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

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

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

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