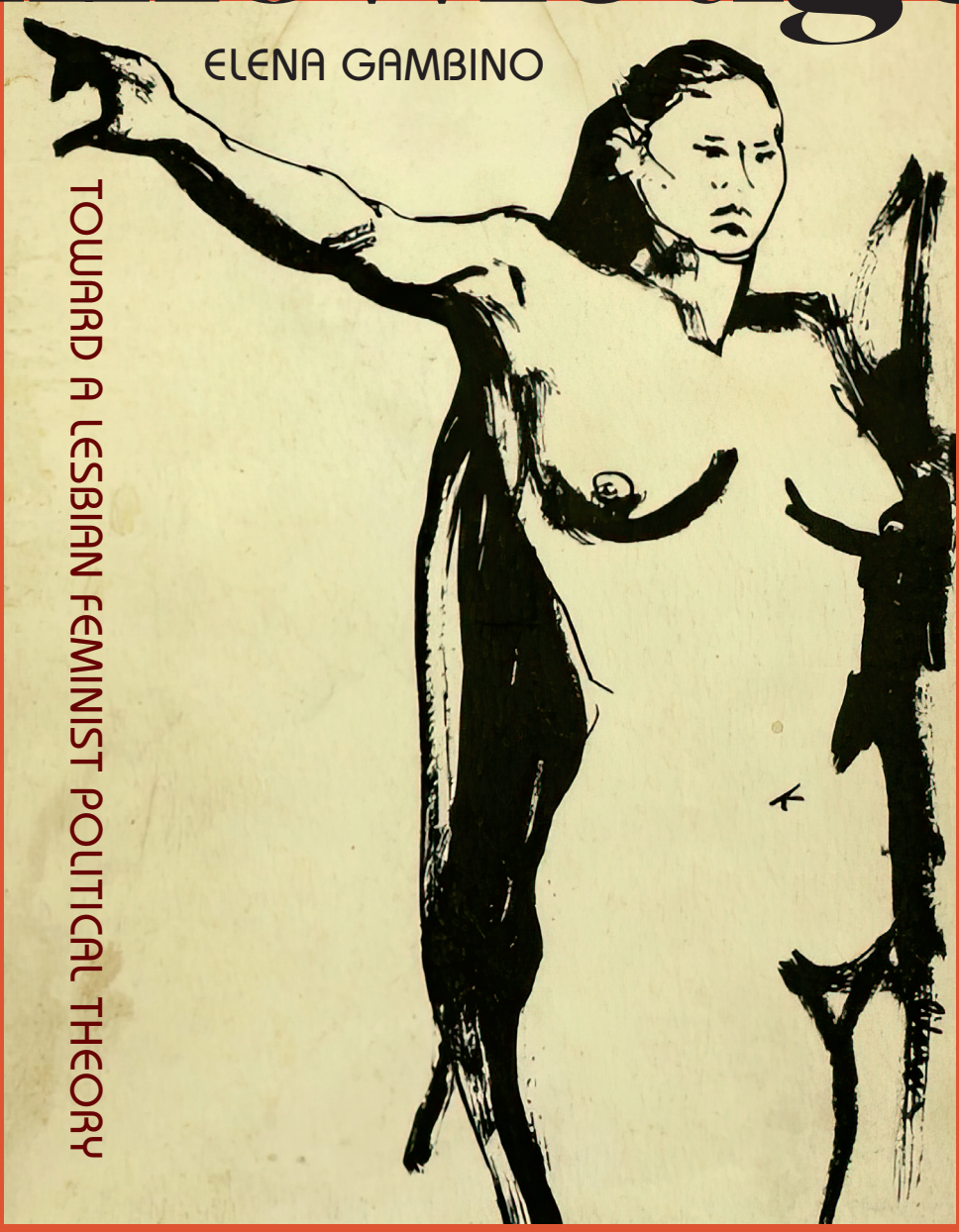
Erotic Knowledge

ELENA GAMBINO

TOWARD A LESBIAN FEMINIST POLITICAL THEORY



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INTRODUCTION

US Lesbian Feminism Beyond and Beside the Waves

Some ideas are not really new but keep having to be affirmed from the ground up, over and over.
—Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born*

The scene at the conference *The Second Sex*—Thirty Years Later was chaotic. It was September 27, 1979—the third full day of activities at the conference, which brought nearly a thousand feminist academics and activists to New York University's campus to debate the future of feminist theory. According to Carol Anne Douglas, who covered the event for the feminist magazine *off our backs* (*oob*), the event was billed as the most comprehensive reevaluation of feminist theory to date: "Speakers would include," she wrote in *oob*, "academics, radical feminists, lesbian feminists (although the word 'lesbian' was not mentioned in the program), socialist feminists, and feminists I am not sure how to describe."[1] Frictions, of course, were to be expected. "The express purpose of the conference," as Jessica Benjamin, one of the conference's organizers, would later put it, "was to make sure that we included as many groups as possible and had an open discussion of all differences"—and these differences were sure to yield some disagreements.[2] But no one seemed to anticipate what would happen in the conference's final hours: a deep, divisive explosion over the wounds of racism and homophobia within feminism.

The explosion, according to the conference participants, was precipitated by Audre Lorde's speech "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House."[3] In the open mic session following her speech, which was

the last programmed event of the day, issues of internal racism and homophobia that had simmered just below the surface for three days finally erupted. According to Douglas, once Lorde finished her speech, attendees jumped to the microphone:

> One woman said she thought this conference lagged behind the movement as a whole in dealing with Black women because it took place in academia.
>
> Another woman said, "We lesbians have helped you women with analysis, put on conferences, worked on abortion, rape, child abuse, etc. When are you going to do something for us?" . . .
>
> A member of the planning committee said she was a bit disturbed at all of the criticisms of the planning. "We have planned for a whole year. We know it has problems. But have you ever been at a conference where hundreds of women have discussed heterosexuality and lesbianism the way we have? I'd like to do the same with race."
>
> Jessica Benjamin said that it was past time to end the conference. Should we cut off speaking at the mike? The audience, tired of the lack of time for discussion, screamed, "No!"[4]

At face value, the scene at the *Second Sex* conference reflects lingering impressions of feminism on the cusp of the 1980s: Confronted with difficult political questions about whether feminist analysis could adequately theorize racial difference and sexual diversity in feminist terms, a wide array of feminist conferences and planning sessions, from the 1981 meeting of the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) to Barnard College's 1982 Conference on Sexuality and the Women in Print conference's 1985 meeting, are remembered for fiery speeches about the harms of lingering racism, homophobia, and sexual conservatism. These eruptions brought to the surface some of the most challenging questions about feminist politics at the time: How would white, or straight, or academically elite participants respond to the analyses of harm that these moments generated? What changes to the institutional structure of feminist theory and activism would need to be undertaken in order for those responsible to be held accountable, or for these harms to be repaired? And how would these changes alter the very grammar of feminist theory?

Erotic Knowledge is a book about how to understand moments like these: moments in which dense and overlapping entanglements—between iconic thinkers like Lorde and their diverse audiences, between radical new ideas and the existing institutions that constrained their emergence, and between powerful critiques of racist, sexist, and homophobic structures and

the political actions they invited—produced intensely generative scenes of conflict and creativity. This book reads these scenes collectively across institutional contexts and genres, arguing that they are so many traces of a distinctive mode of political theorizing and organizing that I refer to, following those who forged these arguments and negotiated their responses, as *lesbian feminism*.

Throughout this book I define *lesbian feminism* capaciously to refer to a plural and dynamic political movement of avowed lesbians that flourished from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s, primarily in the United States. The lesbian feminists who populate this book worked in all corners of the US feminist movement, and nearly all the figures I trace throughout this book appeared at the *Second Sex*, Barnard, NWSA, and Women in Print conferences to take up the work of theorizing and writing alongside one another. They were amateur and professional poets, academics, publishers, and editors; they trained one another to use mimeograph machines and card catalogs; they donated letters, photographs, and personal histories to independent publications and community archives; they organized and attended conferences and protests, poetry readings and editorial meetings, consciousness-raising sessions and open mic talk-backs. Most important, they did so in the service of their commitment to the political possibilities they saw in cultivating the intimate, epistemic, and institutional relationships that might flourish through the enactment of the erotic between women.

While scholars have used various descriptions of this commitment—for instance, *cultural feminism*, *woman-identification*, *separatism*, and *political lesbianism*—I argue that what actually united this expansive set of individuals and practices was a central, organizing insight about power. Power under white heteropatriarchy, these women argued, is fundamentally "arrogant": It enables and sustains political relationships marked by irresponsibility, unaccountability, and asymmetry. Inhabiting or exercising power, these feminists argued, means relating to others arrogantly: assuming that others exist only in relation to oneself, holding that one's *perception* of others obligates them to act in ways that conform to those perceptions, supposing that failure to meet these arrogant expectations is justification for violence, coercion, exclusion, or punishment. As Marilyn Frye defines the concept, arrogant perception underwrites and legitimizes the exercise of all sorts of intimate, epistemic, and institutional forms of power. If, as Frye argues, the "arrogant perceiver is a teleologist" who "does not countenance the possibility that the Other is independent" from him, he also "coerces the objects of his perception into satisfying the conditions his perception imposes."[5] Thus, she continues:

> The arrogant perceiver's expectation creates in the space about him a sort of vacuum mold into which the other is sucked and held. . . . His perception is arrogating; his senses tell him that the world and everything in it (with the occasional exception of other men) is in the nature of things there *for* him, that she is by her constitution and *telos* his servant. He believes his senses. If woman does not serve man, it can only be because he is not a sufficiently skilled master or because there is something wrong with the woman. He may try to manage things better, but when that fails he can only conclude that she is defective: unnatural, flawed, broken, abnormal, damaged, sick. His norms of virtue and health are set according to the degree of congruence of the object of perception with the seer's interests. This is exactly wrong.[6]

This passage in Frye is deceptively simple: Beneath the quasi-psychological analysis she offers of an individual man is a trenchant critique of how arrogant perception not only organizes intimate relationships between individuals but also underwrites common assumptions in historical, normative, and political frames and values; it is the dynamic that underwrites conditions of deviance, invisibility, hypervisibility, and misappropriation for marginalized groups. As lesbian feminists well understood, struggling against conditions of arrogant power meant not only becoming politicized (as the "personal is political" narrative might have it) but coming to terms with how one's appearance in the scene of the political is weaponized, diverted, or miscast in the service of someone else's ends. As I argue throughout this book, for lesbian feminists, this concept of arrogance organizes shared insights about the way power functions across intimate, epistemic, and institutional contexts to engender asymmetrical, unaccountable, and irresponsible political relationships.

Just as important as their insight about the kinds of "perceptions" that underwrite white heteropatriarchy in Frye's essay, though, were lesbian feminists' shared insights about how deeply arrogant perception could pervert and undermine both intimate and political relationships *between women*, especially across lines of race, class, and coloniality. In an iconic essay that is today largely read outside of the lesbian feminist context, for instance, Maria Lugones grapples with and extends Frye's analysis of arrogant power, arguing that this sort of manipulative perception also characterizes relationships between women across racial differences, political identifications, and even generations. As Lugones puts it, "As a child, I was taught to perceive arrogantly. I have also been the object of arrogant perception. Though I am

not a White/Anglo woman, it is clear to me that I can understand both my childhood training as an arrogant perceiver and my having been the object of arrogant perception without any reference to White/Anglo men, which is some indication that the concept of arrogant perception can be used cross-culturally and that White/Anglo men are not the only arrogant perceivers."[7] Thus, for Lugones, to the extent that "women are taught to perceive many other women arrogantly," we might understand these differences as so many barriers to loving—which is to say noncoercive, mutually accountable—relationships between women. "I am concerned with women as arrogant perceivers," Lugones writes, "because I want to explore further what it is to love women."[8] Indeed, "to the extent that we learn to perceive others arrogantly," Lugones writes, "we fail to identify with them—fail to love them—in this particularly deep way."[9]

More than anything else, then, lesbian feminists believed that their feminist politics would require a fundamental transformation in the intimate, epistemic, and institutional relationships between women; because existing conceptions of both intimate and political relationships are premised on arrogant power, making world-constituting accountability between women a *political* reality as much as an erotic one would require radically different theoretical concepts of political authority, history, and institutions, on the one hand, and embodied practices of intimate solidarity, accountability, and coalition, on the other. To interrogate and uproot arrogant power in all areas of their emotional, erotic, and institutional lives, lesbian feminists developed a set of overlapping practices that spanned academic, aesthetic, and institutional grammars. They founded periodicals and presses, gathered at conferences and poetry readings, built bookstores and meeting spaces, and participated in the everyday work of scrutinizing their relationships to themselves, their sexual encounters, their histories, and their institutional contexts.

Together, I argue, these overlapping practices constitute a kind of *erotic knowledge* that is intersectional at its very core; that is, they aimed to understand and unwork the ways that women might exert arrogant power toward one another and, in so doing, to struggle against the ways that lesbian erotics in the broader political scene have long been misnamed, undermined, and rendered both hypervisible and apparitional. Racism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, imperialism, classism: Each of these dimensions of power, for lesbian feminists, represented an axis on which arrogant power might flourish, and therefore on which mutually accountable relationships between women might founder. On a basic level, this kind of thinking is apparent in the description of the open mic session following Lorde's "Master's Tools" speech,

just as it is apparent in Lorde's iconic speech itself. Beneath the clamor and chaos, one can hear the deep desire to identify, disentangle, and undo the knotted and intersecting ways that arrogant power manifests in shared contexts like conferences. This book offers many other examples of written texts, institutional spaces, and political theories that I argue, together, constitute a structural critique of arrogant power, all of which share the feature of having centered the ways that unaccountability and irresponsibility produce relationships that obscure and misrecognize the marginalized, distort reality toward the ends of the powerful, and undermine possibilities for transformative change.

Throughout this book I focus in particular on US-based lesbian feminist activism. At one level, this geographic emphasis on the United States reflects the specific context in which these figures lived, worked, and wrote. The networks of poets, bookwomen, and activists who populate this book were deeply informed by and engaged with the US political and intellectual context from the 1960s through the 1980s: They were active in political spaces such as the antiwar movement and the New Left, the civil rights movement, gay liberation and radical feminism, and the struggle against Reaganomics and the "moral majority," on the one hand, and engaged in radical changes in the US intellectual scene, such as the rise of poststructuralist ideas about history and narratology, on the other. As I argue throughout this book, lesbian feminists not only were affected by these shifts in the US political and intellectual context but played a radically underappreciated role in shaping how these transformations played out both in the United States and beyond over the course of several decades.

Importantly, however, I have largely bracketed the transnational dimension of these writers' works in this book. Such concerns—which include close interrogation of politics in the Soviet Union, efforts to establish lines of solidarity between US and Latin American feminist organizations, strong critiques of the nuclear threat and US militarization, efforts to problematize global development and corporatization in "postcolonial" spaces like South Asia and the Middle East, and the campaign to end apartheid in South Africa—were not only matters of deep personal and political importance to the protagonists of this book but are urgent and pressing questions for feminists today.[10] While I understand US lesbian feminist approaches to transnationalism to be an extension of the ideas that I develop here, I've elected to focus on the United States—and, to a large extent, the even more local contexts of specific journals, conferences, and literary networks—to make

space for an organic close reading of these thinkers and the resonances between and among them that are often ignored. To the extent that I bracket the transnational dimensions of this work, it is in the interest of historicizing the institutional and intellectual responses to these concerns within a specific milieu of lesbian feminists who are seldom read together for the distinctive approach they developed. Like scholars such as Clare Hemmings and Jennifer Nash, my interest is in unpacking and (re)historicizing a set of intimate and institutional spaces that would become "critical actor[s] in feminism's institutional histories."[11] Thus, my reading of US lesbian feminism as responsive to and embedded in a particular set of political and intellectual concerns in the United States and the American academy is not aimed at ignoring or excluding the transnational but rather at identifying how Black, women of color, and lesbian feminist responses to a set of global problematics were cultivated in and through a set of granular intimate, epistemic, and institutional practices at a local level.

At the same time, this method does not preclude conversation with thinkers whose work emerges in other places and times; for example, as lesbian feminist "bookwomen" well understood, a more transnational context opens up important conceptual insights and political solidarities across borders during the 1980s, including attention to leftist struggles in Central America, the Middle East, and South Africa that are as important to recognize today as ever. In fact, reading US-based lesbian feminist works in relation to transnational feminism produced from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s reveals important political, intellectual, and genealogical insights about *both* US feminism and transnational feminism more broadly. As such, *Erotic Knowledge* develops a conception of their intersectional thinking that resists a common framing of feminism that "demands the knowing, naming, and thus stabilizing of identity across space and time."[12] I argue that returning to the US political and intellectual context for lesbian feminism shows how we (especially those of us living and working in the United States) might reimagine intersectional accountability as a relational practice that refuses arrogant power in *all* its intimate, epistemic, and institutional forms. I see this granular contextual work as essential to combating harmful contemporary claims to lesbian identity that are mobilized on behalf of transphobic exclusion and discourses of homonationalism, among other troubling trends that make claims to lesbian history in contemporary politics.[13] I return to this point in the epilogue of the book, where I argue that the forms of erotic knowledge that were developed in these local networks in the United States

led participants into the shared work of undoing the hierarchies of legibility or epistemic authority, including US empire, that underpin arrogant power across various overlapping but distinct contexts.

To make this case, I read scenes like the *Second Sex*—Thirty Years Later conference—along with myriad other examples in conference rooms, in the pages of lesbian periodicals and presses, in bookstores and community forums—as erotic spaces fraught with difficult questions about the legibility and legitimacy of participants whose desire for one another was articulated in sexual, intellectual, and social terms, often all at the same time: When someone speaks "as a lesbian," whom are they speaking to or about? What audience do they expect will respond to their claims? Who has the authority to speak for the group, and whose responsibility is it to listen? Whose responsibility is it to *account* for harm, and what might repair look like? Lesbian feminist responses to such questions—indeed, those written by transnational lesbians, US lesbians of color, and white lesbians—involved a recognition that more just intimate, epistemic, and institutional relationships between women both in the United States and transnationally would require a conscious disinvestment from the forms of arrogant perception that structure racial hierarchies and a fundamental transformation in shared concepts of intimacy, authority, and accountability.

IDENTITY POLITICS AND THE WAVE NARRATIVE

If *Erotic Knowledge* makes the case that seemingly chaotic scenes like Lorde's divisive appearance at the *Second Sex* conference in fact suggest a distinctive, coherent, and transformative lesbian feminist politics, though, this reading is not how this body of thought has gone down in the annals of feminist history. In the face of the open mic's vociferous complaints, for instance, the conference organizers were both frustrated and baffled: "Despite the fact that we had organized the conference to address differences among women," Benjamin writes, "the audience largely consisted of many women ready to protest that their group had been excluded."[14] What had begun as a comprehensive attempt to cover "what is and isn't being done in feminist theory at the moment," in Douglas's words, quickly began to simmer with unspoken frustrations—frustrations that boiled over, according to Benjamin, in the explosion of "a discourse that was brand new to all of us: that of identity politics."[15] Contemporary readers might sense the resentment in Benjamin's statement, which she penned in 2000 in defense of her work on the conference. By invoking the phrase *identity politics* to describe her frustration with

the unexpected protests over racism and homophobia, she evokes a trope that contemporary feminist and queer theorists have all but worn out: the sense that the 1980s were a time of division and impasse over the lived differences between women. Under this common framing, the 1980s were a period in which resentments over feminism's exclusivity, internal policing, and growing acrimony were bubbling over, only to be left unresolved, unheard, and unaltered; indeed, today the phrase *identity politics* invokes what are commonly understood to be the flawed and ultimately unsuccessful ways that lesbian feminists during the 1980s proposed to deal with racial, sexual, and class differences between women.

Many critiques of the period begin, for example, by invoking arguments like Alice Echols's condemnation of "cultural feminism" in *Daring to Be Bad*. Cultural feminism, for Echols, was the strand of feminist practice, fueled by the "gay/straight split," in which lesbian feminists "turned [feminism's] attention away from opposing male supremacy to creating a female counterculture. . . . [In cultural feminism], the focus became one of personal rather than social transformation."[16] Typically, when feminist theorists invoke cultural feminism today, they do so to castigate these thinkers for having turned away from politics. As Bonnie Honig argues in her analysis of Bernice Johnson Reagon's iconic speech "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century," for example, lesbian-centric cultural spaces such as bookstores, music festivals, and poetry readings had, by the 1980s, turned into spaces of "homelike refuge" that threatened the more democratic possibilities of feminist politics.[17] Arguing that "the dream of home" that such cultural spaces engender is dangerous because it encourages a "zealotry" that "takes shape as a propensity either to withdraw from conflicts or to conquer them," Honig goes on to suggest that politics requires us to "accept the impossibility of the conventional home's promised safety from conflict, dilemmas, and difference."[18] Honig's reading of feminist cultural spaces of the 1980s is typical of such "agonistic" arguments: Set against the more *political* backdrop of contestation and struggle, *cultural* spaces appear as apolitical refuges to be resignified or left behind altogether. When theorists and historians describe the 1980s as a time of fracture and fatigue, then, much of the blame tends to rest on lesbians for having relied on merely cultural understandings of feminism: Because so-called cultural feminists—lesbians—were obsessed with elevating a gynocentric culture above the frontline struggle over sexual freedom, they are responsible for enabling a problematic attachment to identity against which feminism in the 1990s had to assert itself.

As both Echols's and Honig's analyses of the weakness of lesbian cultural feminism at the expense of radical feminism's more agonistic political

dimensions suggest, implicit in the moniker are the charges of lesbian feminism's other purported deadly sins: essentialism, reactionary conservatism, and an antidemocratic tendency to privilege one (white, middle-class, cisgender) standpoint over all others. As Victoria Hesford argues, the "feminist-as-lesbian" has "tended to be the figure through which generalized perceptions of second-wave feminism have been organized as memory in the academy and in queer and feminist subcultures. . . . [S]he often stands for the perceived essentialism of second-wave feminism and for the limits of its cross-class and cross-race alliances."[19] Hesford's claim is borne out in myriad reflections on the supposed shortcomings of 1980s lesbian feminism. In her reflections on her own experience in a lesbian separatist community, for instance, Kathy Rudy argues that lesbian feminist politics is a fundamentally essentialist endeavor. Rudy claims that while essentialism as an ideology "was, for many of us for a very long time, a very viable politic," its flaws were also apparent from the beginning: "Class, race, regional, or religious issues and struggles were forced into secondary positions or overlooked entirely. We [lesbians] began policing ourselves in order to guarantee that our members were faithful to the principle of putting women first."[20] Because lesbians spent considerable time and energy promoting a universal women's culture that required them to police their own internal unity, Rudy argues that critiques of exclusivity by lesbians of color *outside* the relatively homogeneous white lesbian community set a process of fracture—what Echols called the "eruption of difference"—in motion: "As white, middle class lesbian feminists read [lesbian of color] works, we began to realize that the things we thought of as essential to womanness—and upon which lesbian feminist politics had been built—largely described white, middle class women."[21] Difference thus "directly clashed" with the tenets of lesbian cultural feminism: "A posture of openness to all," she writes, "was difficult to take up in a community built on exclusionary politics."[22]

More recently, the narrative about lesbian feminist identity politics as creating apolitical, exclusionary spaces has become all the more complex and fraught given its contemporary entanglements with the claims of both white feminists and so-called trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs). For these groups, who claim a version of lesbian feminist history rooted in bio-essentialist arguments about a universal "women's experience" and the sanctity of a shared "women's culture" over and above racial, colonial, or trans specificity, lesbian feminism has become an authorizing position that legitimizes deeply harmful claims about the need to "protect" lesbian spaces from imagined infiltration and degradation. As Zein Murib shows, bio-essentialist

claims that privilege a deeply exclusionary conception of who counts as women—and therefore whose political claims are important enough to be heard—have their roots in a certain strand of lesbian feminist thinking.[23] Indeed, although I would argue that TERFish arguments about how attending to race and gender identity undermines feminism are deeply at odds with the analysis of arrogant power that animated lesbian feminism, figures like Janice Raymond and Robin Morgan, whose bio-essentialist viewpoints about the essence of women's universal experience brought together the worst of gender essentialist and racist feminisms, indeed fed on the grammar of "women's culture" that circulated during the 1970s.[24] These arguments have found renewed life in a strand of contemporary argumentation that uses lesbian feminism to authorize claims that transwomen are intruders into marginalized "women's spaces" and suggests that attention to intersectional feminisms and critical race theory has "erased women." This has only strengthened the notion that lesbian feminist politics are a regrettable, forgettable, and failed political project.

Taken together, these three associations with lesbian feminism—that they were engaged in an enervating cultural feminism; that the myth of a common or universal women's culture was used to police and suppress racial, sexual, or political differences; and that this cultural policing was expressed most pointedly in women-first policies that continue to enable trans exclusion and racism to flourish today—are foundational pillars supporting the so-called wave narrative of feminism's past. In this narrative there is a distinct rupture between the essentialist and exclusionary cultural politics of the second wave of feminism during the 1980s and the trans-inclusive, queer, and intersectional third-wave politics of the 1990s and beyond. On this common reading, recognizing and rejecting the failures of previous feminist iterations—such as identity politics—is a crucial maneuver, because it pushes feminists to acknowledge the limitations of their own frameworks, moving from a singular emphasis on white, middle-class cis women to a broadened horizon that acknowledges the fluctuations of women's identities across lines of race, class, sexual and gender identity, nationality, religion, disability, and so on.

In contrast to this commonplace narrative, in what follows I argue that, however much accounts like Benjamin's, Echols's, Rudy's, and even contemporary TERFs' seem to tell a transparent historical story about lesbian feminist theory's unfolding from radical politics to fracture, and from fracture to essentialist cultural feminism and identity politics, this narrative about identity, essentialism, and uncritical gynocentrism does not tell the whole story of the lesbian feminist 1980s, nor does it explain how more

contemporary feminist ideas emerged in and through this rich archive of feminist theory making. In returning to scenes like the *Second Sex* conference and many similar scenes throughout the 1980s, I argue that the common framing of this era of lesbian theorizing as primarily concerned with an essentialist, exclusionary identity is an egregious oversimplification.

Consider again Douglas's depiction of the *Second Sex* conference. However inadvertently, the description of the open mic session following Lorde's "Master's Tools" speech highlights a different reality of lesbian feminism than the one on offer by either critics of cultural feminism or the TERFs who supposedly defend it. A second glance at the conversation following Lorde's speech reveals how deeply entangled claims about the status of lesbian and Black identities within feminist circles were. That the grievances of Black (and) lesbian feminists could be articulated as overlapping in the open mic session reveals that, on the eve of the 1980s, Black (and) lesbian women felt themselves to be vulnerable to erasure, invisibility, or exclusion in interlocking ways—vulnerable, indeed, in ways that could be coarticulated in terms of arrogant power. On the other hand, if the *Second Sex* conference offers a window into a more racially and sexually dynamic 1980s feminism than is often depicted in contemporary academic work, then this book argues that this profoundly generative era of thinking ought to prompt a reevaluation of how and why feminist grammars have moved away from recognizing these scenes as politically dynamic or relevant to contemporary feminist struggles.

This book, at its most basic, works toward such a reevaluation of US lesbian feminism—both on its own terms and in relation to contemporary feminist questions—by probing what I argue are the deeply intersectional politics of lesbian feminist "erotic knowledges" during the 1980s. On the eve of the 1980s, feminists were engaged in a dialogue about what it meant—and what it *could* mean—to speak for, with, and about other women across sexual and racial differences. *Erotic Knowledge* thus attempts to rethink lesbian feminism "beyond the waves" in two overlapping ways. First, I argue alongside a growing chorus of feminist historians who emphasize the centrality of intersectional thinking for *both* lesbians of color and white lesbians and contest the idea that "second-wave" politics were inherently flawed by their exclusive, or even primary, emphasis on white middle-class women. This body of scholarship has moved significantly beyond thinking about the women's, gay, and queer liberation movements as unfolding linearly as feminists gradually come to grasp and transcend their own limitations and failures. Instead, historians and some theorists have begun to focus on a "range of feminisms" with "many founding events."[25] Thus, while feminist

political theorists have largely used the "waves" as a kind of shorthand for various key concepts and frameworks for conducting feminist research, feminist historians have made a convincing case for thinking of feminisms, *plural*, as organized around various spatial, institutional, ideological, economic, and other nodal points, rather than unfolding in a progressive temporality toward an inevitable political present.[26]

As a number of recent feminist historians have argued, for example, white lesbian antiracist organizing is a key site for rethinking the political possibilities we can glimpse in "histories of attempted transracial alliances within feminism."[27] Moreover, as Jennifer Nash and Samantha Pinto point out, framing the 1980s as a period marked by singularly exclusive and reactionary "white feminism" collapses not only "all of the complexities within the category 'white woman'—including class, sexuality, and religion—that get written out of the simple invocation of 'white women' as feminism's bad object" but also the different textures of Black and women of color feminists' relationships to these "bad objects" over time.[28] In fact, as they remind contemporary readers, the "notion of white woman as the affective excess that must be excised from object-oriented Black feminist rage—and from feminism itself—is a relatively recent construction."[29] During the period of feminist theory and activism with which this book is concerned, both lesbians of color and white lesbians (along with Chicana, Native, and transnationally identified lesbians) engaged in various strategies for delineating and unworking the harms of racism, including "Black feminists calling out white feminism and laying out ways to engage historical and political difference *and* white feminists mapping out new, more intentional methods to engage difference in scholarly and creative work."[30] Throughout this book I emphasize the plural and overlapping strategies that lesbians of color and white lesbians employed in the service of remaking relationships marked by arrogance into ones founded on intimate, epistemic, and institutional accountability.

In addition to making a case for the complexity of intersectional thinking by both lesbians of color and white lesbians during the 1980s, *Erotic Knowledge* also looks "beyond the waves" by rethinking the commonplace distinction between radical and cultural feminisms that typically marks histories of the 1980s. In contrast to those who characterize cultural feminism as an apolitical turn in feminist theory, I argue that lesbian feminists' turn to questions of authorship, writing, and aesthetics (and especially poetry) made key interventions at three interrelated levels: They sought to rework intimate, epistemic, and institutional relationships simultaneously by constituting lesbians as a kind of intersectionally accountable *public*. In fact, as I

argue throughout this book, this turn to questions of authorship and audience became the condition of possibility for some of the most dynamic and impactful thinking about intersectionality during this period. When we understand lesbian feminism in the relational terms that frameworks like authorship and audience invite, new kinds of structures, responsibilities, and political challenges come into view: Rather than conceptualizing the *object* of lesbian feminism as a set of identity questions (What does it mean *to be* a lesbian? What are the political effects of *speaking as* a lesbian?), I argue instead that "cultural" frames like authorship and audience begin from a set of poetic, relational questions (Whom do lesbians claim to speak for, about, or with? What poetic vocabulary is necessary to call forth a lesbian feminist audience? Does calling forth a lesbian feminist *audience* shift the requirements or responsibilities of political engagement with others?). Moving from these questions, then, I argue that the cultural questions that preoccupied writers like Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Cherríe Moraga, Marilyn Frye, and Maria Lugones have more to do with their understanding of how arrogant power forecloses these new intimate, epistemic, and institutional relationships than they do with any essentialist conception of women's culture or lesbian identity. That these writer-activists were concerned to authorize new historical narratives about lesbian erotic encounters, to develop conceptual and aesthetic grammars capable of articulating these narratives, and to cultivate audiences capable of reading and responding to these narratives is indeed a cultural project, but it is not the kind of cultural feminism that has preoccupied anti-identitarian thinkers for decades. In fact, it is one that I argue deserves attention from political theorists and historians invested in new forms of *publicity* and *world-building*, that is, in what it means to transform relationships marked by arrogant power into ones founded on reciprocity, accountability, and intersectional intimacy.

THE "FEMINIST SHELF"

In recent years, an emergent group of feminist historians and theorists have begun to reconsider the significance of not only lesbian feminist *theories*—the written works like essays and poems they left behind—but also the *forms* in which those theories were published, circulated, and read. A diverse set of works like Kathryn Thoms Flannery's *Feminist Literacies, 1968–1975*, Cait McKinney's *Information Activism*, Julie Enszer and Elena Gross's *OutWrite,* and a recent special issue of *Feminist Studies* on women of color anthologies, edited by Samantha Pinto and Jennifer Nash, make clear that the lesbian

feminist archive is distinct from other kinds of intellectual archives. While it's true that lesbian feminists developed several conceptual resources that loom large in academic theory making today—certainly, concepts like intersectionality, coalition, and affect theory are all significantly indebted to the authors I cite in this book—this archive is also marked by the remarkable proliferation of new written forms and, alongside them, emergent reading publics. Alongside an array of midcentury radical knowledge projects (such as gay liberation and New Left presses), lesbian feminist theorists like Lorde argued that "the words you do not yet have"—the words that are most needed to make lesbian political survival possible—are constrained by mainstream, *arrogant* institutions of knowledge production and circulation.[31] In response, they created a set of counterinstitutions that could function to sustain, extend, and critically sharpen a lesbian vocabulary into a powerful political weapon; the result, as Polly Joan once put it, was that almost "more than any other movement in history, feminism has been identified with publishing."[32] Put differently, lesbian feminists understood themselves as "information activists" who responded to the "frustrated desire for information about lesbian history and lesbian life by generating that information themselves."[33]

In this book I follow these and other scholars in insisting on US lesbian feminism not as an identity group, as it is so often understood, but as in equal parts a "movement of poets" grasping toward new erotic and political vocabularies, on the one hand, and, on the other, a diverse and widespread *public* of bookwomen whose work aimed at creating an "alternative communications circuit—a woman-centered network of readers and writers, editors, printers, publishers, distributors, and retailers through which ideas, objects, and practices flowed in a continuous and dynamic loop."[34] Understanding that lesbian feminist theory was produced in and through new written forms as well as in the context of new reading publics and information networks is essential for understanding the archive they have left behind—and also for reconsidering how these archives come to bear on our *own* temporal and affective relationship to feminism's past.

If the archival traces of lesbian feminism were produced in and for dialogue with a diverse, multiracial, and intersectionally accountable reading public, then my argument hinges on the idea that, on the whole, the lesbian feminist archive ought to be considered through the lens of the proliferation of new literacy institutions and reading practices—conferences, periodicals, poetry readings, newsletters, independent presses, and the like—that they inaugurated during the 1970s and 1980s. To capture this idea, this book

develops the concept of the *feminist shelf*, a term borrowed from Kristen Hogan's *The Feminist Bookstore Movement*. For Hogan, feminist bookstores, presses, and periodicals were more than just the background condition for feminist ideas; they were a material infrastructure that gave shape, process, and meaning to the practices of intersectional accountability that were the centerpiece of lesbian feminist theorizing. "The work of analyzing, organizing, and making literature available," she writes, "has been core to feminism in no small part because it involves an ethics of voice and relationships. We not only need 'diverse books,' we need the tools to read them and put them in conversation."[35] Lesbian feminists developed precisely these tools, she argues, by using physical and literary space to rethink the proximities and intimacies among people, ideas, and affects usually held apart from one another. As Hogan explains, the "feminist shelf" describes

> bookwomen's complex practice of using spatial organization, programming, and reflection to map shelf sections as ways of relating to each other, as feminist love; to change reading and relational practices by creating new contexts for each text and for ourselves through the books on the shelf or the list; to build a collective accountability to new vocabularies for lesbian antiracist feminism through events, narrative signs, and newsletters; to enact a feminist ethics of dialogue, speaking with each other rather than for each other, as sections and programming required accountability for our own identities in relationship; and, throughout, to revise this knowledge building in conversation as bookwomen discussed, contested, and redefined these contexts in collective meetings, transnational gatherings, and through the *Feminist Bookstore News* (*FBN*).[36]

Following Hogan's insight, I conceive of the history of lesbian feminism in these terms for both methodological and political reasons. In keeping with Hogan's intuition, I situate works by lesbian feminists like Lorde, Rich, Moraga, Lugones, Barbara Smith, Minnie Bruce Pratt, and others in contemporaneous conversations, debates, and disputes, such as those over race and racism, betrayal and repair, identity and self-determination, and I locate these public debates in the discursive cultural spaces—magazines, journals, presses, and conferences—in which lesbian feminists developed their political thinking together. If texts are not just vehicles for ideas but rather represent a set of reading and publishing practices, new kinds of methodological stakes arise for engaging them *as* texts. How does our reading of Lorde's essays on racism in feminist spaces at the *Second Sex* conference change, for instance, when we acknowledge her proximities to Jewish lesbians writing on the connections

between anti-Semitism and racism in the United States and abroad, or to white lesbians writing on antiracism? How might a lesbian feminist shelf that emphasizes both intellectual and disciplinary proximities between individuals like Lorde and Mary Daly—that infamous target of Lorde's critique in *Sister Outsider*—shift our understanding of Lorde's political concerns? What different affective readings of Black feminist thinkers, including Lorde, might emerge when we read her work as part of a *lesbian* feminist shelf? Thinking in terms of shelf making thus invites us to consider that texts do not, on their own, offer us easy answers to these kinds of questions. Instead, a feminist shelf approach alerts us to the methodological stakes of selecting contexts and convergences for these archival traces by making these choices explicit.

In addition to troubling the narrative that US lesbian feminism was a largely white, essentialist, and exclusionary movement, as I argued above, the concept of the feminist shelf guides both the archive of this book and my approach to reading that archive. As Hogan points out, the politics of shelf making is primarily a *spatial* metaphor as opposed to a *temporal* one. Unlike the "waves" metaphor, which focuses on the development over time of a set of critical tools that uncovered and unmasked the limits of thinking of identity as essential, the feminist shelf moves to put these texts *beside* one another so as to allow different sorts of critical resonances to emerge. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues in *Touching Feeling*, thinking of ideas and texts as existing spatially in a kind of "ecological field"—as unfolding and resonating *beside* one another in complex relation—radically shifts both the critical and affective work of feminist and queer thinking. Like Sedgwick, who suggests that an overemphasis on a "drama of exposure" has impoverished our critical desire for ambivalent objects, my investment in the notion of a lesbian feminist shelf (and in its relationship to other kinds of disciplinary shelves, such as sexual history and political theory) is aimed at producing new kinds of questions about this body of work. The book's method of shelf building, then, is less invested in exposing or revealing the essentialism of these thinkers than it is in putting them in new, spatial relationships—both to each other and to more mainstream ideas in the American academy. As Sedgwick explains, thinking about putting things *beside* one another (as shelf making implies) as opposed to thinking about critical depths *beyond* or *beneath* the surface (as she argues that much antiessentialist theory tends to do) is a strategy for cultivating a "spacious agnosticism" that permits new ways of telling old stories. Argues Sedgwick, "The irreducibly spatial positionality of *beside* also seems to offer some useful resistance to the ease with which *beneath* and

beyond turn from spatial descriptors into implicit narratives of, respectively, origin and telos. . . . *Beside* is an interesting phenomenon also because there's nothing very dualistic about it; a number of elements may lie alongside one another, though not an infinity of them. . . . *Beside* comprises a wide range of desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivaling, leaning, twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attracting, aggressing, warping, and other relations."[37] My claim, then, is that resituating theoretical texts like prose essays by Lorde and other lesbian feminists in a deeper, more diverse US lesbian feminist shelf—that is, thinking key texts of this movement *beside* a wide range of interlocutors that highlight the various ways we desire to be in relation to them today—disrupts settled narratives about how feminist theory came to be what it has become.

The spatial metaphor of the shelf, then, is also inextricably linked to questions about feminism's temporalities. In this sense, I am arguing that the feminist shelf performs what Elizabeth Freeman calls a kind of "temporal drag," both in the sense that rearranging the shelf reveals the constructedness, iterability, and contingency of seemingly settled feminist temporalities and in the sense that it returns us to pasts that call into question the inevitability of those temporalities.[38] By this, I mean to suggest, as Freeman does, that these texts are not only born of specific, local, and historicizable contexts but also embedded in multiple temporalities that speak to unrealized futures and disavowed pasts, and that such complicated objects can invite us to frustrate our own chrononormativities by unsettling our conception of how texts ought to be arranged in relation to one another. When we view texts, and our encounters with them, in terms of temporal drag—by bringing forth the anachronistic, the presentist, or the disruptive temporality—rather than as taken-for-granted objects, it raises new kinds of questions about them as historical objects. When we read them in proximity to Mary Daly, or to lesbian feminist publishing, or to certain forms of 1970s disciplinarity, how do Lorde's and Rich's essays call to mind "the pull of the past on the present"?[39] To plumb these kinds of questions, I develop a practice that *reads for proximities* among texts, authors, and archives by putting familiar texts in new spatial and temporal relationship to one another.

Central to the spatial and temporal drag of the lesbian feminist shelf are the physical proximities and intellectual intimacies that structured relationships across racial lines. By recognizing that lesbian, Black, women of color, white, and transnational feminisms emerged through shared literary and information networks, shelf making reveals new dimensions of both racist and

antiracist practices as formative of feminist theory's shifting identity in this moment. Yet it does so in unexpected ways that disrupt temporal frames and call into question the extent to which feminist pasts are *really* past. For example, as Clare Hemmings argues, whether they emphasize progress, loss, or return, commonplace feminist temporalities frame the relationship between lesbian feminism and Black feminism as particularly fraught.[40] In one version of feminist chrononormativity, Black feminism plays a "disciplining" role that, in Nash and Pinto's view, entrenches a feminism centered around affirming good objects (Black women) and disavowing "bad" ones (white women) rather than grappling with the deeper complexities of racism's haunting presence in feminist intimacy.[41] For both Hemmings and Nash and Pinto, where lesbian feminism is temporally located in the "essentialist" 1970s, Black feminism becomes a "catalyst" that lays the groundwork for intersectional thinking and, ultimately, poststructural feminisms. By keeping Black and lesbian feminists temporally distinct, such feminist narratives "are productive rather than descriptive narratives of the recent past, giving us accounts in which specific contributions to that history—black and lesbian feminist contributions—are by turns erased or fetishized." Like Hemmings, who asks, "What new ways of telling stories might emerge if we refuse to accept this citational separation [and instead] recite those traces of the past that echo still in the present?"[42] the remainder of this book is dedicated to developing new temporal and affective vocabularies through the rearrangement of feminist texts in an effort to remember this past otherwise.

UNTIMELY MEDITATIONS ON LESBIAN FEMINISM

Work that begins from the feminist shelf, then, begins from the intuition that there is much to learn from the history of lesbian feminism that has been inadequately digested by feminist, queer, and mainstream political theorists alike; however, making the case that lesbian feminist history has something important to say about feminist and queer politics in the *present*, as I hope this work does, requires confronting and actively disrupting a series of attachments to certain historical narratives, origins, and disavowals that have come to occupy a privileged place in feminist theory. Kathi Weeks, for instance, has argued that "the 1970s has until recently been most often remembered as something of an embarrassment: the time when feminists essentialized the category of woman, neglected race, constructed maniacally totalizing theories, and exposed themselves in public with their intemperate

speech, overwrought emotions, and utopian dreams. Sometimes it is as if the whole period is now recalled within scare quotes; the daring and ambition of feminist thinkers and activists in the 1970s is often recoded in the historical memory of the field as naïveté and failure."[43] Arguing that "this is not a mere matter of inattention" and that "the shame and disavowal that often characterize feminism's own historiography suggest that a more active mode of forgetting is at work," Weeks argues in favor of rendering the 1970s "untimely"—that is, of appreciating "the content of a vision that requires us to imagine ourselves as radically other."[44] In a similar vein, Victoria Hesford writes that feminist political theorists' tendency to disavow the lesbian second wave is an effect of their (our) attachment to *certain* "rhetorical forms, metaphors, and phrases" that simplify, contain, and "white-out" the political possibilities of the 1970s and 1980s.[45] Lorna Bracewell, too, has argued that an affective attachment to historical "starting points" like the infamous 1982 Barnard conference has obscured and erased the full range of feminist engagements and preoccupations.[46] As these and other theorists have shown, the narrative frames surrounding lesbian feminism typically sidestep the analysis of arrogant power and intersectional intimacy that I center in this book, focusing instead on the ways that lesbian feminism represents the past failures that a more successful contemporary feminism might avoid. These failures run the gamut from an essentialist commitment to transphobic "women's culture" to antisex conservatism, from racist disavowals of the lesbians of color, like Lorde, who have been embraced by more contemporary theorists to a naively utopian framework with an "aspiration to totality." My investment in *Erotic Knowledge* is to challenge these historical narratives about the lesbian feminist 1980s, if not to correct the historical record, then to render this past untimely, to "use the past as a standpoint from which to see the present from a different angle of vision."[47]

I mean two things by insisting on an untimely reading of lesbian feminism. First, as scholars like Weeks, Hesford, and Bracewell argue, an untimely reading of the feminist past highlights how many different visions of the feminist future were in circulation during the 1970s and 1980s—and how few of those possible futures are fully accessible to or compatible with what contemporary feminist theory has become or, indeed, with contemporary narratives of *how* contemporary feminist theory became what it has become. For example, if feminists during the 1970s and 1980s wrote in speculative, utopian, or poetic genres that resist contemporary ways of reading and evaluating political ideas, these challenges to our contemporary grammar have less to

do with the inherent political weakness of these left-behind ideas than with a plurality of political concepts, frameworks, and positions that throw the inevitability of the present into question. That lesbian feminists and their writings are only ambivalently legible in terms of contemporary common sense says as much about our *contemporary* political desires, fantasies, and repulsions as it says about the sum total of their "past achievements minus [their] missteps."[48] In a feminist context that too often falls into the trap of what Friedrich Nietzsche once called a "monumental history" by searching for feminist foremothers who might straightforwardly authorize our own political desires (or by chastising these foremothers for *failing* to address themselves to our own contemporary needs), untimeliness instead invites us to resist "import[ing] the aspects of thinking and living that most clearly fit with the (often misplaced) certainties of the present."[49]

Second, if recent years have taught us anything, it is that the historical, conceptual, and political landscape surrounding gender and sexuality is anything but settled by the past fifty years of feminist discourse. Narrative frames that have dominated public discourse about these issues—that the right to privacy can secure sexual freedom, for example, or even the idea that individual rights are the best or the only way to secure sexual and reproductive freedom at all—have all but evaporated in the face of contemporary sexual and gendered conservatism that openly views state-sanctioned hierarchy as an uncontested good. While I contend more directly with these contemporary challenges in my epilogue, this book begins from the idea that, in the face of the disintegration of a political "common sense" with which feminism has been entangled for half a century, the political desires, attachments, and narratives that have sustained historical judgments of lesbian feminism no longer apply. That the arguments they advanced seemed peripheral, eccentric, or antagonistic to what once looked like settled feminist frames is, I argue, the very thing that makes them relevant today. Moreover, this intuition is not just about the inherent interest of "lost ideas"; as Hemmings argues, we might consider untimely readings of the past as invitations to clarify how *certain* ideas were "always likely to have been lost."[50] Untimeliness, then, is not just about the desire for history. It is about *arrogant power*—the power to silence, to interpret, or to authorize historical "others" in ways that make them speak to (or recede from) politically invested narratives. This insight—that constructing certain relations, desires, or political projects as marginal to history is a primary function of arrogant power—is a point that lesbians themselves made again and again in their work.

NOTE ON THE POLITICS OF LOCATION

When I first began to think toward the questions that would become this book, I worried deeply about writing about the lesbian feminist thinking that animates it. I came out in 2003 as a teenager, during a time in which (from my vantage point) the lesbian feminist aesthetic was as deeply derided as the so-called identity politics that lesbian feminists advocated. It was the era of *The L Word* and the gay marriage debates, and, though I perceived it only obliquely at the time, lesbians were the recipients of a radical public relations transformation. No more butch haircuts and Birkenstocks and radical feminism, the message seemed to be; lesbians were being tucked into "love is love" narratives about the "virtually normal" lives of gay parents and military personnel, on the one hand, or receiving new, glamorous images, from Bette Porter to *D.E.B.S.* to *Kissing Jessica Stein* to *Imagine Me and You*, on the other. I don't think it was coincidental that my greatest concern at the time was not to be perceived as one of *those* lesbians, whose uncoolness manifested not only in what I took to be a profound sexual conservatism but also in what I thought of as a naively idealistic politics. I can now recognize this shame and embarrassment as an effect of my own internalized homophobia but also as a symptom of how deeply marginalized and caricatured lesbian feminists had become in American public and political discourse in the early 2000s. I'm happy to say this kind of shame didn't last long. In college I began to read some of the works that populate this book—Adrienne Rich's *On Secrets, Lies, and Silence*, Audre Lorde's *Zami,* the anthology *This Bridge Called My Back* edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa—along with watching some of the independent lesbian cinema from the 1980s and 1990s (*The Watermelon Woman*, *Lianna*, *Desert Hearts*), and I fell in love with how these works made me rethink everything I thought I knew about myself and my desires for both other women and a lesbian past.

I recount this here not only because I think it is indicative of how many millennial-age, white American queers like myself have engaged with lesbianism in the past twenty-five years (a period marked by increasing mainstream visibility but far more ambivalent queer politics) but also because I think it reflects the strangeness of lesbian feminists' place in the disciplinary stories of recent queer histories. My own changing perspective on lesbian feminism, I think, speaks to its perplexing temporal position in relation to the issues that have defined the twenty-first century, on the one hand, and to the disciplinary and narrative modes through which queer stories have become instantiated in the academy, on the other. Indeed, while these lessons

radically (re)structured my relationship to my own queerness by inviting me to form new attachments to ideas and practices whose uncoolness I had deeply internalized, it took much longer for me to bring them to bear on my relationship with scholarship and disciplinarity. When I arrived in graduate school in 2013, I still could not have imagined writing a *book* on these texts: They were texts I read in my "real" life, and simply didn't feel properly theoretical, or academic, or legitimate to bring into the seminar room. Even by the time I began my dissertation proposal, I thought I would write a dissertation about Michel Foucault or Nietzsche—something I considered properly theoretical. Like my earlier embarrassment over lesbianism as a teenager, I think this perception that lesbian works are not properly theoretical speaks to how these works function as a kind of apparition for queer history, as I explore in chapter 1. If lesbian feminism is a ghostly apparition for major disciplinary shifts of the past twenty years, just as lesbian feminists themselves are in popular queer culture, it also indexes how these voices have become deeply *untimely*. If my experience is at all indicative of these broader dynamics, these are voices that feel inappropriate, or shameful, or embarrassing to bring up in so many spaces that we enter. That dynamic is one that I have tried to not only theorize across this book but engage as a starting point for a new kind of lesbian political intervention.

My academic training is in the discipline of political theory, which receives what I would describe as a loving critique across this book. This disciplinary location matters much for the arguments I make in this book, mainly because it highlights and calls into question the radically different ways that academics and queers have conceptualized theory and its role in queer life and politics. I was not involved in the "foundations" debates or the vociferous drama over poststructuralism in the academy broadly or feminism specifically; I am a generation too young to have adult memories of AIDS and ACT UP and the intense early seductions of queer theorizing in the academy. Just as important, for me, lesbian feminism is the stuff of *historical* inquiry, as opposed to living memory. My knowledge of these formative moments and ideas came, at first, largely from the disciplinary stories of my own training; in political theory, this means that they tend to sit uncomfortably in relation to thinkers like Foucault, Hannah Arendt, and others, whose interventions have structured my discipline's approach to questions about plurality, democracy, social movements, and the political. Readers of this book will therefore undoubtedly notice that these seemingly ill-fitting conversations—between Foucault and Rich, for example, or between Arendt and Lorde—structure many of the chapters. It's true that this approach, like

my own experience as a lesbian person, reflects my situatedness in a certain generational and genealogical location, and that some conversations that appear in this book might feel unfamiliar or even beside the point for readers located outside political theory. But if the chapters first emerged through my own experience as a scholar, I have since leaned into the ill-fittedness and untimeliness of my own shelf as a mode through which to write this book. Indeed, the process of writing this book has been as much about creating a new kind of shelf in which to think—and to feel—as it has been about hitting the milestones of dissertation writing, the job market, and the tenure track. It is my view that thinking lesbian feminism *beside* or *alongside* these other kinds of traditions offers an exceptionally generative space for thinking and feeling, precisely because it occupies such an ambivalent position in relation to much of what we think we know about the role of theory in our disciplines, about the politics of sexuality, and about our almost-unbearable desire for the past. I believe that readers in disciplines beyond my own will recognize the feeling of knowing there are stakes to staging, and struggling to think through, seemingly ill-fitted conversations—even if they look different from the specific ones I unpack here.

Another way of putting this is to say that *Erotic Knowledge* asks how disciplinary shelves have privileged certain ways of reading US lesbian feminist texts over others and considers how reshelving this literature in different and unexpected spatial relationship to the theorists we already know calls into question the kinds of demands that these texts make on us. The (inter) disciplinary aim of this book, which is grounded in my own generational, geographic, and disciplinary location, is thus not intended to bring political theory to bear on lesbian feminism, nor is it to offer a theoretical backstory that reveals how much lesbian feminists are relevant to any obvious disciplinary or political concerns today. While it's true that the book's first aim is to highlight the importance of US lesbian feminist theory as such, I see the book's secondary intervention taking place at the level of (inter)disciplinarity, in that it speaks to a set of interpretive and conceptual gaps at the "settled" intersection of feminist/queer studies and political theory audiences—that is, precisely in those spaces in which the role of theory feels most settled. More specifically, the book proposes the US lesbian feminist archive as a crucial resource for more fully confronting how theoretical ideas frame history and politics. It pushes at our feelings of certainty in our own historical, geographic, and disciplinary locations by emphasizing the ill-fitting and untimely dimensions of this new kind of shelf. If this book speaks to political theory and feminist/queer studies audiences together, it will be because it

holds the divergent concerns of each audience in the strange space that lesbian feminism opens.

As a longtime reader of these works, I hold that lesbian feminists left just such a shelf behind for us by design. As Rich puts it in "Notes Toward a Politics of Location":

> A movement for change lives in feelings, actions, and words. Whatever circumscribes or mutilates our feelings makes it more difficult to act, keeps our actions reactive, repetitive: abstract thinking, narrow tribal loyalties, every kind of self-righteousness, the arrogance of believing ourselves at the center. It's hard to look back on the limits of my understanding a year, five years ago—how did I look without seeing, hear without listening? It can be difficult to be generous to earlier selves, and keeping faith with the continuity of our journeys is especially hard in the United States, where identities and loyalties have been shed and replaced without a tremor, all in the name of becoming "American."[51]

Rich puts a finer point on the matter at the end of this passage, charging all of us in stubborn disciplines to ask ourselves: "How, except through ourselves, do we discover what moves other people to change? Our old fears and denials—what helps us let go of them? What makes us decide we have to re-educate ourselves, even those of us with 'good' educations?"[52] For me, writing this book has been just such a process of reeducation, of letting go and learning to (re)attach. My most profound aspiration for it is that readers within my discipline and beyond will come to experience the kind of reeducation I believe lesbian feminists demand of us as a necessary transformation of our disciplines, our way of seeing, and our intimate and political worlds more broadly.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

If I have here laid out the case for thinking of lesbian feminists as developing intersectional ideas at the intimate, epistemic, and institutional levels, the first three chapters of *Erotic Knowledge* unpack each of these levels in turn. In chapter 1 I develop a lesbian feminist conception of the politics of the erotic that takes up the methodological and political stakes of sexual history in unexpected ways. Working in and through the example of Audre Lorde, chapter 1 makes the claim that lesbian feminists have been relegated to the status of a ghostly apparition in sexual history, meaning that their distinctive theories about the political stakes of sexual intimacy between women

have mainly been illegible to historians. If much contemporary queer theory emerges in and through Foucault's genealogy of sexology in the nineteenth century, I argue in this chapter that lesbian feminists contested the core idea that expert knowledge was a necessary condition for telling queer histories or that queer politics ought to be conceptualized through the lens of "reverse discourse." Reading Lorde *beside* Foucault's conception of sexological knowledge, this chapter develops Lorde's conception of erotic knowledge as a unique form of historical inquiry: Rather than understand lesbian sexual politics as necessarily constrained by what has been named, categorized, and made explicit in historical archives, Lorde (like other lesbian feminists) located lesbian feminism in the speculative, poetic possibility of politicizing those haunting, unspoken, and obliquely perceived sexual solidarities between women—especially those across racial difference—that sexology ignores, misreads, or otherwise obscures.

Building on this argument, chapter 2 argues that erotic knowledge is the point of departure for a sophisticated framework for thinking about the role of history for contemporary political projects. I argue that lesbian feminists were deeply invested in overlapping questions of historiography, authorship, and narrative that informed widespread disciplinary debates in history during the 1970s. Like Foucault, whose genealogical method was indebted to earlier insights about the relationship between discourse and sexuality, lesbian feminists developed an alternative framework for negotiating challenges raised by the impossibility of objective empirical knowledge, which I call the *will to remember*. The will to remember, like contemporaneous narrative approaches to history, embraces the idea that producing objective knowledge about the past is both impossible and politically immobilizing; instead, it casts historians as *authors* rather than *scientists*, meaning that the knowledge they produce can be evaluated only on political, ethical, and aesthetic grounds. Unlike Foucault and other poststructuralist historians, however, the lesbian feminist will to remember draws on the idea of erotic knowledge to show how powerful discourses have conspired to silence and undermine acts of lesbian authorship for much of human history. Arguing that lesbian feminists saw lesbian poetry as a way to reclaim the right to historical authorship, the chapter concludes with Adrienne Rich's *Dream of a Common Language* and shows how this text authorizes its historical claims by grounding them in an intersectional ethics that seeks to unwork all manner of historical silences.

If in chapters 1 and 2 I argued that lesbian feminists like Lorde and Rich developed a radical new conception of lesbian erotic authorship, in chapter 3

I begin to explore how lesbian feminists put this analysis of silence, language, and action to work in the world. Lesbian feminists understood that the audiences for their work would need to be actively cultivated, and in this chapter I argue that the incredibly rich, diverse, and extensive network of lesbian feminist presses, periodicals, bookstores, and conferences took up this work. Following historians of the Women in Print movement, I analyze this diverse network of knowledge producers in terms of their editorial, audience-building, and organizational practices, arguing that it is impossible to fully grasp the extent of lesbian feminist ideas without noticing the radical nature of their material innovations in publishing and editing. In this sense, I argue that we ought to consider lesbian feminism in terms of its *publicity*. Just as important, these lesbian feminist institutions enacted a form of intersectional thinking that prioritized reworking political relationships between women by emphasizing accountability and response; this dynamic, I argue, constitutes lesbian feminists' uniquely intersectional responses to the demands and risks of publicity.

Chapter 4 interrogates how the erotic effects a "wrenching sense of recontextualization" in lesbian feminist writing during the 1980s, as well as how these practices (re)oriented lesbian feminists to the world—a term I use in its Arendtian dimensions. I turn in the first half of this chapter to political theorists who, following the work of Hannah Arendt, characterize the "worldly" stuff of politics in terms of the "in-between spaces" of public concern for which members of political communities are called on to care. While political theory accounts of worldly concerns almost never include sex and the erotic, I put this account in conversation with Amber Hollibaugh and Cherríe Moraga's essay "What We're Rollin Around in Bed With" and poems from Audre Lorde's 1978 collection *The Black Unicorn*, making the case that in these lesbian feminist hands, erotic encounters become a kind of "worldly in-between"—a scene of appearance through which new relational modes are formed and old hierarchies thrown into relief. Through this reading I insist that the world-making capacities of lesbian feminist erotics are sustained through a range of affective-political responses, including narcissism, rage, ambivalence, and hunger.

Chapter 5 then turns to consider lesbian feminism in terms of the disciplinary concerns of political theory writ large. I return to the idea of a lesbian feminist shelf, this time as an orienting object that calls into question the ways that my own discipline structures the very reality we (political theorists) are capable of seeing, but also to say something more reflexive about the choices that structure the rest of this book. Working in and through a

reading of Pratt's essay "Identity: Skin, Blood, Heart," I consider how a range of spatial metaphors for the work of theorizing—seeing, inhabiting, staging, and shelving—help us to see lesbian feminism as something that both extends and challenges the vocation of political theory. I conclude the chapter with a brief consideration of Rich's infamous critique of Arendt, arguing that it reveals the stakes of lesbian feminism as an activity undertaken by a "community of women co-workers."[53] Finally, in the epilogue I consider how these lessons of coworking and intersectional coconstitution might come to bear on our contemporary context today. I read my own engagement in contemporary transnational politics as a white, queer American against a final archival episode: a slow, unfolding story in which Rich and June Jordan struggle to come to terms with their responsibilities for engaging Israel-Palestine and the question of Zionism during the early 1980s. I argue that the lessons of this story between Jordan and Rich are unexpected but urgent; they demonstrate how a project of counterintimacy that *seems* partial, provisional, and slow-going can be really transformative when we take it seriously as guidelines for fundamentally breaking with the arrogant structures that make it possible to break trust, misrecognize others, and fail to account for the harms we do.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION. US LESBIAN FEMINISM BEYOND AND BESIDE THE WAVES

1. Douglas, "2nd Sex," 4.

2. J. Benjamin, "Letter to Lester Olson," 289.

3. The full text of the speech appeared in the same *oob* issue in which Douglas's assessment of the conference was printed. Five years later, it was also anthologized in Lorde's *Sister Outsider*.

4. Douglas, "2nd Sex," 26.

5. Frye, *Politics of Reality*, 67. I have used the masculine pronoun here to reflect Frye's usage in this passage; however, as I note below, arrogant perception is by no means exclusive to men or the male point of view.

6. Frye, *Politics of Reality*, 69.

7. Lugones, "Playfulness," 4.

8. Lugones, "Playfulness," 5.

9. Lugones, "Playfulness," 4.

10. For a deeper discussion of transnationalism in relation to the thinkers centered in this book, see Bolacki and Broeck, *Audre Lorde's Transnational Legacies*.

11. Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined*, 84.

12. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 212.

13. While I do not offer an extended reading of those claims in this book, I have elsewhere offered a critique of how lesbian feminist history might be (re)mobilized against transphobic gender essentialism. See Gambino, "Politics as 'Sinister Wisdom.'"

14. J. Benjamin, "Letter to Lester Olson," 287.

15. Douglas, "2nd Sex," 26; and J. Benjamin, "Letter to Lester Olson," 289.

16. Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, 5.

17. Reagon, "Coalition Politics"; and Honig, "Politics of Home," 267.

18. Honig, "Politics of Home," 270.

19. Hesford, *Feeling Women's Liberation*, 15.

20. Rudy, "Radical Feminism," 200.

21. Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*; Rudy, "Radical Feminism," 201.

22. Rudy, "Radical Feminism," 205.

23. Murib, *Terms of Exclusion*.

24. Gambino, "Politics as 'Sinister Wisdom'"; and Schuller, *Trouble with White Women*.

25. L. Gordon, "Women's Liberation Movement," 71.

26. Such works include, but are far from limited to, Evans, *Personal Politics*; Gilmore, *Feminist Coalitions*; Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism*; Springer, *Living for the Revolution*; Orleck, *Rethinking American Women's Activism*; Cobble, *Other Women's Movement*; Enke, *Finding the Movement*; Valk, *Radical Sisters*; and Hanking, *Girls in the Back Room*.

27. Hogan, *Feminist Bookstore Movement*, xx.

28. Nash and Pinto, "New Genealogy," 888.

29. Nash and Pinto, "New Genealogy," 896.

30. Nash and Pinto, "New Genealogy," 897.

31. Lorde, "Transformation," 41. For works on radical New Left presses, see Chasin, *Selling Out*; D'Emilio, "Placing Gay"; and Streitmatter, *Unspeakable*.

32. Joan, "Women in Print."

33. McKinney, *Information Activism*, 2.

34. Travis, "Women in Print Movement," 276.

35. Hogan, *Feminist Bookstore Movement*, xxii.

36. Hogan, *Feminist Bookstore Movement*, 109.

37. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 8.

38. Freeman, *Time Binds*.

39. Freeman, *Time Binds*, 62.

40. Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*.

41. Nash and Pinto, "New Genealogy."

42. Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*, 162, 180.

43. K. Weeks, "Vanishing *Dialectic*," 735.

44. K. Weeks, "Vanishing *Dialectic*," 735, 751.

45. Hesford, *Feeling Women's Liberation*, 17.

46. Bracewell, *Why We Lost*.

47. K. Weeks, "Vanishing *Dialectic*," 752.

48. K. Weeks, "Vanishing *Dialectic*," 748.

49. Hemmings, *Considering Emma Goldman*, 18. For Nietzsche's discussion of monumental histories, see Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations.*

50. Hemmings, *Considering Emma Goldman*, 33.

51. Rich, "Politics of Location," 223.

52. Rich, "Politics of Location," 224.

53. Rich, "Conditions for Work," 214.

CHAPTER 1. EROTIC KNOWLEDGE: LESBIAN FEMINISM AND THE GENEALOGIES OF SEXUALITY

1. Castle, *Apparitional Lesbian*, 2.

2. Castle, *Apparitional Lesbian*, 6.