committed to relaying criticism/support from our own and audience reactions back to the filmmaker, many of whom say that they've rarely had that feedback and concern": Women's Film Co-op catalog, Joan E. Biren Papers (hereafter, Biren Papers), box 64.
- 3 Fallica, "More than 'Just Talk.'"
- 4 "The relationship between the Feminist Eye Conference and the Conference of Feminist Film and Video Organizations marked the beginnings of a national feminist film and video network. We sprang up independently, and then discovered also that we had the same goals and shared values": Frances Reid and Cathy Zheutlin, "Statement of Relation," March 14, 1975, Biren Papers, box 64.
- 5 Reid and Zheutlin, "Statement of Relation."