CHAPTER 7


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"Most of the time, a young man's choice of a date for the senior prom is of no great importance to anyone other than the student." But in 1980 gay high school senior Aaron Fricke decided that he wanted to attend his prom with a "male companion." When principal Richard Lynch—citing danger to Aaron as well as to Aaron's classmates—refused to give his permission, Fricke sued for the right to attend. About this decision, Fricke writes, "The simple, obvious thing would have been to go to the senior prom with a girl. But that would have been a lie—a lie to myself, to the girl, and to all the other students." The Rhode Island District Court determined that the school's claim that Fricke's attendance at the dance posed a threat to security was not sufficiently compelling to override Fricke's first amendment rights to free speech and association. Fricke had maintained in court that he was exercising rights to which all human beings are entitled, and he later reflected on his decision to take a public stand on the issue:

I believed that those who had themselves faced discrimination or prejudice would immediately understand what I was doing and its implications for human rights. There would be others who may never have had direct experiences with prejudice but who would recognize my right to the date of my choice. These people may have been misled to believe that homosexuality is wrong, but they could still understand that my rights were being denied."

Philosopher Cornel West has distinguished what he terms "thin" and "thick" oppositional strategies in minority cultures. Where thick opposition questions an entire structural framework, "thin opposition is primarily a form of opposition that works on everyday practices at the cultural level." Given that culture is ever changing, the context for these oppositional maneuvers must
also change. And whether resistance is “thin” or “thick” probably depends on a
variety of historical, cultural, and psychosocial factors that cannot be fully
plumbed or articulated. Using West’s framework, one might construe Aaron
Fricke’s claim that he is entitled to the “right” to attend his senior prom as a
form of thin opposition. Though the demand to attend a prom can hardly con-
stitute a deep structural challenge to cultural dominance, the inclusion of a gay
couple in a paradigmatic heterosexual ritual like a prom cannot but call into
question our normative assumptions about dating, romance, and the nature of
desire. Yet, as Fricke’s attendance demonstrated, hegemonic practices gener-
ally have enough “give” to enable them to tolerate some deviance and remain
structurally sound.

At the level of culture, we learn the concepts basic to thought and action as
well as receive group validation for our interpretation of those concepts and our
evaluations of behavior. Culture is never monolithic or one-dimensional but
rather full of overlapping subcultures with their own identifiable “histories,
geographic locations, and social institutions.” Each group—dominant as well
as minority—may have its own mores, languages, codes, and signifiers. Gen-
erally, the level of overlap permits intergroup understanding; but the discourse
of a subculture, because it springs from its unique social position, reflects a
kind of knowledge that may be inaccessible to others.

The dichotomous language of “oppressor” and “victim” fails to capture the
multiplicity and the richness of these cultural layers in which modes of knowl-
edge compete for ascendancy. In such contests, victories are always temporary,
and knowledge is never absolute. But this means that subcultures are never
simply the passive recipients of an oppressive dominant ideology; indeed, such
a model cannot account for social change. Rather, subcultural groups tend to
seek out the pockets that make resistance possible; at the same time, the pres-
sure to replace a subjugated knowledge with the knowledge of the dominant
group is omnipresent. Gay and lesbian subculture functions in this social dy-
namic.

Yet homosexuality is not simply one more subculture in a cultural “melting
pot.” Homosexuality—like certain other “markers” of identity—is stigmatized
in the dominant culture, marginalized into near invisibility or openly vilified.
If, however, the texture of culture and ideology is always open, then subcul-
ture—even in the most repressive cultural contexts—exists in a dynamic of
negotiation and what Stuart Hall has termed articulation. Therefore, paradox-
ically, societal hatred of gays and lesbians may facilitate the creation of sexual
categories and thus gay subculture. If sexuality were not a category in our
culture, gay subculture (like left-handedness, which exists as difference without
subculture) would likely not exist.

Identity is always relational, and gay and lesbian adolescents, whatever else
we say about them, live in at least two subcultures: they are gay or lesbian, and they are adolescents. Lesbians qua women also confront sexism. In addition, gay or lesbian adolescents may be even further marginalized because of racial, religious, ethnic, or class differences from the dominant culture. Conversely, one must not ignore the fact emphasized in much recent theory developed by women of color that any model of oppression must also attend to the multiple levels of privilege with which oppression coexists. That is, lesbians and gay adolescents may also benefit from class, race, gender, religious, or ethnic privilege even as they experience marginality by virtue of their membership in a subjugated group. Patricia Collins, bell hooks, and other women-of-color theorists have also argued persuasively that identity and subculture cannot be articulated additively; that is, one's oppression, for example, as an African-American lesbian cannot be understood simply by totaling the individual oppressions that African-Americans, gays, and women face in the dominant culture. Rather, multiple membership in subjugated groups qualitatively changes the nature of one's experience and identity.

Adolescents form a diverse subculture existing in a complex and ambivalent relation to the dominant culture. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual teenagers form a subculture within a subculture; thus, they must negotiate relations with other teenagers, with gay, lesbian, and bisexual adults, and with the prevailing culture. In this chapter I explore the myriad strategies that gay and lesbian adolescents have deployed in this process of negotiation and identity construction. But several preliminary cautions are in order.

First, if, as I claim below, adolescence itself is a social construction, then there is no reified, universal "adolescent." Though this point is almost cliché in theoretical approaches to culture, one cannot overemphasize in analyses of particular subcultural groups that the dynamic nature of culture means that all conclusions are tentative and preliminary at best. Second, given the invisibility of much of gay and lesbian life and the scant attention paid to gay and lesbian adolescents, my observations here should be taken to be partial and to serve as a goad to encourage further and more-specific exploration of the complicated networks that constitute this group. Finally, since each of us carries multiple and shifting identities marking both domination and subjugation, there can be no "pure" gayness or lesbianism; indeed, attempts to construct a "pure" or "definitive" account of "the homosexual" have all too often resulted in accounts of white upper-class gay males whose experiences are then falsely universalized. I would argue that any attempt to isolate some aspect of identity—whether it be race, gender, class, or ethnicity—is doomed to failure because it must inevitably covertly normalize some other variable. As that buried, unarticulated variable is naturalized and made normative, so is the highlighted category forever consigned to deviant status and our account of it flawed and in-
complete. But while the rejection of totalizing theory does not preclude an analysis of the possible meanings of group identity and cohesion, it does mean that one must resist discourse's conservatizing tendencies by acknowledging that any interpretation of gay or lesbian life is itself culturally constructed, contingent, and unable to freeze the multiple and even contradictory aspects of identity.

With these cautionary notices serving to frame the discussion, I want to examine how gay and lesbian adolescent sexuality is constructed, given the existence not only of homophobia and heterosexism in the dominant culture but also the presence of powerful cultural ideologies about adolescence itself. In undertaking this inquiry, I have tried—insofar as possible—to let gay and lesbian adolescents speak for themselves. Until quite recently little was written about the "real lives" of adolescents; discussions of adolescence—full of stereotypes, warnings about adolescent weaknesses, and recriminations directed at parents—hid agendas that reflected fears about the loss of social control, which adolescence had come to represent. Even less is known about gay and lesbian adolescents who must negotiate their own identities in a culture that tries to deny their existence and where stereotypes about adolescents may or may not resonate for them. How do gay and lesbian adolescents manage these negotiations? How do they construct meanings for themselves out of the messages they receive from the many cultures of which they are a part? How might these adolescents exploit the open spaces that exist in culture? Given that identity is relational, how does the creation of gay and lesbian adolescent identity affirm or challenge the dominant culture? In what ways does gay and lesbian adolescence fit or fail to fit with our normative assumptions about adolescence? In seeking answers to these questions, we may learn not only about gay and lesbian teenagers themselves but also about how our understanding of gay and lesbian subculture can illuminate meanings within the dominant culture. Finally, my analysis is grounded both in theoretical materials on adolescence and gay and lesbian life, and in a variety of experiential data, including my work with gay and lesbian students, my involvement in the Boston Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Speakers Bureau, and my attendance at several meetings of the Boston Alliance of Gay and Lesbian Youth (BAGLY).

**Sexuality and Homophobia**

Though it may be tautological to point out that gay and lesbian romantic relationships take place between persons of the same sex, that fundamental difference is enormously important. One might conjecture that in a culture free of heterosexism and sexual binarisms, "sexual preference" might be a trivial, value-neutral category or even cease to exist as a category. If so, surely "gay
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“Homophobia, Identity, and the Meanings of Desire” would also cease to exist, perhaps replaced by some heretofore unimagined liminal category. Though such speculations can reward one with new insight, there can be no doubt that—for now and some time to come—gay and lesbian subculture exists and that sexuality is a powerful constituent of self-definition.

Homophobia and heterosexism, from their most subtle to their most blatant expressions, maintain heterosexuality’s hegemony; and “deviance”—even where tolerated—is always suspect. Indeed, it is possible that as some sexual strictures loosen, more virulent backlash against gays and lesbians follows as a strategy to police fragile gender and sexual boundaries. Our recent legal history seems to bear out this line of analysis. In the last thirty years, though the Supreme Court has allowed contraception for married couples (Griswold, 1965) and for unmarried couples (Eisenstadt, 1972), struck down laws against miscegenation (Loving, 1967), and permitted abortion (Roe v. Wade, 1973), the Court in Bowers v. Hardwick (1986) was unwilling to apply those same standards to decriminalize consenting homosexual acts. The constitutional basis for the earlier decisions was a penumbral right to privacy, not a right to sexual freedom or autonomy, and the Court explicitly refused to apply the privacy framework to gay and lesbian “lifestyle.” Arguing that not all acts occurring in private could be permitted, the Hardwick Court claimed that homosexual consensual sex resembled incest and battering far more than heterosexual coupling. Those few legal victories won by gays and lesbians also support this line of argument. For example, the legal permission granted to Fricke to attend his prom was grounded in first amendment rights rather than any conceivable sexual or affectional liberty.

Homosexuality, then, seems to represent a boundary, even for many “sexual liberals.” Philosopher Elizabeth Spelman has argued that somatophobia—a fear and hatred of the physical body and a valorization of the mind or spirit separable from the body—has animated much of traditional Western philosophy. The philosophical insistence on the life of the intellect freed from the “prison” of the body; the contempt for the body’s inevitable processes of illness, decay, and death; the bodily tendency to epistemological error and moral temptation—somatophobia has underpinned many of the dualisms riddling traditional philosophy from Socrates to Descartes, from Kant to Sartre. Though Spelman employs the concept to explain philosophy’s devalorization of women and people of color (who, she argues, are seen as inevitably and tragically embodied), somatophobia may also illuminate the sources of homophobia. Gays and lesbians have come to represent the sexual; gay men in particular are thought to be hypersexual, controlled by the body and its desires. Further, the Freudian view that latent homosexuality exists in individuals who may never exhibit any behavioral evidence of homosexuality makes it difficult, if not im-
possible, to prove that one is not a homosexual; thus, fear of one’s own homosexuality may manifest itself in verbal and physical attacks on gays. Men—for whom the masculine gender role is quite narrowly circumscribed—may strive to be “hypermasculine” as a reaction against their own same-sex attractions. One study even found that a man’s status improved if he identified another male as gay, whether or not the identification was correct. Homophobia has also served to erase from history the contributions of gays and lesbians and led to the marginalization of homosexuality as extraordinary, usually pathological. It has invalidated those same-sex relationships (whether sexual or not) that have had powerful erotic components to them. For example, “women’s choice of women as passionate comrades, life partners, co-workers, lovers, tribe, has been crushed, invalidated, forced into hiding and disguise.” Intense same-sex friendships that continue after adolescence—particularly those between men—are often discouraged, judged immature, and occasionally severely punished. But generally such heavy-handed cultural intervention is unnecessary, for we quickly absorb messages about permissible and impermissible relationships. Indeed, homophobia is so pervasive and so powerfully internalized that individuals may “voluntarily” abandon a close friendship rather than risk charges of homosexuality. Inversely, heterosexism undermines the very possibility of close, nonromantic friendships between men and women.

Even much feminist theory has either ignored lesbianism or trivialized it as an alternative “lifestyle,” refusing to interrogate heterosexual privilege or to critique heterosexism as an institution. Feminists like Dorothy Dinnerstein have gone so far as to criticize single-sex parenting as the source of the “sexual malaise” and misogyny of contemporary culture; her demand that children be raised by parents of both sexes privileges heterosexual families. Some liberal allies of gays and lesbians (including gays and lesbians themselves) have inadvertently defused the power of same-sex sexuality by portraying it simply as a mirror reflection (“We’re no different from you”) of heterosexuality. Our cultural insistence on the importance—social as well as legal—of “privacy” has paradoxical consequences for gays and lesbians: while serving in some cases to shield gays and lesbians from public scrutiny, the contemporary fetishization of privacy permits the accusation that more-visible gays and lesbians are “flaunting” what heterosexism characterizes as “bedroom behavior.”

Finally, heterosexism—or what Adrienne Rich has termed “compulsory heterosexuality”—endorses not only sex-role rigidity but also sex-role inequality. “Heterosexuality may not be a ‘preference’ at all but something that has had to be imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, and maintained by force.” Heterosexism and homophobia ensure that women must be dependent on men for economic survival and physical safety, and they guarantee that men will maintain a careful physical and emotional distance from other men, including their most intimate friends and family members. The heterosexual family—
where women still generally earn less than men, do more household work, and have more responsibility for children—mirrors the social inequality of men and women. Though gay and lesbian relationships are not necessarily more egalitarian by nature, studies suggest that they do tend to be more egalitarian than their heterosexual counterparts, particularly because the partners cannot delegate relationship responsibilities automatically along the lines of traditional sex-role expectations.

Rigid definitions of gender, of "masculinity" and "femininity," underpin homophobia. Homosexuality, contrary to the popular stereotype, is not an example of gender confusion, and gay men and lesbians may have as heavy an investment in gender as do their heterosexual counterparts. But society’s hatred of gay male sexuality seems to be inextricably linked to its hatred of women: the gay male is viewed as "acting like a woman" and abandoning the male privilege to which he is entitled. Conversely, the lesbian is seen as attempting to usurp male authority and privilege; though she may be penalized for her trespass, her presumption is at least understood. Thus, given that men and women are socialized in accordance with the culture’s gender-role expectations, gay male and lesbian sexualities are inevitably constructed differently. And because lesbians confront sexism as well as homophobia, the lesbian qua woman shares with heterosexual women an oppression from which gay men are exempt. As long as gay men are able to "pass" as heterosexual, they reap the benefits of sex inequality.

A multitude of legal and extralegal sanctions against homosexuals reflect the dominant culture’s investment in heterosexuality (and perhaps its concomitant anxiety about its fragility). Few states recognize gay rights, permitting employers to fire gay employees, landlords to evict gay tenants, and lesbian parents to lose custody of their children. Insurance policies do not recognize same-sex partners, hospitals may not allow one's same-sex partner to visit, courts may blame the gay victim of an assault for "provoking" the attack, children taunt each other with the label "fag," advertising and popular culture in general are full of subtle and blatant messages about heterosexuality, and heterosexism leads most people to assume that everyone around them is heterosexual. Because homosexuals are an invisible minority, negative stereotypes are easy to maintain in the face of little contrary evidence. The lives of gays and lesbians, and gay and lesbian adolescents more specifically, are shaped in this context.

Gay and Lesbian Adolescents: Homophobia and Identity Formation

"Practically all researchers agree that a person’s sexual preference is determined early in life [some think as early as three]. That means that in high school, like in adult life, roughly one person in ten is going to have strong gay
feelings." While accommodating their lives to the usual pressures and demands of turbulent adolescence, gay and lesbian adolescents have to face the additional burden of homophobia. One adolescent, for example, tells the following story: I’ve lost many of my male friends. Since they know I’m this way, they run off or move quickly if I come near them. I no longer sit with boys in the cafeteria. I sit with girls because they are the only friends I have. To be honest I’ve had more bad experiences than good in coming out."

Unlike members of racial, religious, or ethnic subcultures, gay or lesbian adolescents are likely to be isolated in their families. Gays and lesbians are dispersed throughout society and generally have heterosexual parents, and “rejection by one’s own parents is a more common story than we know.” This is especially painful for gay and lesbian adolescents, given that adolescence in this culture has come to represent a period when one can (safely and temporarily) reject one’s parents as part of a process of individuation. But many gay and lesbian teenagers are struggling for their very survival against cultural repression, parental abandonment, and familial pressures to conform. Parental strategies—screening telephone calls, restricting activities and contacts with friends, revoking school tuition, evicting their children from the home, physically abusing and threatening to abuse, compelling therapy with unsympathetic psychiatrists, and even institutionalizing—attempt to police the behavior of a gay or lesbian child. One gay adolescent informed me that his parents sent him to a psychiatrist when he was age five to “cure” him of atypical gender behavior. Even in the most “tolerant” households, parents may repeatedly deny the reality, insist that the child will outgrow it, or manipulate the child to feel a profound sense of guilt. “Parents can be blind to signs of gayness in their own children though they would immediately see such signs in others. One time my father told me Jon was so ‘obviously gay’ that there was no way his parents wouldn’t know. I wanted to tell him then. I wanted to say, ‘How can you be so blind? I’m gay too and you don’t know it!’”

Further, because so much of homosexual culture is hidden, gay and lesbian youth lack positive role models. As one student remarked, “I know of no other gay people in school; men or lesbians, students or teachers.” Such isolation is particularly painful for adolescents for whom so much of their self-worth depends on peer-group approval: “When I entered high school I was completely isolated from the world. I had lost all concept of humanity; I had given up all hopes of ever finding love, warmth or tenderness in the world. I did not lie to myself, but I did my best to keep other people from thinking I was homosexual. For the most part I succeeded.”

As gay and lesbian adults are becoming more open about their sexuality, gay and lesbian teenagers are finding more positive role models, and certainly more resources now exist than ever did before. Still, however, the culture is
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profoundly heterosexist, and gay and lesbian teenagers often have to fantasize about the lifestyles of popular culture heroes or guess the sexuality of adults they encounter. While popular culture may offer positive (though peripheral) glimpses of gay and lesbian sexuality (e.g., L.A. Law; Welcome Home, Roxie Carmichael; Truth or Dare; and so forth), more often than not it exploits gays and lesbians as comic "relief" (e.g., Mannequin, Father of the Bride) or signifiers of corruption and deviance (e.g., Silence of the Lambs, Basic Instinct). Gay and lesbian viewers develop the skill of oppositional reading, or "reading against the grain," and "finding" gay or lesbian subtexts in what to members of the dominant culture may appear to be heterosexual texts (e.g., Thelma and Louise, Cagney and Lacey). But materials that push these boundaries more overtly or articulate thicker challenges inevitably provoke hostile public reactions; note, for example, the furor over the possible bisexuality in Madonna's video Justify My Love, which even MTV refused to run. And the gay/lesbian imagination—however creative—can only stretch so far, even allowing for the inevitable textual gaps in any cultural production.

As long as there are so few open gays and lesbians, stereotypes and myths about homosexuality can flourish without opposition. Ironically, because anyone "could be" gay or lesbian, it also means there is tremendous pressure to prove oneself heterosexual. As one sixteen-year-old lesbian stated, "Even young people who know they're straight feel they have to show it to prevent themselves from being called queer." Groups of boys may call other boys names or, in some cases, assault boys they have decided are "queer." Though racism has lost much of its social currency, little stigma attaches to homophobia. In fact, though many schools have created strict policies forbidding racist, sexist, and anti-Semitic name-calling, students may be permitted to sling homophobic epithets.

While it is true that America seems to be experiencing a disturbing resurgence of racism and anti-Semitism, . . . it is also true that we will not allow discrimination based on these hatreds and at least make pretenses of disapproving of the hate itself. In the meantime, homophobia is still vastly more respectable than prejudice against any other minority and creates an atmosphere in which the penalties for choosing to "come out" are potentially severe (loss of friends, family, economic security, or even life). Homophobia, then, is not an isolated, individual "neurosis" or clinical phobia but a form of social control that serves psychologically and physically to intimidate sexual minorities and to validate heterosexuality as "normal." Information about the harassment of gay and lesbian youth is extremely hard to find, in particular because few social workers or educators take the problem seriously. Programs like Los Angeles' Project 10 that provide counseling and edu-
cation about homophobia for public high school students are exceptional. In general, public school administrators and teachers refuse to protect gay youth from peer violence; some explicitly justify the homophobia, and others rationalize that “we can’t fight all battles” or that “kids need an outlet.” One teacher told a fourteen-year-old that he would rather his son come home with cancer than announce he was gay. But even liberal tolerance can be a form of homophobia, suggesting conditional acceptance and distanced approval: “As long as they don’t flaunt it”; “Just don’t throw it in my face”; or “It belongs in the bedroom.” Further, liberal tolerance has an ugly underside to it: the liberal, like the racist and the anti-Semite, distinguishes “good gays” from “bad gays.” In fact, the liberal in this sense may be likely to be critical of (homo)sexuality while insisting on a concern for those gays and lesbians deemed “worthy.” The “bad gays” may be more-effeminate gay men, or gays and lesbians who are open about their sexuality, or activist gays and lesbians who seek social change and refuse to remain invisible.

Gay teachers may be especially vulnerable in such an environment. One gay teacher, for example, mentioned that he does not bring up gay issues in the classroom, though he has never been afraid of other sorts of controversies: “If [the students] attacked homosexuality it would strike at the roots of my character and set up a lot of conflicts for me.” An additional dynamic affects lesbians and heterosexual women: many are hesitant to discuss their feminism, and some feminists resist all talk about lesbianism for fear that both will be discredited as a result. Ironically, then, hiring gays and lesbians will not necessarily provide role models for gay and lesbian youth as long as homophobia keeps them in the closet.

Students in such environments end up forced to struggle simply to survive rather than to be educated; the effects on self-esteem are devastating. As one young lesbian put it, “I feel very strongly that I was cheated out of educational and social supports thru [sic] the public school system because of its institutionalized homophobia, and suffered mental and emotional trauma with no recourse.” A young gay man stated, “High school to me was a terrifying and intimidating place.” If, as one California Supreme Court decision claimed, education today is the “sine qua non of useful existence,” then gay and lesbian adolescents are being robbed of their futures.

“Homophobia functions as a threat in defining and maintaining” traditional sex roles. Evidence suggests that people who are highly homophobic tend to be more authoritarian, to express greater awareness of status, and to hold more-rigid views of the fixed and static nature of sex-role behavior. Gays who possess more-positive self-concepts, conversely, tend to support sex equality and to embrace the goals of feminism. Much research has shown the correlation between strong beliefs in sex roles and antihomosexual attitudes; similarly, cultures and ideologies that tend to be “sex negative” generally enforce anti-
homosexual measures and are more likely to treat sexuality as dichotomous rather than continuous. More than this, though, heterosexism and homophobia seek to efface the fact that sexuality is political and not simply a “preference” or even an “orientation.” As one lesbian teacher noted about a series of faculty workshops on homophobia, “It is significant that the sessions emphasizing the problems experienced by lesbian and gay students and staff were better received than those that encouraged heterosexual staff to see their own sexuality as political and to acknowledge the privilege which it gives them.”

To be queer—to be different, outside the norm—is to be suspect; heterosexual hegemony serves not only to contain gay sexuality but also to pathologize almost any nonconformity. Deviations from traditional gender roles—feminine boys and masculine girls—are most frequently and severely punished. A “queer” might be an adolescent boy, for example, who studies rather than play a sport, who does not treat women as sex objects, who wears glasses, who has no romantic attachments, who shows any sign of physical or emotional vulnerability. Indeed, according to the Institute for the Protection of Lesbian and Gay Youth in New York City, violence against “effeminate” males is the major gay issue high school counselors face. This violence is directly tied to the masculine gender role:

The pain that heterosexual males bear as a consequence of homophobia is so chronic and pervasive that they probably do not notice that they are in pain, or the possible source of their discomfort. Homophobia encourages men to compete. Since competition is not a drive easily turned on and off at will, there is probably a tendency for homophobic men to compete with others in their personal lives as well as at work. Only certain types of relationships are possible between competitors. Love and close friendship are difficult to maintain in a competitive environment because to expose your weaknesses and admit your problems is to be less than a man, and gives your competitor an advantage.

Likewise, girls who hold feminist principles, who play sports, who wear no makeup or do not shave their legs, are “dykes.” In fact, one study of suburban teachers revealed that the student “least liked” was the independent, aggressive girl. Lacking the protection of a boyfriend, such girls—whether lesbian or not—are often more vulnerable to physical and psychological abuse from their peers. Stories abound in the gay community of lesbians who discover that their high school boyfriends also came out in college or later life. Wittingly or unwittingly, such alliances may serve as necessary heterosexual cover for these adolescents. Finally, students who are uncertain about their sexuality, either because homophobia blocks earlier certainty or because the person is simply a “late bloomer,” may face ridicule from peers or pressure to conform to the heterosexual norm or both. Ironically, some young people become heterosexually active in order to avoid being stigmatized. One twenty-year-old lesbian
described her high school experience: “I’d go to parties and get real real drunk. I couldn’t have sex with a man when I was sober. I wasn’t into makeup or stuff like that, but I could get by because I was fucking men. Looking at me, everyone thought dyke, and I had that against me, so I started doing anything I could to make them think I was straight.”32 One consequence of such inauthenticity may be the future psychic pain such individuals experience as adults, forcing them to reassess their sexuality as they have constituted it; indeed, this phenomenon may help to account for the “delayed adolescence” some gays and lesbians experience in adult life.

Many psychologists have discussed the stress that having to hide a major part of oneself creates. “Were it not for the sexism and homophobia, each of us could be an individual who grew into a satisfying self in all ways, including sexual gender preferences.”33 The “lies” that homophobia enforces take a terrific toll on the individual. As one lesbian reported, “Growing up gay meant hiding myself, my true feelings a great deal of the time, and trying hard to fit into a heterosexual mold—trying to enjoy dates and physical contact with boys and men, flirting, game-playing. But none of it was ever me.”34

Adolescence, a time of powerful sexual/emotional feelings, may provoke a gay or lesbian to deal with the fact of heretofore submerged “deviance.” Though the homophobe would urge the gay or lesbian adolescent that he or she is just confused or “going through a stage,” in fact, studies suggest that many gays and lesbians not only know at an early age that they are gay but have also acted sexually on those feelings. While same-sex sexual activity is neither necessary nor sufficient for the establishment of a homosexual identity, research indicates that the average age of “coming out” is between thirteen and eighteen. For women, the median age is eighteen and for men thirteen to fourteen.35 In one study of 1,038 gay men, 35 percent reported their first attraction before age ten, and 41 percent between ten and fourteen; and in those two groups, 76 percent reported that “they now realize certain feelings they experienced in childhood were indeed homosexual, but that they repressed them.”36 Further, 21 percent were sexually active before age nine, and 62 percent before age fourteen. In another study, gays reported their first awareness of homosexual feelings at an average age of 12.8, females at 13.8; on average, gays “understood” the term “homosexuality” at age 17.2 and females at 15.6.37 Women, however, lag behind men both in the amount of sexual experimentation and in their age at first same-sex experience; one study, for example, found that lesbians, including even those who already identified themselves as lesbian, had their first same-sex sexual experience at age twenty-three. Thus, the differences between gay men and lesbians may mirror the differences between men and women more generally than between homosexuals and heterosexuals.

However early in life gay and lesbian identity and sexual object choice are determined, there will be some gay or lesbian children and families who know
or suspect that their children's orientation differs. Since no one escapes the
cultural ideology that homosexuality is wrong and that everyone will eventually
marry, the family of the gay or lesbian may face a crisis. "Minimally, the child
feels 'different,' alienated, and alone." Internalized homophobia" occurs
when a gay or lesbian, socialized in a heterosexist and homophobic context,
feels self-hatred in the form of denial or guilt or identity confusion. Further,
AIDS has exacerbated already-existing homophobia, forced a reappraisal of gay
sexuality, and placed enormous psychological pressures on the gay community.
Some gays and lesbians stay in heterosexual relationships and hide their true
feelings their whole lives. Others have casual, furtive sex with strangers and
then return to the heterosexual mainstream. Some struggle in therapy to change
their preference. Whatever form this internalized homophobia takes, it tends
not only to keep gays and lesbians in the closet but also to shape the parameters
of gay and lesbian subculture.

At its most extreme, the self-hated gays and lesbians experience may mani-
ifest itself in suicide attempts. The high adolescent suicide rate in this culture
has been the subject of considerable media attention. But underplayed is the
fact that along with adolescents, gays and lesbians are in the highest risk group
for suicide. Alan Bell and Martin Weinberg hypothesize that 35 percent of gay
men and 30 percent of lesbians have either considered or attempted suicide and
that gay men are six times and lesbians two times more likely to attempt suicide
than heterosexuals. Thus, gay and lesbian teenagers face a double jeopardy.
According to one study, gay and lesbian youth are two to three times more
likely than their age counterparts to commit suicide and may constitute up to 30
percent of all youth suicides annually. A conservative estimate is that fifteen
hundred gay and lesbian teenagers kill themselves every year. Suicide is the
leading cause of death among gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth in the United
States. Yet where school systems may have suicide prevention units, "99.9
percent of them make no mention of the heightened risk of being gay or les-
bian." Many gay and lesbian adolescents identify the feelings of isolation
from family and peer group and the absence of positive role models as primary
causes of suicidal behavior. Bobbie Griffith, who killed himself at age twenty,
rote the following in his diary at age sixteen: "I can't let anyone find out that
I'm not straight. It would be so humiliating. My friends would hate me. I just
know it. They might even want to beat me up. And my family? I've overheard
them lots of times talking about gay people. They've said they hate gays, and
even God hates gays, too. Gays are bad."

Though the consequences of the teenage closet can last an entire lifetime,
gays and lesbians, like members of other subcultural groups, do develop a gay
"identity" through developmental stages. Though developmental models are in-
adequate to a full understanding of gay and lesbian youth subculture, it is non-
theless important to examine briefly this process in order to understand better
some of the intersections between the dominant culture and the subculture. Coming out—the process of acknowledging to oneself, to other gays and lesbians, and to heterosexuals that one is gay or lesbian—is probably a lifelong process. "For me, as a gay man, (coming out) refers to a long process of self-discovery that led me to realize and celebrate my sexuality."

Researchers have identified varying stages relevant to an understanding of gay youth. They suggest that each stage must be resolved before one can move on to the next. One model, proposed by Vivienne Cass, lists six stages in this process: identity confusion (who-am-I? feelings of difference, denial, shame, and anxiety; a period of great dissonance); identity comparison (a bargaining stage: perhaps this is only temporary); identity tolerance (perhaps, probably, I am gay or lesbian); identity acceptance (increased willingness to see oneself as gay or lesbian; friendship with other gays and lesbians); identity pride (an immersion stage in which one feels great anger at heterosexuals and tremendous pride in gay identity; a search for gay and lesbian history, culture, and identity); and, finally, identity synthesis (involving less of a dichotomy between the worlds of heterosexuality and homosexuality).

Eli Coleman’s model has five stages that focus more on coming out and less on identity per se: pre-coming out (feelings of difference accompanied by strong denial and anxiety; this resembles Cass’s identity-confusion stage); coming out (a conscious or semiconscious awareness of one’s same-sex orientation; a period of great confusion when one may disclose one’s orientation to a trusted few, usually other gays); exploration (when one experiences a new sexual identity, a more positive self-image; this period may occur quite late in life because of homophobia, accounting for the phenomenon of “delayed adolescence” in some gays and lesbians); first relationship (falling in love, a period of great optimism and vitality); and integration (a stage that lasts the rest of one’s life).

Regardless of their differences, coming-out models share the assumption that the process itself occurs in interaction with one’s environment; thus, some individuals may get permanently stuck in one stage, perhaps never getting to the final stage. Research has shown that a positive gay or lesbian identity is directly related to healthy psychological adjustment, and that “the gay and lesbian movement over the past decade has facilitated the process of acquiring a positive homosexual identity by providing more in the way of social support systems than previously existed.”

**Negotiating Gay and Lesbian Subculture**

John D’Emilio has written that “speaking about gay oppression involves not only addressing injustice in the abstract but also acknowledging the emotional toll it levies on particular individuals and the institutions of which they are a
part.\textsuperscript{49} My analysis to this point should leave the reader with no doubts about the devastating effects of homophobia on gays and lesbians (and, to some extent on heterosexuals as well) and on the institutions of which they are a part. But, as the introduction to this essay makes clear, oppression is never one-sided, and struggles over meaning are ongoing in every culture. Further, the positive identity and sense of community that develop at least in part in response to a shared sense of oppression lead to the construction of ideologies that vie with dominant ideology for hegemony. As Hall has maintained, though dominant cultural practices are not free-floating and are extremely difficult to subvert, no cultural practice has any necessary or a priori meaning. Thus, any particular practice can be (re)appropriated by a subcultural group and "rearticulated" according to its own specific political meanings and values. And the popular force of any ideology depends on the social groups who engage it, who can be "articulated to and by it."\textsuperscript{50} These links between and among dominant cultural ideology and subcultural ideology mean that ideologies can be fused, constructed, and deconstructed to produce forces that can be progressive or reactionary. This meaning cannot be predicted in advance, for any meaning a cultural strategy has is dependent on and varies according to context.

Like other communities, the "gay community" is multilayered and multiply constituted. The work of Michael Bronski and others has made important contributions to our understanding of gay and lesbian culture, or the "gay sensibility."\textsuperscript{\textcopyright} Gay and lesbian adolescents are a part, albeit an often unsung part, of that culture. But gay and lesbian teenagers must also negotiate with their heterosexual age cohort. Thus, we must examine the cultural ideology surrounding adolescence itself. In doing so, we can more clearly articulate the negotiation that occurs between gay and nongay teens.

\textit{Adolescence}

Adolescence is a fairly recent notion. Nathanson has pointed out how in the United States in the latter nineteenth century the young unmarried woman came to symbolize the perils of uncontrolled sexuality.\textsuperscript{52} As sexual mores evolved, women increasingly were expected to hold back the tide of what was perceived to be a deteriorating sexual morality. Female responsibility for family life and for postponing sexual activity until marriage (boys, it was argued, simply could not help themselves), and the dichotomy between the nymphomaniac and the asexual female, were incorporated into sexual ideology. Heightened fears concerning increased female sexual activity may have been a response to the increasing numbers of young middle-class women who were leaving their parents' homes for jobs; as women were gaining independence, surveillance of their activities became increasingly problematic.

As sex reformers like Freud and Havelock Ellis (who was more widely read
in this country than Freud) were beginning to characterize an autonomous women’s sexuality and desire, the dominant culture developed a virtual obsession with female premarital sexual activity, hyperbolized in tracts on the dangers to “innocent girls.” Allegedly to protect “innocents,” the White Slave Trade Act served to control young women’s sexuality, threatening the partners of even willing young women with criminal prosecution. Girls who “ruined” themselves (through sexual activity and especially through pregnancy, the most visible sign of sexual activity) were viewed as jeopardizing their opportunities for marriage and family. Ironically, ideology portrayed the “innocent girls” as the ones who “got into trouble,” for the “bad girls” could figure out how to prevent conception.

Adolescence has come to be structured as a time of transition when young people assert their independence from their parents and move into adulthood, with its concomitant responsibilities. Our culture, as Sharon Thompson and others have pointed out, tends to equate intercourse with adulthood. This may offer at least one reason why postponing sexual activity still carries so much emotional currency; the “child” who is sexually active may be (prematurely?) leaving childhood behind, and “virginity”—once lost—can never be reclaimed. More cynically, perhaps, one might note that we have no clear social place for sexually active youths, especially girls: laws define even their consenting sexual acts as statutory rape; children have little or no economic power that might enable them to be independent of parents and other adults; parents must give consent to “underage” children to marry; and girls in particular may face serious sanctions for transgressing cultural norms about “responsibility.”

If we define adulthood as a readiness for commitment and yet create social structures that make it all but impossible for adolescents either to explore relationships or to develop commitments, then we have guaranteed that all adolescent relationships are, almost tautologically, illicit and immature. In addition, in a patriarchal culture with rigidly defined gender roles, sexual autonomy is reserved for males and not for females. As Constance Nathanson points out, “The sexually unorthodox girl threatens not just her own future, but an entire system of social and economic relationships based on the assumption that each individual woman and her children will be supported by an individual man. And it is in these structurally disruptive possibilities that the dangers in a young woman’s transition to adulthood most particularly lie.”

The cultural belief in an asexual female adolescent depended on a belief in women’s basic disinterest in sex, accompanied by the view that its reproductive intent legitimized sex in marriage. Gradually, women’s sexual nature was allowed expression, at first legitimized in marriage and later independent of marriage. Once women were admitted to be sexual beings, it was no longer possible to see them as innocent victims of male desire. And today, for the first
time, heterosexual adolescent girls’ sexual patterns resemble those of boys. Thus, the dichotomy between “good girls” and “bad girls,” if it is to remain vital, must be reconstructed.

Though the ideology of the innocent asexual young girl corrupted by men has faded from today’s popular imagination, an affirming vision of adolescent or female sexuality has yet to replace it. And female sexuality, while it has been recognized with a near vengeance, has not been affirmed. Particularly since the outbreak of AIDS, messages about abstinence make clear the fatal costs of departures. Commentators on teenage sexuality equate sexual activity with drug and alcohol addiction. Several states have enacted or are considering enacting legislation requiring that sex education courses emphasize celibacy. But messages about sexuality—even apart from AIDS—have been fraught with warnings about the negative consequences of early sexual activity. Note, for example, the following interchange that appeared recently in the nationally syndicated “Ask Beth” advice column. A teenager named Sallie writes, “You keep saying that it isn’t okay for young teenagers to have sex. Why? My boyfriend wants to do it with me. I feel warm and safe when we’re together. I don’t see why I shouldn’t let him. I’m 14 and he’s 16.” Here is Beth’s response:

Intercourse should be the way two mature and caring people express their love for each other. If you feel you are “letting him do it,” there’s something wrong. It probably will not be a pleasant experience. Age and maturity and knowledge make a huge difference. Few people your age really understand the consequences of sex, such as pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases, or know how to prevent them. Young teen-age girls who are sexually active often become so preoccupied with possible pregnancy that they are highly stressed. Depression and poor schoolwork or substance abuse may result. Do you know how to use birth control? Have you the courage to get it for yourself? Do you know why it’s important for men to use condoms these days? A pregnancy now could really harm your future plans for yourself. For more help with this important decision send for a free booklet.

Read by both adolescents and their parents, Beth possesses a rare intergenerational credibility. Yet however liberal her views have been characterized, she is a creation of the culture described above, even as she mediates conflicting cultural messages. Her response to Sallie is riddled with a number of unexamined assumptions. In the very first sentence, she makes clear her normative position that intercourse should be reserved for loving, mature relationships. The absence of definitional elaboration suggests that we are expected to know almost intuitively what sorts of relationships qualify as “loving” and “mature”; but even were Beth to admit any conceptual ambiguity, it seems clear that Sallie’s relationship has failed to meet Beth’s implicit criteria. Notice further that Beth neglects to offer sexual options for intercourse—oral sex, for exam-
— that would ensure that pregnancy not occur and that birth control be moot. Sallie’s question Should I let him? seems to seal her fate: Beth fastens on this formulation, ignoring conflicting evidence in the narrative (“I feel warm and safe when I’m with him”) that Sallie’s desire may actually rival that of her boyfriend. The discourses of desire, particularly for teenagers (and especially for teenage girls) are not only highly constricted; they also tend to be framed in binary oppositions. So we assume, for example, that an active sexual partner requires one who is passive, that there are good girls and bad, and that sexuality is organized around dominance and submission. No wonder, then, that Sallie can only express her own desire by asking whether she should “let him.” Beth refuses to address anything but the surface, and she assumes Sallie’s passivity. Indeed, Beth’s paternalistic interpretation might characterize Sallie’s protestations to the contrary as nothing more than forms of false consciousness.

Rather than urge Sallie to explore her own desire more fully, Beth’s argument reinforces gender division: boys want it, girls are victims. But not only does her answer reaffirm gender, it also deflects attention away from a closer examination of the systemic discrimination that results in far fewer options for girls than for boys; for Beth, the solution is simple and individualistic: a girl must learn to control her boyfriend’s straying hands. Since she must bear the burden of the consequences that result from early sexual practice (e.g., a damaged reputation, inability to commit to future relationships, unwanted pregnancy, etc.), how can we not expect her to be the responsible party? Thus, Beth’s analysis is essentially conservatizing in its failure to question the status quo.

As Michelle Fine and others have pointed out, current practices privilege heterosexual marriage over all other expressions of sexuality. Female sexuality is virtually invisible, as are most nonphallocentric sexual practices. The adolescent girl is not a “subject in her own right” but rather always a potential victim of or in relation to male sexuality. This is not to trivialize the very real danger women face from male sexual violence but rather to suggest how problematic it is that this is virtually the only message girls get about sexuality. Ironically, in our indiscriminate portrayals of teenage girls as sexual victims, we may be failing to teach them about genuine sexual autonomy and consequently ensuring that they will be victims.

Beth’s answer is a slippery slope argument—full of all the bogies of sexuality: disease, pregnancy, and even drug addiction—that fails to attend to or even, in this case, acknowledge the possibility of pleasure. Though it is no doubt true that adolescent boys are often ignorant about what pleases women and that boys and girls live in polarized social and sexual cultures, the problem, as Thompson has pointed out, is not one of “too much, too soon,” an argument even many feminists are now making, but rather that adolescent girls experi-
ence too little pleasure and face too few options. Beth’s answer is far more clever than an explicit message of abstinence, which teenage readers might easily dismiss. In a more realistic and “clinical” posture, she recommends more information (about sexually transmitted infections, birth control, and perhaps even the greatest taboo, abortion); but the burden of proof is borne by the adolescent to demonstrate her “readiness” to take the plunge.38

Thus, it is not only New Right ideology that has focused on “danger” and not “pleasure” in its elaboration of an analytic of female sexuality. Discussions of female desire and the erotic (even a socially constructed desire) have—despite some recent notable exceptions39—been largely absent from feminist writings as well, suggesting that even progressive theorists struggle with the good girl–bad girl dichotomy. Obviously, the history of patriarchal control over women’s bodies explains the absence of open, inclusive, and joyful investigations of female desire. Feminist writings, in foregrounding the devastating effects of patriarchal hegemony, have exposed, for example, the horrors of violence against women, the dehumanization of women in pornography, and the mythology of heterosexual romance; further, many lesbian feminists have privileged “woman-loving-woman” relationships, at times to posit uncritically their “inherently” equal nature. Liberal feminist arguments seem ultimately to valorize the notions of “choice” and “consent” without positioning these signifiers in a context of dominance and submission. Women—both heterosexual and lesbian—now struggle to articulate a sexual politics of desire, fantasy, and the erotic that, while not glibly dismissive of the power of patriarchal culture, is more than a reaction to centuries of domination.

Sexuality: The Battle for Cultural Hegemony

All discursive practices occur inside the hierarchies of power/knowledge relations that exist in a given culture. Though not all areas of discourse are equally significant within that hierarchy, there is no doubt that sexuality is a dominant one with myriad textual productions open for interpretation. Every interpretation of a cultural text is a new production of meaning. Interpretive practices relating to sexuality have contingent implications for existing social relations, ranging from affirming those relations to contesting them. Though I have argued that meaning is never fixed once and for all and thus that the possible positions and meanings of a text are infinite, at any given moment a finite number of discourses are competing for ascendancy in the power/knowledge hierarchy. This conflict creates new possibilities for thinking about social relations.

“Considering its possibilities, sexuality has been very effectively policed,”60 especially for teenagers (girls in particular), whose lives are fairly rigidly controlled and who have little economic and social power. Recent administrations
have sought to make access to birth control more difficult for teenagers, to require parental consent for abortion, to ban AIDS education and safe-sex programs, and to outlaw sex education in the schools. Conservatives have claimed that the AIDS crisis has confirmed their position on sexual orthodoxy: "safe sex" does not exist except as no sex. Yet at the same time, teenage sexual activity—particularly among white upper- and middle-income teenage girls—appears to be on the rise. According to the Alan Guttmacher Institute, the percentage of girls aged fifteen to nineteen who reported engaging in sexual activities rose from 47.1 percent in 1982 to 53.2 percent in 1988; and in 1988, 58 percent of sexually active teenage girls reported having had two or more sexual partners. Yet in denying the reality that our children are, in the words of Mary Calderone, "beings-in-process of sexual development," we condone ignorance that may be literally deadly. Indeed, the incidence of young adults diagnosed HIV positive over the years from 1989 to 1991 rose nearly 80 percent.

No doubt, even in the absence of formal programs, we learn about sexuality from cultural ideology. Sexuality, unlike sex, is not a thing, not a natural fact, not a purely descriptive term or a "simple representation of some objective state of affairs or a simple recognition of some familiar facts about us." Rather, sexuality organizes and interprets those "facts" and provides a coherent picture of self in relation to others. Thus, there is no natural, given, essential sexuality that is repressed or revealed; rather, all sex is culturally mediated. And though ideology is almost always internally inconsistent, multilayered, and mutable, the messages we receive about gender identity, gender roles, sexual practices, and the wider realm of the erotic—what Michel Foucault has termed the "perpetual spirals of power and pleasure"—constitute multiple networks of discourses, special knowledges, and normative categories that emerge to manage and police sexual practices. Such social control organizes our responses to people and behavior we regard as "deviant, problematic, worrying, threatening, troublesome or undesirable in some way or another."

Recent analyses have attempted similarly to locate homosexuality in a parallel historical context so that homosexuality itself—like sexuality—has a history, becomes an invention, in this case a creation of nineteenth-century discourses of desire that medicalized sexual oddities. "The homosexual," according to this view, appears during this time as a "character" defined by his (sic) sexual practices and attractions. This new visibility cuts two ways: while it creates a new (and potentially empowering) homosexual identity, it also offers up the homosexual (along with women's sexuality, the sexuality of adolescents and children, masturbators, and pederasts) to newly emerging "specialists" whose aim is to study and police these deviants. Medicalization does not do away with questions of morality, however; rather, it may embed them more deeply or
articulate some new vision of morality. In either case, this strategy often disguises the normative core. In today's medicalized model, for example, "good girls" have become those who "practice" contraception.

The view that sexuality is innate, universal, transhistorical, static, and perhaps even "God-given" remains deeply entrenched in culture, reflected in normative assumptions about sexuality and deviance. A survey conducted by the National Opinion Research Center suggests that current attitudes toward sexual practices may in fact have become more conservative over the last twenty years. For example, whereas 71 percent of American people in the period from 1973 to 1977 thought that extramarital sex is "always wrong," from 1986 to 1989 that figure rose to 76 percent. Researchers got the very same figures in response to whether homosexuality is "always wrong." The only change in the direction of greater sexual liberalism is in response to whether sex before marriage is "always wrong": whereas 33 percent of the respondents thought in the earlier period that premarital sex is wrong, 28 percent did so in the late 1980s. Still, however, only 3 percent of all people surveyed thought that sex among teenagers is "never wrong."  

Powerful cultural assumptions operate to maintain the belief that sexuality is innate and natural. Why has popular cultural discourse remained so resistant to the social constructionist musings of the academy? Cultural absolutism, however heavy-handed, offers a comforting safety net, a guide to ethical conduct, and a sense that there is some right and natural action that good reason only has to discover. At the same time, to suggest that there is right sexuality is obviously to delimit a range of activities that must be at least morally—if not legally—condemned. The deconstructionism of Derrida and the related work of Foucault have shown how "official" forms of knowledge tend to crush self-confidence and a sense of oneself as agent. Essentialist views make sexuality a discovery rather than a creation, with human beings almost passive observers of our own conduct. And if sexuality is defined as being "by nature," then we can pathologize any nonconforming practices. Further, as Nathanson has pointed out in another context, essentialist views make any departure from sexual norms an intrinsic and unalterable aspect of the person. To "fall," then, is to fall irrevocably, making personal and state vigilance all the more important.

Sexual conservatives want obedience to external, objective truth (or law, or reason) and are extremely uncomfortable with even the mildest forms of moral, spiritual, psychological, or sexual ambivalence. Sexuality comes to represent disorder, a return to bestial, uncontrollable nature; only in the traditional family do we find the means of restoring stability and declaring moral boundaries. To witness the policy implications of a theoretical agenda that makes the control of sexuality central, one need only turn to the New Right's campaign in this country to outlaw abortion, limit access to birth control, criminalize gay and
lesbian sexuality, and ban sex education in schools. Sexual conservatives recognize an important truth that their more complacent liberal critics discount: that there exist profoundly transformative possibilities in the deconstruction of sexuality. For just as sexual absolutism provides the dominant culture with a form of legitimation, so does the critique of absolutism, with its contextualizing of conduct and its genealogies of sexuality, call into question normative cultural assumptions about necessity and nature. The consequences of such critical practices are not inevitably liberatory, but they do open a conversational space in which differences can be addressed without the usual a priori evaluations attached. The conservative recognizes this potential but rejects the normative agenda.

**Gay and Lesbian Adolescent Culture: Beyond Homophobia**

While not losing sight of the partial, unstable, and contradictory character of groups, one can safely characterize gay and lesbian adolescent subculture as one of the “cultures of resistance” that inevitably occur in even the most repressive cultures. As such, it is always negotiating with the dominant culture over ideology; such negotiations must be read as contextual and temporary, their meanings always contestable in an ongoing process of articulation and rearticulation. The locational metaphors of “margin” and “center” used by bell hooks may help to concretize the lived experiences of gays and lesbians. Like others traditionally disenfranchised, gays and lesbians live at the margins of dominant culture, participants in and observers of the culture’s practices. This “double (at least) consciousness” means that gays and lesbians, like people of color, experience life at a certain distance and in a state of constant vigilance: Must I change my pronouns? Is it safe to “come out”? May I hold my lover’s hand? Do I interrupt a homophobic “joke”? I do not wish to repeat my analysis of the devastating psychological effects of homophobia on gays and lesbians; rather, I want here to argue that this “double consciousness” may enable gays and lesbians to articulate a cultural critique of those practices “at the center”: norms about romance, about identity, and even about humor may be fair game. Further, the difference that comes to constitute gay and lesbian identity can become a source of pride and the impetus for activism. As one adolescent lesbian put it, “It doesn’t seem fair that everyone else can talk about their boyfriends or husbands, but I can’t talk about my girlfriend and have people accept it. Some people act like I can’t really be in love with her. Some others believe it, but it really grosses them out. It doesn’t seem fair that other girls can kiss their boyfriends in front of people, or a guy and a girl can walk around in public with their arms around each other, but if my girlfriend and I did that, we’d be stared at and whispered about.”

In addition, the experience of being the object of cultural hatred and preju-
dice may sensitize gays and lesbians to the oppression suffered by members of other marginalized groups. Further, political work has served to make explicit the connectedness of specific oppressions: gay and lesbian activists have, for example, opposed Operation Rescue at abortion clinics, protested the appearance of David Duke, and condemned racist and sexist policies in AIDS treatment and research. Though I in no way want to minimize the existence of racism, ageism, anti-Semitism, and sexism in the gay community, there may be more honesty there about its presence and a heightened critical consciousness of its meanings. As one young gay man put it, “I have learned to accept myself and celebrate my difference. It has given me a deeper understanding of the senseless hate and prejudice suffered by so many people throughout the world.”

Thus, the awareness of marginality may help to make gay youths more sensitive to issues of exclusion and may push them to identify their own societal privilege. Further, the limited numbers of gay and lesbian adolescents may necessitate subcultural cooperation to mitigate the consequences of social hierarchy. Finally, widespread cultural misogyny may make gay men—who are often seen as abandoning masculinity and being more like women—far more sympathetic to lesbian and feminist issues. As Fine has pointed out, non-heterosexual males are highly vulnerable in our culture and likely to be victimized “in the absence of a discourse of desire.”

Unlike members of most subjugated groups, however, gays and lesbians are often able to hide their sexual orientation. If this is the case, then, the predominance of internalized homophobia and the desire to reap the benefits of heterosexism may make some gays and lesbians antagonistic to other gays and lesbians who are more political, more promiscuous, more “obvious,” or less conformist. Such an attitude accepts the dominant culture’s bifurcation into “good gays” and “bad gays” and tends toward the assimilationist mentality described above. Thus, the cultural practices of assimilationist gays and lesbians are not intended to subvert hegemonic discourse; indeed, slogans like “We’re no different from you” or “We just want equal rights” attempt to defuse whatever threat homosexuality might pose and to placate dominant culture. But the meanings of the practices of gays and lesbians are not “owned” by their agents; regardless of the original intentions that animated an activity, cultural practices quickly disown their authors and take on a life of their own. Thus, the prom that may look like nothing more than a mimicking of one of the icons of (hetero)sexist, conformist adolescent culture may in fact call into question those very norms. The very act of holding the hand of one’s same-sex lover can be a political act of resistance to heterosexual hegemony. Coming out forces heterosexuals to confront stereotypes about gays and lesbians. Organizations for gays and lesbians—even those whose purpose is purely or primarily social—not only provide needed resources for gays and lesbians but also tend to educate the
heterosexual majority about gay and lesbian life. The Boston Alliance of Gay and Lesbian Youth (BAGLY), for example, has a speakers bureau and a peer counseling program. Standard cultural practices may, then, take on very different meanings in the lives of gays and lesbians. For example, at UCLA the gay and lesbian students have formed a gay fraternity and a lesbian sorority, with all the standard trappings, including rushing and pledging. But rather than “beer parties and MRS. degrees,” as one sister put it, they are doing community service.

Material changes in the dominant culture have provided teenagers in general with greater independence: the impact of economic opportunities (however limited), higher education, and the automobile cannot be underestimated. With greater mobility and some degree of independence from parents, adolescents may have more opportunities for sexual encounters. Further, with the rise of families with single parents or two working parents, surveillance of adolescent children seems to have diminished in importance. Yet adolescents—whether at work, at school, or at home—cannot escape adult authority, and concealment continues to be the norm within adolescent culture. In fact, some have argued that the culture’s fairly recent campaigns to end “teenage pregnancy” are linked to a hysteria over the fact that teenage girls, probably for the first time in our history, are following sexual patterns like those of boys. Further, attention to increasing rates of HIV infection among teenagers may escalate attempts to control teenage sexuality. As Nathanson argues, “Concealment . . . has a dual meaning. It is associated, on the one hand, with sexual autonomy; on the other, it testifies to the power of the social norms that make concealment necessary.”

Adolescence is full of secrets, of dramas big and small that enable one to separate from one’s parents while preparing one for eventual membership in the community of adults. Because gay and lesbian adolescents, unlike heterosexual youth, often cannot count on eventual reunion with family, they may have a great investment in resolving tensions or even denying seemingly innocuous differences that exist among subcultural members who often come to replace family of origin. Further, rejection by parents may mean that gay and lesbian youth suffer class dislocation, becoming poor, regardless of their original class position. Finally, gays and lesbians, unlike people of color, usually grow up isolated, in families where they do not feel at home; whereas people of color are taught survival skills to live in racist culture, the lesbian or gay’s own family may be overtly and virulently homophobic, and the “street smarts” necessary to survive homophobia may develop late in life or not at all.

Gays and lesbians, then, reside in the world of mainstream culture, the world of adolescence, and the world of homosexuality. And, as many observers have noted about other subjugated groups and dominant cultures, gays and lesbians know far more about heterosexual culture (indeed, they are most likely brought up by heterosexual parents) than heterosexuals know about homosex-
Homophobia, Identity, and the Meanings of Desire

Many gay activists emphasize the importance of educating the heterosexual community about the realities of gay and lesbian life so as to demystify homosexuality and defuse the power of negative stereotypes. Much of gay and lesbian subculture is necessarily and consciously a culture of secrecy; secret languages, codes, and behaviors. At times gay and lesbian adolescents must insist on secrecy for reasons of survival; at other times that secrecy helps to constitute gay and lesbian identity itself. “The perceived need to maintain secrecy tends to promote commitment to the gay world as a place where the gay self can be validated and accepted. . . . The gay self becomes salient precisely because it must be hidden.” Such secrecy leads both to passionate rejection of adult authorities (consistent with adolescence more generally) and to intense bonding with others who share the secret.

Gay and lesbian adolescents—like other adolescents—probably share no universal characteristics other than age and sexual orientation; but given that we read cultural texts from our own discursive positions, gay and lesbian adolescents may become more sensitive cultural critics because of their marginalization. In this sense, gays and lesbians may be creating new meanings out of the cultural materials available to them. Given that no one can stand completely outside of culture, there are limits to what we can re-vision: that is, we might be able to piece together some new patterns, but those patterns will inevitably spring from existing cultural materials.

Gay males, for example, benefit from the dominant culture’s validation of men over women, and the hypersexuality of some gay men and adolescents is fairly consistent with the stereotypical image of the heterosexual “stud.” Lesbians, socialized as women, may easily slip unconsciously or consciously into stereotypical gender-role behavior. Lesbian adolescents may express a longing for long-term monogamous relationships that gay males seem not to share. Lesbians, like many heterosexual women, may be hooked on romance, whereas gay males, like so many heterosexual men, are more likely to blur sex and romance. Whereas lesbians tend to identify sexual orientation in terms of relationships and strong bonds with other women, gay males may link it more closely to same-sex sexual experience. This point was driven home to me in a somewhat humorous way when I sat in on a very animated discussion of “sleaze” during a BAGLY general meeting. These gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth, all of whom were under twenty-two, realized that they were unable fully to transcend cultural attitudes toward sexual practices even as they were interrogating societal definitions of “sleaze.” This discussion broke down along very clear gender lines, with the girls obviously confused and taken aback when the boys discussed their sexual preferences and practices. The boys, on the other hand, while trying to reappropriate the term “sleaze,” seemed nonetheless to be struggling with guilt and to be paying at least lip service to the women’s rela-
All participants in the discussion were scrupulously avoiding normative judgments about others’ sexuality, while it seemed to me, being quite heavy-handed about their own.

In addition, though gay males may be more sensitive to sexism because of their own cultural marginalization, the tensions between gays and lesbians may in fact reflect the more general polarization of men and women in the culture. BAGLY, for example, is one of a few mixed gay-and-lesbian groups (along with Queer Nation, ACT UP, and some others), but such groups must struggle constantly with sex inequality and male privilege. BAGLY continues to be three-quarters male, and many young women I interviewed there reported that it is not uncommon for women not to return after one meeting. Meetings are structured to allow time for groups to split up by sex, but the general meetings, which are mixed, tend to focus on male issues. As one female member told me, “They always have to be pushed on their sexism. I think they just don’t get it.” Another one reported to me that males dismissed and trivialized women’s concerns by consistently referring to them as “women’s stuff.” A third young lesbian noted, “They’re so excited to be with each other that they can forget about how they treat us.” Lesbians, then, must often choose whether they will remain in gay-identified groups that may be sexist or join feminist organizations in which they will have to struggle against homophobia.

Adolescent sexuality tends toward the same sorts of binary oppositions that confine and explain sexuality more generally in the culture. These oppositions, though they may differ from person to person, are limits that “serve many of the same purposes that compulsory legalized heterosexual monogamy serves: they provide mechanisms to order sexual exploration and rationalize sexual retreat.” These collections of rules and cultural mores help to shape sexual identity. They “constitute local and individual erotic systems” fashioned out of old and new ideologies, mythologies, and cultural images. The erotic systems of adolescents are both accommodationist and rebellious, mirroring cultural values even as they push the bounds of transgression. Gay and lesbian adolescents, though tempted by the ideologies of romance rampant in this culture, are excluded by those very ideologies. Thus, they must create new erotic systems in which same-sex desire is central, a cultural politics that recognizes “desire as truly a matter of survival.”

But even as gays and lesbians may deploy their own “erotic systems” and creatively use the dominant culture’s signifiers, so can these binary systems stymie the self-definitions of gays and lesbians. Many writers, for example, have noted the overemphasis in this culture on the reproductive aspects of sexuality. Not only does such an approach reinforce a clinical, biological orientation toward sexuality, it also narrows the meaning of sexual expression to those few acts in which sexuality and procreation are linked. Gay and lesbian sexu-
ality within this framework comes to be seen either as nonsex (usually reserved for lesbians), which is by definition trivialized or erased, or as illegitimate sex (the standard charge against gay men), which is then vilified morally and sanctioned legally. Identity construction occurs in this context, where one is both outlaw and phantom.

The negation of an autonomous female desire has important repercussions for lesbian as well as heterosexual women. We have seen how the sexually unorthodox girl has come to represent a threat to cultural stability. Today’s dominant mythology rationalizes that fear with warnings about escalating rates of teenage pregnancy and “babies having babies”; further, marriage offers the heterosexual woman one man’s protection against all other men. If the opposition of the male and the female is at bottom the opposition of desire and non-desire, then the lesbian adolescent as female represents the absence of desire; on the other hand, as sexual outlaw, she becomes pure desire, out of control and forfeiting the “protections” afforded by traditional femininity. Earlier I suggested that if Beth had urged Sallie to explore her own desire more fully, Sallie would have had permission to interrogate an entire range of cultural practices relating to gender, romance, and, especially, power. If this is so, then one can only imagine the transformative possibilities in lesbian sexuality. Where is the lesbian positioned in an ideology that cautions against faulty contraception and unwanted pregnancies, that describes girls as crazy about boys but not crazy about sex?

Many young lesbians are explicitly rejecting both hegemonic norms and what they perceive as the political correctness and stuffiness of older lesbians by self-consciously “flaunting” their sexual desire. Some have reappropriated traditional symbols of femininity like makeup and skirts. Others use these signifiers only to subvert them: skirts appear with unshaved legs, and lipstick and eye shadow combine with a completely shaved head. Similarly, gay men may wear women’s clothing; now that earrings have become acceptable signifiers for heterosexual men, gay men may wear several earrings in both ears. Thus, “gender deviance” can be a rallying cry for many gay and lesbian youth, a deliberate flouting of adult (gay and straight) cultural taboos. Wilder personal styles combine with outrageous political strategies in groups like ACT UP and Queer Nation, many of whose members are young gays and lesbians.

The rigidity of heterosexism and homophobia demands that one be either heterosexual or homosexual. Even the most progressive curricula in sex education or values clarification tend to assume that sexuality is clear and dichotomous. Yet many adolescents are unsure about their sexuality and may want to “experiment” sexually. Such concerns are particularly important for women, whose sexuality may be more fluid than men’s, who generally are sexually active later than men, and who as lesbians tend to come out later in life than
their male counterparts. Our attachment to duality in the sexual domain suffers profound discomfort in the face of attitudes, desires, and behaviors that we cannot neatly pigeonhole. To experiment sexually is to open up a normative space in which sexuality might be construed more expansively; indeed, it might mean that we loosen the tie between sexual practices and identity. Clearly, to free such a potential would demand that we abandon sex-negative ideology, with its emphasis on the grave consequences of “error” and its investment in responsibility. Those who understand sexuality to be innate and “discoverable” will by implication assert the existence of right and wrong choices. The domain of sexuality is so charged that we assume that we may be married irreparably by the “wrong” choice; we view the decision to act on a same-sex sexual desire as a crossing over into territory from which there is no return. Like a contemporary Hester Prynne, the person who ventures into homosexuality must be prepared to embrace a new, immutable, reified sexual self. In what other realm do we demand such a priori certainty?

The traditional view of sexual responsibility has not only placed the onus of responsibility on women but has also all but prohibited “sex-positive” discussions of safe-sex practices; on some profound level, sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS may be seen as punishment for lack of responsibility, where responsibility is equated with sexual abstinence. Even where sex education is taught, the curriculum is usually remarkably devoid of discussions about sex. AIDS education tragically circumvents more-explicit discussions of sexual practices and intravenous drug use. Gay and lesbian adolescents may be as in the dark as their heterosexual counterparts in terms of knowledge about sexuality and sexual practices. Many young male members of BAGLY, for example, suggested to me that they were able to tell whether another male was “clean” by how he looked, if he passed muster, they asserted, it was not necessary to practice safer-sex techniques.

Even given the limited social power of heterosexual teenagers, they nonetheless have models for their relationships, and the institution of heterosexual marriage eventually legitimates their bonds. But for gay and lesbian adolescents, relationships are immature almost by definition, and no gay man or lesbian can realistically expect the benefits of future, socially sanctified marriage. Is all gay sex “irresponsible” because it undeniably and blatantly disentangles sex from reproduction? Or is it “selfish” because its goals are pleasure and the expression of affection? Are gays and lesbians our culture’s Peter Pans, who refuse to grow up, that is, who refuse to accept the social imperatives of heterosexual marriage and family life? The traditional framework with its emphasis on reproduction oversimplifies the nature of sexuality and divorces sexuality from the rest of human relations. The full range of the erotic is condensed to a narrow set of genitally oriented acts. Sex becomes private and detached from life more generally. Gay and lesbian sex, however, comes to signify quintes-
sentential sex and nothing more. Homosexuality takes place, then, only in the bedroom and is not about identity or character. Gay and lesbian adolescents may experience feelings of attraction before ever acting on them sexually. How does one define oneself as a sexual being? Even our very notion of “virginity” relies on a heterosexual framework: a girl loses her virginity, so the story goes, when she first has heterosexual intercourse with a boy. The construction of gay and lesbian identity is not immune to the power of such ideology; in fact, some of the ideological battles within the feminist community and between lesbians and gay men reflect disagreements over the normative meaning of “responsibility.” More concretely, some members of the gay and lesbian community eschew any use of the word “responsibility”; others adopt a similar standard for themselves; and still others attempt to reconstruct a new meaning for “responsibility” more consistent with a sex-positive agenda. Regardless of what approach one takes, however, the cultural baggage is inescapable; one is not creating anew but in reaction to.

However pessimistic it may seem, the likelihood that the dominant heterosexual culture will appropriate gay and lesbian signifiers is great. Indeed, the mysterious nature of what is Other may make the qualities associated with that Other seem more appealing and more desirable to those who lack them. Further, lacking a sense of community, members of dominant culture may envy the solidarity that marginalization grounds. Majority-group members may envy the apparent sexual freedom and the cultural identity of gays and lesbians. Accusations of selfishness and irresponsibility, then, may mask a cultural resentment toward gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. And gay and lesbian signifiers may be appropriated into mainstream culture. One can rattle off examples easily: today, earrings on heterosexual men are common; the most macho heavy metal musicians wear their hair down to their waists; heterosexual women—thanks to Cher—sport tattoos and call them “fashion statements”; advertisements now feature models with a more “androgynous” look; and wearing the color lavender no longer puts one in jeopardy of being called fag. Bisexuality, which some view as a potentially thick challenge to the dominant vision of sexuality, may be transformed and softened into a “normal” stage or a “natural” (but less powerful) attraction, or an empty hypersexuality or a universal experience without practical consequences.

But appropriations such as these, as one might expect, may cut in other directions as well. Thus, a cultural appropriation of some gay or lesbian text may result in a more accepting, “gay-identified” dominant culture, a rearticulation of gay and lesbian signifiers, and the mainstreaming of gay and lesbian culture. Gay and lesbian activists and scholars must then struggle to speak for themselves, to identify and valorize the contributions to culture that this subculture has produced. At the same time, however, we are forced to recognize that one’s own experience—one’s “voice”—is structured by the very culture one is critiqu-
ing; thus, it is essential to find ways to problematize the experience of one’s own ideologically constructed experience, to subvert even one’s own authority.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that culture is produced and that as such it is inevitably contingent, multiple, social, and contested. Given that context, gay and lesbian subculture—and gay and lesbian adolescent subculture more specifically—comes to be seen as a possible site of resistance to cultural hegemony. Indeed, gay and lesbian adolescent culture can be viewed as the intersection of multiple cultures, including most obviously adolescent and homosexual cultures but also racial, ethnic, religious, gender, age, and class identities as well. Given the presence of homophobia, gay and lesbian adolescents—if they are to develop a sense of affirmative identity—must resist the dominant culture’s messages about gender roles, about sexuality, about love and romance, and about responsibility; given the presence of heterosexism, gay and lesbian adolescents must—if they are to find themselves anywhere—invent new readings of standard cultural texts. Though adolescence itself seems marked by rebellion and individuation, the ability of gay and lesbian adolescents to subvert dominant values is essential to their very physical and psychic survival. The fact that some do not survive testifies to the power of societal prejudice and hatred; the fact that many do testifies to the growing strength of gay and lesbian movements and individuals.

In the contested terrain of sexuality, homosexuality constitutes a threat to heterosexual hegemony. Though not all gays and lesbians are warriors in this contest, gay and lesbian sexuality can provide the means by which we interrogate many of the most fundamental institutions of our culture—the family, monogamy, and religion, to name just a few—and some of our most fundamental assumptions about health and normalcy. Gay and lesbian adolescents must juggle the ideologies of dominant heterosexual culture, of their own adolescent culture, and of gay and lesbian adult culture more generally. But the constant negotiation that occurs between subculture and dominant culture means that one can never assume that gay and lesbian sexuality is inherently subversive any more than one can assume that a subculture is simply a passive receptacle of dominant ideology. Eve Sedgwick has written of the closet as a central defining motif in gay and lesbian experience. That closet grounds both the struggle and the affirmation of gay and lesbian adolescent experience. In a world where homophobia is deprived of social legitimacy, the lives of gay and lesbian adolescents would be radically transformed. How much of the dominant culture would be subverted by these changes is an open question; whether there would still be proms, for example, remains to be seen.
A number of fairly obvious political implications follow from the claims made in this chapter. If, as I have argued, homophobia/heterosexism is a form of societal oppression crippling to gays and lesbians and harmful even to heterosexuals, then progressives of all stripes must place the eradication of homophobia on any political agenda. On the legal front, activists must demand that laws that criminalize sodomy and other same-sex sexual practices be overturned and that, affirmatively, the law must confer the same social legitimacy and material benefits on gay and lesbian relationships that it now does on heterosexual. Further, given the powerful link between sexism and homophobia, one must not underestimate the importance of challenging patriarchal culture, with its insistence on rigid and unequal gender roles. Key to that challenge is the centrality of the battle over reproductive freedom; rather than focus on narrowly demarcated privacy rights and bourgeois "choice," genuine sexual self-determination must be the goal, and that includes not only lesbian and gay liberation but also access to abortion, to sex education, and to safe and effective contraception. Finally, any radical politics must continually struggle—in its practice as well as its theoretical base—to invent discourses to bring together differently identified groups and individuals without erasing or devaluing those differences.

Much scholarly work remains. Only with a broader empirical base can we justify any confidence we might have in drawing conclusions about gay and lesbian adolescents themselves, about differences between gays and lesbians, about specific racial, ethnic, religious, and class subcultures, and about the similarities and points of contrast between older gays and lesbians and their adolescent counterparts. More theoretically, any treatment of subculture raises questions not only about identity itself but also about similarity and difference and how they come to be constituted. How do multiple identities bearing both privilege and oppression intersect? How do we create stable community from shifting identities? How can categories of identity be both liberating and yet dangerous? How do we create different discourses to talk about difference? What is the transformative potential of a particular subculture and from what perspective do we assess it? This chapter has taken the first critical steps toward understanding gay and lesbian adolescent subculture and its position within the dominant culture; only with such an understanding will it be possible to critique the dominant culture and to invent alternatives to it.

NOTES


7. In Dangerous Passage: The Social Control of Sexuality in Women’s Adolescence (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), Constance A. Nathanson persuasively argues that male adolescence began to appear in popular culture and academic journals at the beginning of the twentieth century and that female adolescence emerged as a concept before that in the late 1800s. I argue that these constructions took very different forms and served very different purposes.

8. The term “homophobia” was first used by George Weinberg in his Society and the Healthy Homosexual (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1983), first published in 1972. Homophobia, the fear and hatred of gays and lesbians, is a form of prejudice that is socially sanctioned. Though a few states (including Massachusetts) have gay rights bills, most communities provide little or no protection for gays and lesbians. Recently, many gay and lesbian scholars and activists have abandoned their use of the term “homophobia” preferring instead “heterosexism.” One might argue that “homophobia” suggests a neurosis rather than a form of prejudice and that its use tends to reinforce an individualistic and clinical approach. In contrast, “heterosexism” more closely resembles its analogues (racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, etc.) and puts the blame where it belongs. The connotative differences are worth noting: whereas “homophobia” suggests actively negative attitudes and behaviors, “heterosexism” is associated with the privileging of heterosexuality. While I admit that the term “heterosexism” has distinct advantages over “homophobia,” I tend to use the latter largely because of its wider currency.


13. Interestingly, one early myth about lesbians was that they had enlarged clitorises that resembled shrunken penises and that this biological aberration explained the presumed hypersexuality of lesbians, that is, that they were more like men. Racist ideologies have capitalized on these sorts of stereotypes and fears about sexuality, portraying persons in the oppressed group (especially women in those groups) as more like animals in their sexual appetites and powers. More recently, research on the relative sizes of the
Brains of gay and heterosexual men would have us believe that gay men are, in fact, more like women.

14. Don Clark, *Loving Someone Gay* (New York: Signet, 1977). Conservative estimates put homosexuality at 10 percent of the population, based on the findings of research like the Hite Report (where 8 percent of the women reported themselves lesbians) and the Kinsey Report (in which 10 percent of all men indicated a preference for their own sex, and many more reported occasional to frequent same-sex sexual activity to orgasm). There is great disagreement over how accurate the 10 percent figure is. Can one trust any statistical finding when so many gays and lesbians are closeted? Even more complicated (and beyond the scope of this chapter) is the question how to determine who is gay or lesbian. How does one count the person in a heterosexual marriage who has occasional same-sex sexual encounters? the person who never has any same-sex activity but fantasizes about it almost constantly? the woman who has intense friendships with other women that lesbians might identify as erotic relationships?


16. Ibid., vii–viii.


18. Mark Holmes, quoted in Heron, *One Teenager in Ten*, 83.


20. What may remain inexplicable is how and why certain openly or obviously gay cultural texts not only break through hegemonic practice but actually achieve popularity within it. Groups like The Village People, performers like Sandra Bernhardt and Freddie Mercury (of Queen), and cultural figures like Harvey Fierstein and others have all attained fame without hiding their sexuality. Calling them “tokens” does little to explain either how they managed to burst forth or how others failed to. Perhaps this speaks to the cultural resilience I described above, or it may reflect a powerful form of hegemonic denial (e.g., how could anyone not know Liberace was gay?). Regardless of the explanation, such gaping counterexamples are rare and seem in most cases to fade quickly from the limelight.


27. Gregory Lehne, “Homophobia Among Men: Supporting and Defining the Male
38. Ibid., 33.
42. Virginia Uribe, quoted in Maguen, “Teen Suicide,” 42.
43. Quoted in ibid., 42.
44. Rick, quoted in Heron, One Teenager in Ten, 86.
46. Coleman, “Developmental Stages.”
47. Ibid., 34.
48. Lynn Minton, quoted in ibid., 41.
53. Sharon Thompson, “Search for Tomorrow: On Feminism and the Reconstruc-


55. In fact, Nathanson’s data suggest that it may well be that there were more schools offering sex education courses in the 1920s than today.


59. See, for example, JoAnn Loulan, *Lesbian Sex* (San Francisco: Spinsters Aunt Lute, 1984), and Vance. *Pleasure and Danger*.

60. Kate Millet, “Beyond Politics? Children and Sexuality,” in *Pleasure and Danger*, 220.


66. Here I by no means intend to claim that essentialist views inevitably incline one to sexually conservative positions in practice but only that the theoretical position is conservatizing. Ironically, studies of homophobia, for example, have shown a high correlation between homophobia and the belief that homosexuality is a learned behavior. Similarly, many “homophiles” of the nineteenth century (e.g., Havelock Ellis) were desperate to prove a biological cause for “inversion”; today, many gay and lesbian advocates insist that one “cannot help” being gay. Though this argument is plainly defensive (and fails to address the essentialist position that sexuality is innate—homosexuality, for example, may simply be a biological aberration like color-blindness), one can certainly understand its appeal: if gayness is beyond one’s control, the likely response (even if one views it as a sickness) should be pity rather than punishment; further, the biological argument implies that gayness cannot be “caught” through exposure to gays and lesbians.


70. Ian, age twenty-two, reported in ibid., 9.
73. Nathanson, *Dangerous Passage*, 212.
75. Thompson, “Search for Tomorrow,” 373, 374.
77. See, for example, Janie Victoria Ward and Jill McLean Taylor, “Sexuality Education for Immigrant and Minority Students: Developing a Culturally Appropriate Curriculum.” Chapter 3 in this volume.