

## CHAPTER 1

# *Haunted Questions, Inhabited Spaces*

Something seems to make many people uneasy when they hear the words “lesbian” and “academic” in the same sentence. Individually, each word may carry meanings that are fixed or fluid, alien or familiar, positive or negative, but rarely neutral. Putting together the two words to say “lesbian and academic,” “academic and lesbian,” or “lesbian academic” can bring about a sort of disequilibrium, a questioning. What does one have to do with the other? For some, it may connote a political agenda at the expense of an intellectual one. For others, it may connote privilege and a neglect of urgent political and material matters. And for yet others, there may be a response of “so what?” There is no clear “so what,” for it can never be definitively said what one term has to do with the other. There are times that the meanings of “lesbian” and “academic” may be intertwined and times that they may be discontinuous, unrelated.

One of the perplexing things about speaking of lesbian academics is that *lesbian* is often understood as a private term, referring to who one is or what one does in one’s private life. *Lesbian* invokes the body, sexual practices, carnal knowledge rather than public knowledge. *Academic*, on the other hand, is often understood as a public term, referring to who one is or what one does in public life. Although *academic* invokes the mind, often understood as private, it also invokes the communication of ideas, or knowledge brought into the public sphere. To bring the terms *lesbian* and *academic* together is to disturb conceptions of what is private and what is public, to ask what their intersections might be, and in what ways they might be mutually implicated.

My purpose in this book is precisely that: to disturb habits of thinking about the points of intersection of *lesbian* and *academic* as these terms have been constructed in the late twentieth century in the United States. Through ethnographic case studies of three women who are faculty members at a public research institution, I explore what it might or might not mean to dwell in these two categories. My focus is on social and institutional discourses, personal conversations, and the lives and

actions of specific individuals within and beyond a university. I seek to rethink constructions of identity and knowledge in an academic setting by looking closely at the ways three women are defined by and (re)define *lesbian* and *academic* and their relations. I explore the women's ideals of research, teaching, and service, and their enactment within a university setting. At the same time, I investigate the university itself, including how knowledge and professional roles are constructed and legitimated within the intersections of institution, department, and discipline, as well as official and unofficial recognition and representations of lesbians' presence. Thus, my inquiry into the construction of academic practice includes "levels" of society, university, department, discipline, classroom, and individual. To speak of "levels," as Adrienne Rich says, is to speak both of a person's "positioning in society" as well as her "level of responsiveness, of responsibility, to what lies around [her]." Levels are never discrete, but interact to constitute the ways humans respond to each other and to circumstances. Richard Terdiman has offered, "To respond is to be engaged with someone *else*; simultaneously it is to remain different or diverse. . . . To respond is to pursue further and yet to cross, to mesh but not to fuse, to be inside the interlocutor's discourse and outside it at the same time. . . . To respond is thus to be and to sustain one's status as an *other*. . . . Conversely to be responded to is to know . . . that someone else is there."<sup>2</sup> Response invites a questioning of how we live within and beyond the given.

To speak of responses to social and institutional formations is a complex task that can never be complete. The questions that can be asked and the theories that can be considered, as well as the complexities of three persons' professional lives, render such a project inherently partial, in multiple senses of the word. Inquiry into the academic practices of lesbian faculty is situated not only within discourses of higher education. It resides in the nexus of shifting conceptions of self and identity, the relations of multiple communities, and the effects of social and institutional cultures and ideologies. As a starting point in this chapter, I outline the ways *lesbian* and *academic* have been configured together in the contexts of oppositional social and intellectual movements over the past three decades. By questioning understandings of *lesbian*, *academic*, and *intellectual* practice, I suggest a more contextualized understanding of their relations than has been set forth in the identity-based discourses that continue to structure conversations about lesbian academics.

In the post-Stonewall era, an epoch of proliferating social, political, and intellectual activism by gay men and lesbians, the joining together of the terms *lesbian* and *academic* has produced two primary constructs: (1) an authentic (essential) lesbian who, consonant with identity politics,

should be empowered to speak and be seen as lesbian, and (2) a post-modern lesbian intellectual who eschews the essentialism of identity categories and who, through her work, may or may not speak *as lesbian*. Each of these standpoints informs this text, either as their assumptions inform my thinking, as they find resonance in the women's thoughts and actions, or as they structure the possibilities and limitations of empirical inquiry. As I shall argue, a helpful formulation for inquiry neither relies on identity nor disavows its salience in social and institutional discourse, but focuses on practice within and across contexts.

As I originally conceptualized an ethnographic study of three lesbians' academic work at a research institution in the United States, I wished to bring together two areas of interest: how lesbians make their lives in a society that denies, even as it attaches meanings to, their existence, and how institutions of higher education function as sites for the production of knowledge through teaching and research. I wished to examine how lesbians have constructed their roles as faculty members in order to problematize social, institutional, and personal dilemmas created by their presences and actions. How do institutional and social structures participate in shaping the work of lesbian academics? How do they reciprocally participate in shaping the structures of which they are a part? I hoped to offer both lesbian- and non-lesbian-identified readers narrative and analysis that would expand understandings of the intertwinings of social and institutional discourses of identity and knowledge, and prompt a rethinking of assumptions (whatever they may be) regarding lesbians' academic work. In short, I came to the study with a belief that inquiry into the experiences of lesbian academics, whose voices often do not have a place in the canonized knowledge of their disciplines and whose pedagogical relations remain largely unexplored, could offer new perspectives on the constraints and possibilities of higher education.

The assumptions and purposes I brought to my work were clearly embedded in a humanist project that, although reticently, constructs sexuality as a meaningful category of identity and looks to enlightenment through narratives of resistance. Implicit in my thinking were beliefs that there may be something "different" in the work of lesbian-identified academics, that their "voices" are not canonized, and that they may have identifiably different relations to students or knowledges *because they are lesbian*. I took *lesbian* to be a site of causation. Despite my skepticism of simple understandings of the constitution of agency, the subject, experience, and knowledge, my awareness of the potential dangers of producing locatable, or disciplined subjects, and my distrust of attaching meanings to the category *lesbian*, I began with *lesbian* at the center of my inquiry. To invoke the category locates me, I suspect, as a

person who has benefited from participation in social, political, and intellectual projects undertaken by lesbians, despite my ambivalences. The tension of calling on a category whose meanings and constructions I wish to interrogate appears throughout the project, as the humanism implicit in my purposes and ethnographic processes conflicts with the posthumanist interpretive frameworks I engage.

In order to contextualize the theoretical, epistemological, and ontological tensions of which my project partakes and which it seeks to interrogate, I turn to social, political, and intellectual work in the post-Stonewall epoch, which finds a principle point of origin in identity politics. For some, identity functions as a tactic to secure rights within a liberal political system; for others, identity forecloses fundamental conversations about relations of power and the transformation of society. Of interest are the meanings identity takes on in university contexts, in which knowledge production is a central purpose. Throughout this text, identity and knowledge will enter into tricky, sometimes theoretically unresolvable, relationships. I begin with a moment in the early 1970s when activists and scholars began to investigate systematically the roles of gay and lesbian university faculty. Initially, identity and community activism defined the possibilities and purposes of much gay and lesbian oppositional intellectual work. Over time, ongoing work undertaken by gays and lesbians has transformed social, institutional, and disciplinary configurations that would define these possibilities and purposes. Multiple frameworks mediate gay and lesbian academic practices such that their meanings cannot be located in identity *per se*. I argue that identity collapses as a useful rubric for understanding lesbians' academic work and turn to theories of practice as an alternative that engages the complexities of living in institutions of higher education.

#### SEEKING TO FOUND A LOCATION: THE GAY ACADEMIC UNION

Gay and lesbian work in academia did not coalesce in significant, organized forms until after the Stonewall uprisings of 1969. On the heels of social and political activism by "gay liberationist" groups, gay and lesbian academics began to question their places as scholars in institutions of higher education. Although isolated courses pertaining to "gay issues" had been taught in universities as early as 1972, the first organizational work was the formation of the Gay Academic Union (GAU) in New York in the fall of 1973.<sup>3</sup> The GAU's statement of purpose, published in a monograph of its first conference proceedings, "assert[ed] the interconnection between personal liberation and social change" and

outlined five organizational goals: “(1) to oppose all forms of discrimination against all women within academia, (2) to oppose all forms of discrimination against gay people within academia, (3) to support individual academics in the process of coming out, (4) to promote new approaches to the study of the gay experience, and (5) to encourage the teaching of gay studies throughout the American educational system.”<sup>4</sup> While startlingly prescient of the stated aims of many gay and lesbian disciplinary caucuses in academia today, the goals must be understood in their historical context, as they were shaped by activism outside the university and the search for legitimation inside academia.<sup>5</sup>

The GAU’s statement of purpose embraced liberal tactics, including principles of nondiscrimination, assumptions of the interrelations of personal and political dimensions of visibility politics, and a belief that a body of knowledge about the “gay experience” could be created. The first point, that the GAU should oppose all forms of discrimination against women in academia, brought together work that links gender oppression to gay and lesbian oppression, and was hotly contested from the beginning. Disagreements over feminist analysis quickly led to the formation of separate men’s and women’s caucuses within the organization. The second point, to protect gays and lesbians in academia against discrimination, was consonant with civil rights models of organizing and took on a distinctly educational mission as GAU members endeavored to educate the “general public” to bring about attitudinal change and decreased discrimination. Consonant with this logic was the group’s third purpose, to support individuals in the process of coming out so that they could work toward personal integration and social change. Individuals would educate by providing positive examples of gay men and lesbians while also constituting a group in need of rights. The fourth and fifth points, to promote new approaches to the study of “the gay experience” and the teaching of gay studies throughout the educational system, were the first organizational commitments to gay and lesbian scholarship and teaching.

The work of GAU members was instrumental in legitimating a field of study that rejected then-dominant models of social, medical, and psychological deviance in the study of gay and lesbian lives. What George Chauncey, Martin Duberman, and Martha Vicinus have called the pioneering work outside of academic institutions initiated new scholarship by offering evidence that there were historical documents to be interpreted, such as the publication of GAU member Jonathan Katz’s *Gay American History* in 1976, or the inauguration of grassroots archives, such as the Lesbian Herstory Archives, founded by GAU members Joan Nestle and Deb Edel in 1973.<sup>6</sup> This push to legitimate the presence of gay and lesbian persons and studies in universities set a context for gay

and lesbian-affirmative talk and action in the academy. Identity models of activism—the constitution of a group with a history, literature, and culture—were used to validate areas of study, while academics constituted themselves as a group with specific concerns and goals. Toward these ends, during its some ten years of existence, the GAU held conferences and published newsletters, a bulletin, and briefly a journal. In its early years, GAU annual conferences included a nearly even split of scholarly panels and workshops devoted to such topics as coming out, gay and lesbian therapy, combating bias in the media, and ending discrimination in academia.<sup>7</sup>

Converging in the period from 1976 to 1978 were several trends that led to the GAU's demise. First, since its formation, the GAU had been beset by two principle problems, each reflecting conflicts in gay and lesbian social movements. Membership was split between an assimilationist perspective and beliefs that incorporated Marxist and Freudian concepts to argue for the complete transformation of social relations. Bound up with this split were the GAU's predominantly male numbers and outlook. Frustrated by many of the men's inability to understand the links between sexism and heterosexism and to address issues specific to lesbians, the women's caucus withdrew from the GAU in 1976. Second, as GAU members had success in facilitating the formation of caucuses within disciplinary professional organizations, scholarly activity shifted to academic disciplines as a primary site for defining and validating gay and lesbian work and the GAU increasingly focused on extra-academic issues.<sup>8</sup> Issues of outsider status in the gay/lesbian movement and of disciplinary legitimation in the academy, then, shaped much initial lesbian academic work, but were not unique to the domain of "gay studies."

At the same time that lesbians worked within and at the edges of the gay movement, their networking and scholarship were enabled and shaped by the feminist movement and the gradual institutionalization of women's studies programs. However, despite lesbians' participation in inaugurating many academic programs and political organizations, the problematic nature of their relationships to both should be kept in mind. Homophobia in the women's movement, as evidenced by Betty Friedan's notorious 1970 commentary on the "lavender menace" in the National Organization for Women (NOW), was equally endemic in Women's Studies, particularly in its early struggles for legitimacy. NOW added lesbian issues to its platform in the mid-1970s; however, it was not until the mid-1980s that academic feminism, largely in response to critiques by women of color and lesbians, actively sought to include those it had previously excluded.<sup>9</sup>

Marginalized in both the early gay/lesbian and feminist movements,

lesbians intensified their efforts to legitimate their identities, traditions, and concerns. Gay and feminist work in the academy developed around identity politics and collective experiences—a strategy that has excluded lesbians at the same time that lesbians have appropriated it in order to define and validate their own specificities. Initial work in gay and lesbian history focused on biography and creating histories of oppression and resistance; in literature, it centered on identifying gay and lesbian authors and themes. Early feminist scholarship involved recovering “lost” works and history and challenging the literary canon.<sup>10</sup> Such work was appropriated in lesbian projects, first in the quest for visibility and then in definitional anxieties around the lesbian and an area of study. Essays such as Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s historicization of nineteenth-century “female friendships,” Barbara Smith’s reading of *Sula* as a lesbian novel, Adrienne Rich’s naming the “lesbian continuum,” and Bonnie Zimmerman’s overview of lesbian feminist criticism contributed to and reflected the canonization of defining lesbianism as key to lesbian scholarship.<sup>11</sup> Definitional strategies forged a common lesbian identity and made possible the construction of historical narrative accounts of lesbian lives. Much lesbian scholarship thus came to conflate definition and identity, a move that paralleled the work of its feminist and gay partners as it produced lesbian icons and role models for those sharing in the common definition and identity.

From the late 1970s to the early 1980s, there were shifts in the political and academic spheres: women of color and lesbians challenged white middle class heterosexual feminism and decentered universal womanhood as a rubric for organizing at the same time that so-called “sex radicals” challenged cultural lesbian feminists’ identity models of lesbian sexuality and politics.<sup>12</sup> These breaks with monolithic understandings of women and lesbians were enabled by the rise of social constructionism, a theoretical trend that argued for the social, historical, and discursive formation of identities rather than the existence of fixed, timeless identities. This perspective was strengthened by poststructuralism and embraced in much gay scholarship influenced by the work of Michel Foucault, particularly his *History of Sexuality*. In the 1980s, then, social constructionism rose in academia, never entirely displacing essentialist models of identity, yet superseding them and in many disciplines, particularly in the humanities, gaining theoretical respect and credibility.<sup>13</sup> The shift in thinking has not been without controversy; poststructuralist accounts were critiqued for being devoid of praxis and essentialist accounts critiqued for relying on exclusionary accounts of identity in order to organize for change.<sup>14</sup> An effect of poststructuralism and social constructionism has been to displace the stable lesbian identity and history constructed through activism and scholarship with a

focus on ideology and the cultural construction of identity categories,<sup>15</sup> thus placing poststructural thought in tension with identity-based political activism.

I offer this brief overview of the Gay Academic Union and related developments in gay, lesbian, and feminist scholarship and activism to illustrate how the tensions that play out in academic gay and lesbian work have come to be imbued with problems of individual and collective identity. Although not all gay or lesbian academics choose to “come out” or to work in gay and lesbian studies, their intellectual and institutional locations are frequently understood through the logic of identity politics. Identity politics’ creation of gay and lesbian academic voice and visibility has effected institutional, disciplinary, and social changes that bear both on academics’ choices for action and on the ways their practices can be understood. In fact, the imbrication of voice and visibility in the construction of identity and knowledge surfaces throughout my representation of the three women’s academic work.

#### LESBIAN IDENTITY POLITICS: THE LIMITATIONS OF FULL DISCLOSURE

What or who is it that is “out,” made manifest and fully disclosed, when and if I reveal myself as lesbian?

—Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination”

Borrowed from the tactics of social movements, the definitional anxieties over lesbian identity underlying scholarly legitimation are predicated on voicing and making visible group identity and experience. Identity politics deploys identity representationally to bring persons together under a rubric of shared positions and experiences of “otherness” that are immanent to categories of race, gender, or sexuality. For example, in her discussion of pedagogy, bell hooks valorizes the voicing of identity and experience for empowerment: “Identity politics emerges out of the struggles of oppressed or exploited groups to have a standpoint on which to critique dominant structures, a position that gives purpose and meaning to struggle. Critical pedagogies of liberation respond to these concerns and necessarily embrace experience, confessions and testimony as relevant ways of knowing, as important, vital dimensions of any learning process.”<sup>16</sup> Identity serves as a foundation for social recognition, inclusion, and equality; experience, constructed as coextensive with identity, offers a place from which to speak and a privileged means of representation.<sup>17</sup> Identity highlights the common to suggest a representable *set* of differences or similarities that are stable and whole.

A provocative critique of the uses of identity has been formulated by

Judith Butler, whose theory of gender performativity, as elaborated in *Gender Trouble*, calls into question the liberatory nature of representations of identity and experience. She describes “identity” as produced by “regulatory practices [such as compulsory heterosexuality] that generate coherent identities through the matrix of coherent gender norms” (17). Because identity is an effect produced by relations of power, she argues, invoking identity as an originary substance is complicit in naturalizing the structures that operate to create and maintain it. Thus, representation of identity as foundational conceals the formation of that identity by the very “assertion of that foundation” (6). Butler poses a key challenge to identity’s usefulness in representing subjects, for she points out that identity demands adherence to a norm that cannot represent what it purports to represent. In other words, because identities are organized around a central difference and indicate continuous links in a chain of binary oppositions, such as sex-gender-desire, they exclude differences that do not flow from this center as incoherent, thus dictating who or what becomes intelligible as an identity in a political economy predicated on visibility. If what the lesbian “is” continues to be knowable through a system of compulsory heterosexuality and its attendant gender norms, the value of definitional strategies is undermined, for these definitions depend on and reinscribe an imposed coherence. As Judith Roof has said, “The lesbian’s configuration of unrepresentability is a product of a heterosexual *weltanschauung*. Its exceptional quality relies entirely upon the heterosexual categories it appears to challenge. Naming and defining it makes sense of the lesbian position as both an exception to and mimetic of a heterosexual rule.”<sup>18</sup> Not only is *lesbian* unrepresentable but also a socially, psychologically, and historically contingent category, as Valerie Traub has described:

To ask, “What is a ‘lesbian?’” is generally to elicit a direct, descriptive response: “A lesbian is such and such.” But the very simplicity of this question is, in fact, disarming, for part of the theoretical and existential problem of defining the “lesbian” is the variability of the category to which “she” belongs. To answer the question is to fix that which is fundamentally unstable, to immobilize what is in fact a shifting field of only temporarily meaningful significations. Whatever a “lesbian” “is” is constantly negotiated—a matter of conflicting and contradictory investments and agendas, desires and wills. Although “love” and “desire” for other women is a historical constant within a consistent minority of the population, how that love and desire are experienced and expressed—individually and culturally—are historically changing phenomena.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the unknowability and instability of lesbian, voice and visibility have become defining tropes<sup>20</sup> of identity politics in order to validate individual and collective identities.

As illustrated in the GAU's political work, the logic of speaking and making visible one's identity assumes that "coming out" is personally transformative for individuals and necessary for gays and lesbians to be an identifiable group in seeking civil rights. Bonnie Zimmerman, for example, has argued, "Speaking, especially naming one's self 'lesbian,' is an act of empowerment. Power, which traditionally is the essence of politics, is connected with the ability to name, to speak, to come out of silence."<sup>21</sup> The assumption that speech (voice) leads to visibility, which leads to personal and collective "empowerment," has been commonplace in lesbian writing. Adrienne Rich has described the imposition of invisibility as "not just a matter of being told to keep your private life private; it's the attempt to fragment you, to prevent you from integrating love and work and feelings and ideas, with the empowerment that that can bring."<sup>22</sup> But if lesbian voice and visibility must draw on social norms to be intelligible, what are their effects within existing structures? By asking such a question, I do not wish to deny the personal integrity and wholeness individuals have experienced or the political gains won by groups through "naming." However, I do wish to question whether such actions *inherently* challenge existing power relations. As suggested by poststructural critiques of identity politics, visibility may serve to reinscribe the givenness of preexisting identities rather than interrogating their production through relational differences or structures of power. In other words, when a person speaks to become visible, "what is made manifest and fully disclosed," as Judith Butler asks, depends precisely on the configurations of power in which a lesbian becomes visible. Because identities are "seen" through certain matrices, or norms, they may never be "seen" at all—except as they can be understood within a discursive system. The notion that voice leads to visibility must be rethought as a reciprocal relation in which visibility also structures one's voice and what can be heard. Underlying tropes of voice and visibility is a belief that each produces knowledge. Yet that knowledge is already partly written by the context of speech.

A key challenge to the positive effects assumed to come from speaking lies in Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, in which he suggests that the proliferation of discourses on sex have not repressed, but on the contrary, have "produced and determined the sexual mosaic" (47). Arguing that power and knowledge have become linked to produce a belief in sexuality as revealing identity, or the "truth of sex" (77), he demonstrates that from the seventeenth century on, instead of silence, there has been a proliferation of discourse of sex, "an institutional incitement to speak about it" (18) as the human sciences have appropriated the church's techniques of confession to analyze and classify persons' pleasures. Knowledge-power has focused increasingly on deter-

mining what the subject “is” via sex: “Causality in the subject, the unconscious of the subject, the truth of the subject in the other who knows, the knowledge he holds unbeknown to him, all this found an opportunity to deploy itself in the discourse of sex” (70). Identity politics’ reliance on *testimonies* of experience to present reality and self carries traces of Foucault’s formulation of confession as producing the belief that people can tell the truth of themselves and ignores the personal and historical conditions under which lived experiences are recounted.<sup>23</sup> As Foucault makes clear, communication invariably takes place in relations of power, making impossible communication devoid of the constraints of the structures within which it takes place. To understand voicing identity and experience as “an exercise in recognition”<sup>24</sup> that is inherently transformative is to believe that persons can speak who they are, that others can hear and understand them, and that such recognition necessarily enables dialogue and action. Unquestioned are the relations of self to experience, social-discursive formations, and audience. What if voiced experience and identity are comprised of shifting identifications and interpretations? What if what is heard and seen is unevenly received by spectators and listeners? I am concerned that identity politics takes identity to be a self-evident category from which knowledge and experience flow and elides the ways knowledge and experience are discursively and historically mediated.<sup>25</sup> Identity seeks recognition, yet depends on social relations and social knowledges to be recognized. As Lacanian arguments point out, recognition is never “full” or complete; it “is not conferred upon a subject, but forms that subject.”<sup>26</sup> This mutually constitutive relation of identity and recognition belies the possibility of “authentic” knowing, for both are predicated on existing discourses.

Queer theorists’ formulations of coming out or being closeted as performative speech acts highlight the role of others in the creation of one’s voice and visibility. Eve Sedgwick has described the dynamics of secrecy and disclosure, or “the epistemology of the closet,” thus:

Every encounter with a new classful of students, to say nothing of a new boss, social worker, loan officer, landlord, doctor, erects new closets whose fraught and characteristic laws of optics and physics exact from at least gay people new surveys, new calculations, new draughts and requisitions of secrecy or disclosure. Even an out gay person deals daily with interlocutors about whom she doesn’t know whether they know or not; it is equally difficult to guess for any given interlocutor whether, if they did know, the knowledge would seem very important.<sup>27</sup>

Transactive knowledges and the perpetual (re)negotiation of information are constitutive of lesbian voice and visibility. The ignorance or

knowledge of others—and the significance they are perceived as attaching to knowledge—may construct one's use of voice/silence in becoming visible or maintaining invisibility. Preceding Sedgwick, Erving Goffman's theorization of strategies of "stigmatized" persons for negotiating social relations points to the context-bound, unstable nature of "knowledge." Goffman does not place visibility and voice as sources of knowledge; instead, others' knowledge constructs visibility and voice as persons manage their identities (managing what others see and hear) through "passing" to avoid revelation or "covering" in order to reduce tension by diverting others' attention from the stigma, or, for those who have achieved a degree of eminence, acting as "professional representatives" of their category.<sup>28</sup> Voice/silence and visibility/invisibility, then, are not origins of knowledge/ignorance, but both consequences and elements of it. In other words, voice does not lead to visibility that in turn leads to knowledge. Knowledge may set the terms for the use and reception of voice and visibility. For example, in the case of the GAU, existing social knowledges and ignorances were productive of the ways gay and lesbian academics constituted themselves as a group seeking positive (re)definition through the construction of individual and collective identities and histories. There was a project of rewriting knowledges that limited the visible by constituting an affirming visibility that nonetheless was legible through the very knowledges of the moment. Thus, there is a complex interplay among voice, visibility, and knowledge—and gradations of their opposites—in which they are in mutually constitutive relationships dependent on context. Causality is lost to instability.

Contrary to a formulation of coming out as signifying movement from secrecy to disclosure, theorists such as Sedgwick argue that incoherences surrounding gay definition prohibit "authentic" disclosure of self. Because gay definition is unstable, voice and visibility do not create knowledge. Persons may never know when or how disclosure occurs or what meanings it takes on: "no one person can take control over all the multiple, often contradictory codes by which information about sexual identity and activity can seem to be conveyed" (79). Conversely, as Butler suggests, disclosure may conceal more than it reveals:

In the act which would disclose the true and full content of that "I," a certain radical *concealment* is thereby produced. For it is always finally unclear what is meant by invoking the lesbian-signifier, since its signification is always to some degree out of one's control, but also because its *specificity* can only be demarcated by exclusions that return to disrupt its claim to coherence. . . . If I claim to be a lesbian, I "come out" only to produce a new and different "closet." The "you" to whom I come out now has access to a different region of opacity.<sup>29</sup>

Butler points to the lack of control one has over signification and stresses the illusion of knowledge produced in speech due to the false coherence of lesbian. Because “lesbian” cannot be known yet is presumed to be knowable as “such and such,” lesbian takes on different meanings according to context. The limitations of representation suggest that rather than merely hearing or seeing the voiceless and invisible, it may be more efficacious to learn of the meanings and relations of voice and visibility, silence and invisibility in specific contexts. What knowledges are implicated in their workings? The shift I propose from the representation of identity to an inquiry into knowledges in practice requires a comment on the theoretical frameworks I draw from, as well as their difficulties.

### IDENTITY INTO PRACTICE

Critiques of identity politics and the effects of knowledge/ignorance, voice/silence, visibility/invisibility have been evolving over the past several decades, primarily in literary and cultural studies. In the social sciences, there has been little scholarship that goes beyond “giving voice” and “making visible,” possibly for good reason. The social sciences’ reliance on empirical-perceptual data (datum: that which is given) leaves little room for interpretive approaches that seek to go beyond the given, particularly when the given is an unrepresentable and unstable identity. A difficulty of this inquiry is that of bringing epistemologies that rely on sensory modalities of seeing and hearing into conversation with epistemologies that question what is seen and heard, related to a topic whose epistemology may be that there is no seeing, hearing, or knowing. My inquiry is characterized by several tensions as I draw from the social sciences, the humanities, humanism, and poststructuralism. Instead of placing the individual as origin, I am interested in subjectivity and agency as they are formed through discourses and actions. In considering identity and experience as constructed rather than given, my questions turn not to “what are the women’s experiences?” but to “how are their experiences produced in the sociocultural and institutional discourses in which they live and work?” and “how do they challenge or adapt to these discourses as they enact their scholarship, pedagogy, and departmental relations?” I am less interested in representing “selves” than in asking how “selves” are articulations of specific dilemmas found at the intersections of institutional space and time. Yet my ethnographic approach assumes identity and experience as starting points and does not easily allow such interpretive leaps. Thus, a number of contradictions structure this work: What does it mean to conduct an empirical

study of lesbian academics if *lesbian* does not carry stable meanings? Does ethnography enable the interrogation of the construction of identity and knowledge by looking at and listening to their manifestations? If processes of construction are beyond ethnographic reach, are there other formulations that, taking construction for granted, may help to understand the intertwinings of *lesbian* and *academic*? I have found that although discourses may be identifiable through fieldwork, connecting them to the *construction* of academic practice has not always been possible. Instead, in order to understand how three women enact their relationships to *lesbian* and *academic*, it has been helpful to identify their practices within specific domains, which I analyze as sites of agency. By agency, I mean the possibilities persons have for effecting change and for pursuing projects they find meaningful.

Humanist understandings of agency have been contested by those who embrace postmodern understandings of the subject, as described by Butler: "In the one view, agency is an attribute of persons, presupposed as prior to power and language, inferred from the structure of the self; in the second, agency is the effect of discursive conditions which do not for that reason control its use; it is not a transcendental category, but a contingent and fragile possibility opened up in the midst of constituting relations."<sup>30</sup> This second view of agency, from which I draw, is consonant with Butler's understanding of identity as existing not prior to discourse and action, but as constituted "within practices of *signification*."<sup>31</sup> These practices are "*not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition*" (145). It is precisely repetition that allows for "the possibility of a variation" (145), which leads to Butler's argument that agency lies not in the doer but in the deed. This open-ended construction of the subject—through actions within discursive formations—is what makes possible "subversive repetition" (147): *doing*, rather than *being*, allows for new iterations of regulatory norms. In her example of gender as performative, performances of gender (thought to be a *being*, but actually a *doing*) are imperfect copies of the norm and thus "swerv[e] from their original purposes" (29) to expand what is culturally intelligible. Although the performance of discontinuous gender identities may demonstrate the arbitrariness of categories of compulsory heterosexuality, I do not share Butler's optimism that it will in and of itself create within the "matrix of intelligibility rival and subversive matrices of gender disorder" (17). Attention to historical and contemporaneous contexts may enable an understanding of how such a *doing* can lead to new possibilities.

Butler's recent work, *Excitable Speech*, signals more nuanced attention to temporality and context. In it, she points to the historical traces in all speech, figuring it "as repetition, not as origination" (39). Draw-

ing on Austin, she explains that the “subject speaks *conventionally*, that is, it speaks in a voice that is never fully singular” (25). Time is confused, for conventions are informed by the past, yet speech takes place in a present and presumes a future: “Who speaks when convention speaks? In what time does convention speak? In some sense, it is an inherited set of voices, an echo of others who speak as the ‘I’” (25). Historicity, or the sedimentation of uses of language, lends contemporary speech its meanings. In this, Butler borrows Derrida’s formulation of citationality to argue that a speech act “*accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior and authoritative set of practices*” (51). With the opening of this temporal dimension, the space in which one speaks or acts may also be opened: “Not only defined by social context, such speech is also marked by its capacity to break with context. Thus, performativity has its own social temporality in which it remains enabled precisely by the contexts from which it breaks” (40). Speech acts are performed in contexts beyond those for which they are intended. These breaks with ordinary usage are key to the possibility of “contest[ing] what has become sedimented in and as the ordinary” (145). To suggest that one draws on norms, yet never reproduces these norms faithfully or in faithful contexts, offers the beginnings of a theory of appropriation. However, a question of what enables practices to arise in new contexts remains.

Several theorists have suggested that performance and the performative have links to Michel de Certeau’s theory of practice.<sup>32</sup> De Certeau situates his theory of practice as breaking with more deterministic social theories, such as Bourdieu’s socially reproduced habitus and Foucault’s sometimes seemingly inescapable disciplinary grid. Practice is a theory of usages loosely informed by Saussure’s distinction of *langue* (a system of language) and *parole* (an act of speaking) that focuses on “situating the act in relation to its circumstances, ‘contexts of use’” (33). De Certeau’s interest in the practices of “consumers”—the reader of a text or the pedestrian in a city—blurs the dichotomy of producers-as-active and consumers-as-passive. Practices of everyday life are “‘ways of operating’ or doing things” (xi), “modes of operation or schemata of action” (xi), an “ensemble of *procedures*” (43) within social relations. Practices may either be strategies, which are used by institutions and those in power, or tactics, the use or appropriation of existing systems and institutions by the “other.”<sup>33</sup> Strategies, which pertain to the *propre*, “a spatial or institutional localization” (xix), are circumscribed spatially, “and thus serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it” (xix). These spaces seek “a certain independence with respect to the variability of circumstances. It is a mastery of time through the foundation of an autonomous place” (36). Tactics, on the other hand, are tem-

poral; they have no spatial location but are created improvisationally within space, and have the effect of redistributing space: "A tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety" (xix). The indeterminacy of tactics makes them a potential source of resistance, for their intuitive, unspoken (tacit) nature disrupts the predictability, order, and visibility space would impose: "The order of things is precisely what 'popular' tactics turn to their own ends, without any illusion that it will change any time soon. . . . Into the institution to be served are thus insinuated styles of social exchange, technical invention, and moral resistance" (26). Tactical practices must be understood as appropriations of space, responses to networks of relations.

While space would erase the variability introduced by time, the improvisations of tactics complicate the coherence space would impose, for they are "composed of many moments and many heterogeneous elements. It [a tactic] has no general and abstract formulation, no proper place. It is a memory" (82). As de Certeau explains, "Like those birds that lay their eggs only in other species' nests, memory produces in a place that does not belong to it. . . . [M]emory derives its interventionary force from its very capacity to be altered—unmoored, mobile, lacking any fixed position" (86). Memory, or the intersecting historicities of spaces, acts, and individuals is "mobilized relative to what happens" (80) and brings new responses to what it finds. Practice may be thought of as the creative use of what is available, "conditioned by places, rules, and givens; it is a proliferation of inventions in limited spaces."<sup>34</sup> Thus, as de Certeau points out, the visible locations that panoptic disciplining would produce are disrupted, for "[t]here is no place that is not haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence, spirits one can 'invoice' or not. Haunted places are the only ones people can live in."<sup>35</sup> Other times are constitutive—in unpredictable ways—of spaces and present practices, just as spaces create the conditions for tactics' possibilities and effects, as Cindy Patton has explained:

[What] de Certeau calls tactics, but which may as easily be called performance, involves deployment of signs which have already attained meaning and/or standard usage within the legitimated discourse and crystallized practices of a "social," understood as a place of contestation. . . . Performance operates through timing and repartee, and is not recognizable except as defacement within the space-oriented domain of the proper.<sup>36</sup>

This understanding of the social as a multiply contemporary, historical, and spatial dimension in which knowledges are put into practice in new contexts shares assumptions with William Sewell's theory of the

“transposability of schemas.”<sup>37</sup> In his reworking of Bourdieu’s theory of fields and habitus and Giddens’ structuration theory,<sup>38</sup> Sewell argues that actors’ schemas (akin to procedures for practice) draw on existing resources to create new resources for action. Structure and agency presuppose each other (as space and tactics presuppose each other, and as *langue* makes possible *parole*), yet actors’ schema and practices are not isomorphic with one structure but are derived through movement across structures. This movement through multiple domains, cultures, and locations forms actors’ strategies for action, which they bring to new locations. Relocated and recombined in new contexts, these actions constitute the possibility of agency to rearrange spaces by appropriating aspects of them for new uses and meanings.<sup>39</sup>

Practice underscores the mutability of *lesbian* and suggests that identity might be reconceptualized as but one tactic, or form of practice. Certain discursive spaces encourage certain articulations of the self: voices and practices are created within the conventions and knowledges contexts allow and offer. In the same way, *intellectual* and *academic* are not fixed categories but forms of practice, ways of responding to circumstances. Although at times I seem to use the terms “academic” and “intellectual” interchangeably, I intend a distinction. “Intellectual” suggests a relation to knowledge and society, whereas “academic” highlights the mediation of that relationship by the space of universities. Consonant with the temporal nature of practice, Bruce Robbins has urged historical attention to “what social changes may have occurred *around* intellectuals so as to shift their value, function, and potential for resistance.”<sup>40</sup> Equally important, and germane to location in academia, are institutional changes that affect the work of lesbian faculty. In understanding academic practices as responses, I draw on Bill Readings’ theorization of the “post-historical” university, or the university constituted by multiple spaces and times.

## INTELLECTUAL PRACTICE AMONG THE RUINS

In *The University in Ruins*, Readings traces the development of the modern university from the emergence of a Kantian university guided by reason, to a Humboldtian project of culture-building through research and teaching, to a recent technobureaucratic emphasis on “excellence.” The modern university was an institution centered by “an idea that functions as its referent, as the end and meaning of its activities.”<sup>41</sup> The Kantian University of Reason had as its central purpose to create progress by developing autonomous reasoning subjects and rational communities in the “perpetual conflict between established tradition and rational

inquiry" (57). Slowly displacing the centering of reason was the Humboldtian University of Culture (the model for U.S. research universities), which developed a unified culture for the nation-state and merged the cultivation of the individual and the nation (or the subject's relation to the nation-state): "On the one hand, culture names an *identity*. It is the unity of all knowledges that are the object of study. . . . On the other hand, culture names a process of *development*, of the cultivation of character—*Bildung*" (64). The projects of culture and reason are not a simple chronology, but contemporaneous. For example, these two discourses join in the American preoccupation with the literary canon, a definition of heritage and culture that is partly handed down, but also chosen "in a free exercise of rational will" (85). The now-classic call for giving students the "discipline and furniture of the mind"<sup>42</sup> figures academic subjects as having intrinsic value for their cultural content and their ability to develop habits of reasoning. The study of "the best that has been thought and written," particularly in the humanities, "would train the moral intelligence, working to produce a community with shared values, and would provide foundations for thought and action."<sup>43</sup>

A contemporary manifestation of the nexus of culture-reason lies in the idealized conceptualization of the university as populated by universal intellectuals engaged in the disinterested pursuit of knowledge to impart to future generations.<sup>44</sup> The "crisis of the humanities" begun in the mid-1980s calls for a return to canonical authors and core Western knowledge. The teaching of high culture as a "common culture" to be transmitted inducts citizens into "our national heritage" and teaches skills to reason.<sup>45</sup> Such formulations appeal to liberal democratic principles of equality of opportunity and freedom from indoctrination despite their elision of relations of power, the inherently interested and contextual nature of knowledge, and the value-laden nature of selecting traditions to be taught. The teaching of culture becomes largely monumental and leaves little room for social criticism; figured as naturalized heritage, culture "serves as a trope to decouple knowledge from power."<sup>46</sup> Reacting to changes in university curricula effected by protest movements of the 1960s,<sup>47</sup> neoconservatives argue that those who teach from openly committed positions pose a threat to the university's autonomy. In the context of the "culture wars," much oppositional intellectual work that has sought to dispel the universal intellectual has been based in individual and collective identity, as in the work of the GAU. These efforts continue to be tied to culture and reason—with the added twist of identities that seek location. Representation and recognition of identities—rather than the differences that produce identities—become the terms of the debates in the culture wars through the appropriation of culture and reason.

With the decline of the nation-state as the primary unit of economic production, the lessening importance of culture to the global economy, and increasing acknowledgment of a lack of a unified culture, culture-building and the development of rational communities have lost their status as the unifying ideas of the university. Displaced as fixed referents, culture and reason become contested centers. What Readings calls the “post-historical” university, or “the University without an idea” (118), is an institution that “has outlived itself, is now a survivor of the era in which it defined itself in terms of the project of the historical development, affirmation, and inculcation of national culture” (6). In their stead has arisen the University of Excellence, in which, he argues, “The need for excellence is what we all agree on. And we all agree on it because it is not an ideology, in the sense that it has no external referent or internal content” (23). Because Excellence has no meaning, cultural and political questions of value are not at the center, but economic criteria of “performativity in an expanded market” (38). Research comes to be gauged by its exchange-value in the market rather its use-value for the nation-state (175). Pedagogy becomes part of the apparatus of transnational exchange and no longer serves citizens but “contemporary students [who] are consumers rather than national subjects” (53). The Excellent university is a space that carries traces (ruins) of the past, in which the purposes of intellectual work, of teaching and research, become uncertain. Faculty can neither restore nor ignore “traditions” that have historically defined the university but instead must sort through its ruins to give them contemporary meaning. Dwelling in the ruins of the university requires “attention to the present complexity of its space, undertaking an endless work of *détournement* of the spaces willed to us by a history whose temporality we no longer inhabit” (129). Echoing de Certeau’s idea that “Haunted places are the only ones people can live in,”<sup>48</sup> Readings says of the university in ruins, “the past is not erased but haunts the present” (170). Memory intrudes to make the space of the university multiple.

This confused temporality maps onto de Certeau’s distinction between place and space to offer a means of conceptualizing the implications of the ruins for academic practice. Place represents an order of distributed relationships, location, and fixity, such as a given culture to be transmitted, an interpretation to be learned, or defined skills and methods of reasoning to be acquired. Space, on the other hand, is a “*practiced place*” that is “composed of intersections of mobile elements” (117). The intrusion of memory diverts disciplined places that would be fixed to create spaces that are emergent, incomplete, and unpredictable. The ruins of the university become spaces that are multiple, for if space is a place in use, it is made ambiguous because it is

“dependent upon many different conventions” (117). In this context, intellectual practice is not a prescribed performance, but an interpretation of the resources found among the ruins. Intellectuals respond to the discontinuities and uncertainties of their and others’ circumstances, aware of the impossibility of final knowledge or understanding. Knowledge ceases to be independent, transcendental, or transmittable, information and skills cannot be dispensed, and students are no longer autonomous subjects to be developed. In short, the indeterminacy of excellence creates a renewed ethical imperative to conceptualize intellectual practice as networks of obligations to self, society, and students. A decentering, or indeterminacy, is not a state to bemoan, but a site of possibility for the tactical use of the space of the university. With the loss of fixity, either in the university’s purposes or the role of intellectuals, intellectual practice is emergent, contingent on circumstances, open to interpretation.

Foucault’s specific intellectual, who has been said to break with the “totalizing ambition of the universal intellectual,”<sup>49</sup> offers an example of intellectual practice as implication, as contextual response. Foucault has described intellectual practice as “not to shape others’ political will; it is, through the analyses that he carries out in his own field, to question over and over again what is postulated as self-evident, to disturb people’s mental habits, the way they do and think things, to dissipate what is familiar and accepted.”<sup>50</sup> Located in institutional and social spaces, intellectuals’ role is less to shape will or reveal false consciousness than it is to play a part in questioning and shifting the discourses in which they are implicated. Discursive formations rather than identity per se are constitutive of intellectual practice.<sup>51</sup> A useful extension of Foucault’s formulation can be found in Andrew Ross’ description of “new intellectuals,” who are historically and personally positioned and who intervene not only in specific locations, as Foucault describes, but also in a “broader” public sphere. The “new intellectual” is not bound by a singular identity, set of interests, or tactics, in the way, for example, that early GAU work was. Rather, such intellectuals

belong to different social groups and have loyalties to different social movements. They will possess specific professional or occupational skills and knowledges that can be applied within institutions but also in public spheres and communities. Their sense of strategy will shift from context to context, whether it involves the use of specialized knowledge in an occupational field or the use of generalized persuasion in speaking through the popular media. . . . Their ethical sense of the personal as a liberatory sphere means that their responsibility to “objective” political causes will be experientially inflected by a deeply subjective psycho-history.<sup>52</sup>