Entertaining Lesbians

Celebrity, Sexuality, and Self-invention

Martha Gever

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FOR YVONNE

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I was also able to benefit from the stalwart support and provocative questions of others who read early drafts of the manuscript. Since the days when lesbian and gay critical writing on art and media was scarce, Douglas Crimp

has been a constant ally. His scholarship in these areas, as well as his commitment to gay politics, allowed him to critique my work as someone who understands thoroughly its implications. Serafina Bathrick was one of the first people with whom I explored the notion of lesbian celebrity as a fit topic for serious study and who followed up with sound advice about the project as it developed. Stuart Ewen challenged my sometimes convoluted thinking and difficult prose, prompting revisions intended to remedy these problems. Patricia Clough lent her critical intelligence and experience with knotty questions of feminist and queer theory, suggesting intriguing interpretations of several key points. Jill Dolan also offered knowledgeable suggestions, which led to additions that improved the text. Jill Johnston and Ingrid Nyboe graciously allowed me to rummage through Jill's archive, which provided information that might otherwise have never surfaced. Suggestions made by a reader who commented on the manuscript for Routledge also encouraged me to update my ideas to include an appraisal of a newcomer to lesbian celebrity, Rosie O'Donnell, which allowed me to punctuate the last chapter with references to recent events. And I must thank Ruby Rich, who endorsed my tentative idea for this book as we chatted about possible areas of lesbian culture I might subject to critical scrutiny.

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conversations when we were not, enabled me to write this book. And her appetite for bold honesty, rigorous work, creative riskiness, and wacky humor continues to amaze me. My mother, Jean Gever, confirmed her belief in my abilities at every turn. And without Donna Smith, I would never have been able to ride the waves of emotional and intellectual doubt and fatigue that threatened to discourage this project at many points along the way.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

CELEBRITY TALK, LESBIAN STYLE

Ever since I began my research on lesbian celebrity, I have been surprised at the interest the topic provokes among friends and colleagues who do various kinds of intellectual work. I assume that they will find it a subject too frivolous for scholarly study, barely worthy of serious discussion, and I may have not always been successful in convincing them otherwise. Just the same, I routinely find that social occasions become opportunities for intense discussions when I mention the topic. What has intrigued me most, though, is the kind of curiosity I most frequently encounter. The typical question concerns who I am *doing*, as in, "Are you doing Ellen? k.d.? Lily? Are you going to deal with Jodie's refusal to admit she's a dyke? And what about Whitney? Why do you think it took Rosie so long to come out?" After a couple of awkward attempts to answer queries of this sort, I adopted a standard reply: my project isn't intended as a series of biographical sketches, I explain, but rather an inquiry into the social factors that inform lesbian celebrity. By reciting this clarification I hope to earn forgiveness for not dealing with the controversies that swirl around prominent lesbian performers and short-circuit any disappointment they might experience after they find out that I'm not "doing" any of these famous lesbians, even though the names of one or two may appear in the following pages.

The problem I found myself facing in these conversations stemmed from my decision during the early phase of my research that I was not going to deal with the question of closeted stars, at least not in the terms that are generally employed, and I wasn't going to agonize over the debates over outing (funny how "out" has become a verb). And I also decided that I was not going

to trace the routes any lesbian celebrity traveled (or did not) to reach the point where she announces that she is a lesbian, gay woman, dyke, or whatever other word she might choose from among the possible self-designations.

None of this stops me from engaging in a good gossip, of course, as well as using such opportunities to test my conjecture that this topic generates a great deal of curiosity and speculation about the presence of lesbians in popular culture. By mentioning these encounters I also hope to caution readers eager to find juicy tidbits about one or another of their favorite stars in this book. There may be a few, but my intent in writing it was not to add to or evaluate the truthfulness of lore about lesbian icons. I do hope, however, that anyone interested in exploring how lesbian celebrities—who before the last decade and a half appeared only as caricatures or as shadowy figures suggesting forbidden desires—have become familiar figures in American popular culture will be more than entertained by this book. Questions about how and why lesbian celebrity came about provoked this study in the first place, and I have found that the possibility of this kind of celebrity involves cultural and political transformations that go beyond more widespread recognition of a constellation of sexual identities and practices defined as lesbian.

Let me return, however, to how this book relates to contemporary studies of celebrity. The existing literature on stars and stardom can be divided roughly into two kinds: biography and social critique. As I have indicated, my project belongs in the second category, although biographical materials often provide points of departure for my analysis. I also devote considerable attention to problems presented by biographical representations, both self-representations in autobiographies and other writers' descriptions and interpretations of the lives of celebrities. There is a further categorical refinement proposed by Richard Dyer in his important survey of the literature on celebrity phenomena, *Stars* (1979), where he sorts academic studies in this field into two additional categories: sociological and semiotic. This work is situated on the sociological side of this divide but employs paradigms and techniques from semiotics from time to time.

I should also alert readers that this book is not an ethnographic study of fans' responses to celebrities, despite what my opening anecdotal paragraph may imply. Nor does it delve into psychological issues or theories meant to unravel the intricacies of fans' fascinations with and fantasies about stars. In other words, I do not undertake a psychoanalytic inquiry into the construction of or engagement with celebrity images. The omission does not result

from conceptual sloth but stems from more substantial problems with privileging the psyche as the organizing principle of cultural life. I agree with those who favor psychological paradigms that subjectivity, the problem central to psychoanalytic theory, is a major question for any serious inquiry concerning celebrity culture. However, I find more convincing the proposition that the psychological bedrock of subjectivity is not a primary structure of the human organism but rather a set of effects, historically situated social discourses and practices—as Michel Foucault and others have argued and elaborated (Burchell, Gordon, and Miller 1991; Foucault 1978, 1994; Hacking 1986, 1995; N. Rose 1998, 1999). This decentering of the psyche suggests a radical redirection of the critique of celebrity, away from psychological structures and processes, toward historical studies of the production of particular kinds of persons and concepts of selves, including what is commonly called the inner life.

I have chosen, therefore, to set aside questions of desire and identification—the province of psychoanalytic theory, in particular—in order to concentrate on dimensions of lesbian celebrity related to cultural institutions and practices, discursive configurations, and political debates and developments. I find this approach more suitable for my investigations of lesbian celebrity because the kinds of people involved, both celebrities and lesbians, pose suggestive questions concerning the way personhood has been constituted in contemporary Western societies—how people are made up, as Ian Hacking says, or selves are invented, to adopt Nikolas Rose's idiom. Understanding subjectivity from this perspective involves placing it in the context of cultural reproduction: the processes by which cultural norms and systems of meaning are maintained and undergo change, how social relations regulate individual conduct and, in turn, how conduct is interpreted, and how specific kinds of subjects and subjectivity become legible.

Until recently, however, lesbian personhood was valued negatively in just about every corner of popular culture. Of course, there were a handful of acclaimed lesbians who lived long before the past fifteen years. Think, for example, of Gertrude Stein. Still, because lesbianism was considered a perversion and generally regarded as synonymous with depravity, it was hardly something that someone striving for public recognition would want to aver. During the latter decades of the twentieth century, however, these standards were assaulted by challenges on many fronts. Most importantly for the entity considered here—lesbian *and* celebrity—disciplinary techniques of self-management and practices of self-stylization that became prevalent in the

United States (and other Western nations) in recent years enabled new kinds of selves and descriptions of them.

One such new type of subject is the lesbian, first identified in the mid-nineteenth century, later redefined by those classified (often self-classified) as lesbians in the twentieth. Another is the kind of celebrity who now dominates North American popular culture. Unlike the military conquerors, captains of industry, and religious leaders featured in the halls of fame of previous eras, celebrities nowadays are most often acclaimed on the basis of personal style and individual enterprise. And when celebrities become implicated in public debates over identity—as well-known lesbians inevitably do—the processes and problems involved in shaping contemporary subjectivities are put on display. Thus, both modern stars and lesbians can be described in terms of particular modes of subjectivity achieved through practices of self-fashioning and image management. A detailed exploration of the constitution of such personae is the project of *Entertaining Lesbians*.

Before embarking on a discussion of the specific areas and issues covered in the book, its organization warrants a brief explanation. Its premise as a study of lesbian celebrity can only be conceived within the context of contemporary culture. But this is in many respects, a historical study, although the chapters are not ordered in chronological sequence. Rather, each chapter emphasizes particular historical configurations and developments that resonate in the present, loosely connected by the common themes that occur at the intersection of homosexuality, female gender, and celebrity. As my aberrant chronicle unwinds, skips around, and at times doubles back, one persistent motif emerges, however: self-invention, which is intimately related to opportunities for self-display, as well as the continual monitoring and adjustment of self-image.

Entertaining Lesbians begins, in effect, with an analysis of the claims about the importance of visibility and related concepts of representation that first animated my interest in the topic of celebrity within U.S. lesbian culture and politics, and it seems appropriate that a survey of visibility politics should introduce the discussion.[1] Present-day concerns about lesbian visibility in the United States have been advocated repeatedly as an important political project. The visibility of increased numbers of lesbian stars, it is said, fosters greater freedom for all lesbians. According to this logic, the proliferation of images of lesbians in the media provides evidence of our existence, refutes stereotypes, and provides role models for those who suffer from inadequate self-esteem. The problem that arises with such arguments is that they mis-

take symbolic representations in the media for political representation and social legitimation. The causal relationship between visibility and power is not only difficult to demonstrate, it is also based on an unexamined faith in the unmediated veracity of documentary evidence, including that produced by photographic media. More pessimistic cultural critics often make the contrary argument that lesbian celebrity serves as testimony to the voracious appetite of media empires, capable of appropriating and manipulating all cultural phenomena and political dissent for profitable exploitation. However, this explanation, too, is seriously undermined by the faulty assumption that lesbian (and other) fans are simple-minded pawns of capitalist machinations. Moreover, these critics may not oppose campaigns for visibility but only protest the recruitment of celebrities for these purposes.

Rather than attempting to decide in favor of one of these positions, *Entertaining Lesbians* treats such contradictions as indications that a different critical approach may provide more satisfactory analyses of how celebrity operates in relation to political identities and social change. Drawing upon paradigms employed by critics of visual and media culture, primarily but not exclusively those developed under the rubric of cultural studies, I outline various tensions and paradoxes found in the enactment of and commentary about lesbian celebrity in the United States. The general outlook I borrow from cultural studies (Stuart Hall's work in particular) theorizes popular culture as a site of struggle over definitions and meanings of key terms in shared cultural vocabularies. But there are additional questions posed by lesbian visibility politics that call for more specific analysis, especially those related to such political issues as the commodification of lesbian styles; connections between sexuality, class, race, and visibility; and the gendered character of cultural expression and social recognition.

These questions recur in chapter 4, although here the problem of visibility is articulated in different terms at a previous historical moment—the late 1960s and early 1970s—when lesbian subjectivity in the United States was radically reconfigured within the crucible of the gay and women's liberation movements. At first, gay and feminist political principles precluded any activist from collaborating with what was believed to be an elitist media system. Celebrity was condemned vociferously as antithetical to the democratic ethos of liberation. Two prominent feminist and lesbian activists—Jill Johnston and Kate Millett—were routinely criticized on these grounds, and their treatment by both mainstream and movement media provides illustrations of the anticelebrity ideology prevalent in radical politics of the sixties.

At the same time, though, the lesbian and gay movement made visibility a centerpiece of its political strategy when it promoted coming out—commonly understood as the realization of self-knowledge, self-possession, and self-esteem—as *the* definitive feature of lesbian or gay personhood. It is no exaggeration to say that coming out became the paramount theoretical and practical weapon in the lesbian and gay political arsenal. But there was an apparent incompatibility between being proudly lesbian but also averse to publicity. Within a few years, though, a rapprochement between the utopian ideals of liberation and visibility was effected when the glorious star became reconciled with the noble lesbian. The truce was brokered on the basis of a shared investment in an ethic of self-fashioning and self-management or, to use the terms introduced by Foucault (1994), the technical practices of governmentality. Lesbian celebrities, I argue, are an effect of this alliance.

Before going any further I should define lesbian celebrity. Stated succinctly, my interpretation of the term is limited to instances where a celebrity is known to be and does not deny being a lesbian. To be more precise, the stardom of these lesbians is achieved and authorized within the institutions of popular culture, endorsed by the mainstream media. As I noted previously, I do not deal with so-called closeted stars and have no interest in debating the pros and cons of outing. Even in its most sophisticated form (e.g., Gross 1993), the discussion of outing presumes that the parameters of lesbian identity have been settled once and for all. Far too much empirical and theoretical work contradicts this assumption for it to remain viable. The political significance of the outing controversy dissipates as soon as social identities are recognized as contingent and often contradictory.

Despite the restrictions I have imposed on lesbian celebrity by ruling out those who would refuse the designation, my definition by no means reduces the scope of my study to a tiny group of exceptional individuals. More importantly, the ideas about lesbian celebrity developed in this book all reject the premise of lesbian celebrity as a result of individual initiative—stars recognizing who they "really are" and incorporating that identity into their public personae—but treat it instead as a social phenomenon. Indeed, this critique of lesbian celebrity attempts to take into account myriad phenomena frequently invoked by commentators on the cultural scene in the late twentieth-century United States. Just naming a few of these—spectacle, mass media, commercialization, sexual politics, socialization—hints at the breadth of the territory visited. Organizing this melange are questions concerning the emergence and expression of lesbian celebrity. Indeed, the pairing of the two

words just a decade ago would have required a lengthy explanation for anyone not privy to lesbian subcultural knowledge. A couple of decades before that, lesbian celebrity would have been an oxymoron, nonsensical.

As soon as the possibility of lesbian celebrity is proposed, other problems begin to surface. Can there be lesbian celebrity prior to the conception of a lesbian person who might qualify? Are changes in the criteria for celebrity related to the acceptance of lesbians into the charmed circle? These are questions I take up in chapter 3, which presents a historical overview of cultural, economic, and technological changes in the past 150 or so years that set the stage for recent lesbian celebrities. My point of departure is a discussion of the lesbian self-fashioning practiced by Radclyffe Hall, the British novelist, whose 1928 novel *The Well of Loneliness* produced a scandal when the book first appeared. Hall's concern for her public image and reputation, as well as her contribution to conventional ideas about lesbian identity, qualify her as the first self-conscious lesbian icon. However, Hall's looks and gestures would have been meaningless without an entire edifice of technological refinements, ranging from the emergence of sexological science (which Hall endorsed when crafting the archetypal lesbian protagonist of *The Well*, Stephen Gordon), the incorporation of photography by the mass media, the related growth in celebrity and gossip journalism, the expansion and democratization of consumer culture, and mutations in the characteristics of celebrity. In addition to what could be called celebrity technology, another significant cultural development took place alongside it: the embrace of melodrama as the preeminent aesthetic in popular entertainment. The emotionalism and femininity associated with this theatrical form provided a cultural environment where lesbian desires and identities could, and did, proliferate, although normative pressures were sufficient to keep such inclinations under wraps and underground during long stretches of the twentieth century.

This more or less hidden history has galvanized attention among chroniclers of popular culture over the past dozen years or so. Chapter 5 contemplates the popular revisionist histories that began to proliferate in the 1990s, the decade when lesbian celebrity became a feature of the cultural landscape. These are books that profile celebrities who engaged in lesbian practices but who never described themselves in those terms—most notably, Alla Nazimova, Eva Le Gallienne, Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, and the woman who consorted with all of them, Mercedes de Acosta, as well as the wider circle of lesbians she knew, befriended, and maybe slept with. Rather than producing yet another breathless exposé of their love and sex lives, I am

concerned with the rhetorical and social mechanisms that generate knowledge about ancestral lesbian celebrities in the name of historical truth but often reproduce worn out clichés with questionable implications as a result. But I am also interested in another interpretation of the history represented by de Acosta and her friends that emerges when their lives are recast as exemplary studies in image management and theatricality.

Having offered a general outline of the key issues explored in this book a central question remains: who counts as a lesbian celebrity? Perhaps the best example is Martina Navratilova, whose international fame was earned in a cultural domain—sports—where lesbianism has long been, and continues to be, assumed even if not acknowledged or accepted. Others are engaged in more traditional female occupations in entertainment—for example, stage actress Cherry Jones—but depart from convention by refusing to hide or deny their lesbianism, as Jones did when she acknowledged her lover in her acceptance speech when awarded the Tony for best actress in 1995. Television actresses Amanda Bearse (*Married . . . With Children*) and Ellen DeGeneres, of course, whose splashy coming out in 1997 was heralded as a groundbreaking media event, have been equally forthright. Rosie O'Donnell, whose career has run the gamut of theater, movies, and TV, as well as her eponymous glossy magazine, offers yet another example, although she does not fit neatly into any particular professional category. And at a time when fashion models may attain celebrity status and thus have not only their bodies but also their private lives and personalities scrutinized, such lesbian supermodels as Jenny Shimizu and Gia Carangi complicate the traditional notions of idealized femininity that fashion models are said to represent.

Popular music provides plentiful examples of lesbian (sometimes bisexual) celebrity—for example, k.d. lang and Melissa Etheridge, of course, but also Me'Shell NdegéCello, Albita, Sinéad O'Connor, Ani DiFranco, and the Indigo Girls, not to mention the various singers who it is said have taken over the folk music scene in the United States (Hadju 2002). Indeed, lesbian celebrities seem to crop up regularly in this arguably more freewheeling cultural field, and the lesbian histories of such eminent singers from earlier generations as Ma Rainey, Carmen MacRae, Janis Joplin, and Dusty Springfield have not been entirely suppressed. Moreover, this is the only entertainment sector that has consistently produced celebrities who are lesbians of color. I explore some of the historical factors that contribute to the overwhelming—one could say overdetermined—whiteness of lesbian celebrity in the discussion of visibility politics in chapter 2. The absence of a more extensive dis-

cussion of this issue could be rectified by a thorough examination of sexual politics in popular music, but that will have to wait for a writer with more knowledge of the field, as well as a more musical sensibility, than I am able to profess.

Out of the increasing number of lesbian celebrities, I selected only Navratilova for an extensive case study of the production of lesbian celebrity in chapter 6, although I devote considerable space to de Acosta's posthumous reputation in chapter 5. The reasons for choosing Navratilova can be summed up in a phrase: image management, one of the recurring themes in this book. Since celebrity is synonymous with celebrity image, lesbian celebrity—or any celebrity, for that matter—becomes in effect an image management project. The self-fashioning practices used to fabricate a celebrity image are well known, epitomized perhaps by the techniques perfected by Hollywood studio publicity departments in the 1920s and 1930s but now performed by a plethora of specialists employed to manage a star's career—personal agents, publicists, stylists, and trainers, to name a few. But until very recently such projects involved primarily cosmetic enhancements.

Although a review of Navratilova's circuitous itinerary on her way to lesbian celebrity provides an account of an elaborate experiment with such methods, the efforts to redesign her image were not confined to looks alone. She also employed ancillary theories and techniques that involved a makeover of her entire physique. The result was a body described by sports reporters in terms of mechanical apparatuses and cyborg metaphors—an ambiguously gendered, perhaps nongendered, clearly human, but also somewhat inhuman or superhuman, lesbian person. And, as many advocates of fitness regimes will attest, this kind of self-enhancement involved mental, as well as physical, discipline. Navratilova and others credited her dominance of women's tennis for close to a decade to the combination of disciplined mind and muscle. Most pertinent for the study of lesbian celebrity, however, Navratilova's image management project also coincided with another kind of self-invention—coming out—which she also enacted in the arena of popular culture. And she was again praised by the press and fans for risking ridicule in her pursuit of self-realization.

But Navratilova's enduring fame, forged by the aggregation of disparate programs for self-mastery, should not be interpreted simply as the just reward for individual initiative confronting and conquering social prejudice. Rather, a thorough examination of her celebrity suggests that Navratilova took advantage of the obligations of self-government that now permeate social

and intimate life, as well as the displacement of the moral authority of normative definitions of gender and sexuality by increasingly powerful imperatives to attain physical and psychological well-being. In other words, Navratilova's and others' lesbian celebrity occurs at the point where concepts of the self intersect with relatively new strategies for mobilizing power.

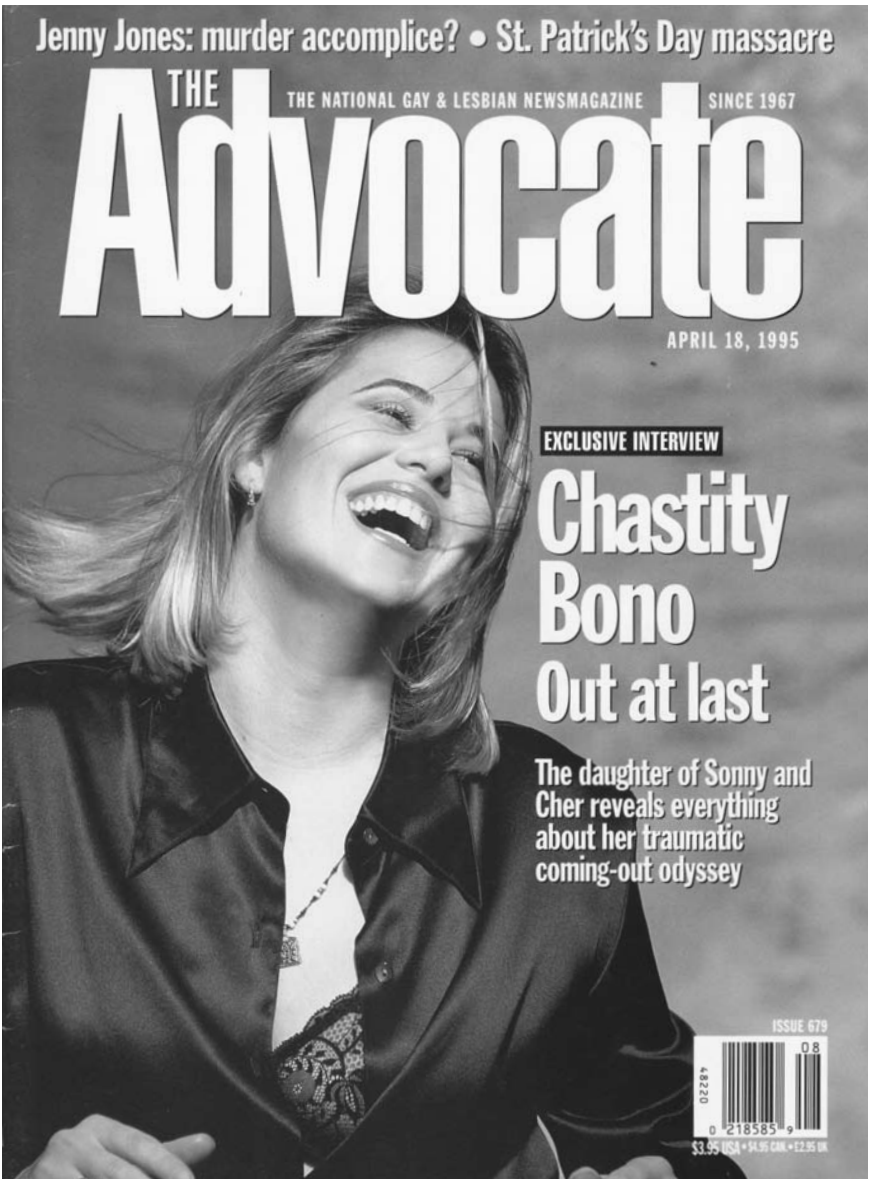
Lesbian celebrities embody such encounters with techniques of social regulation accomplished as willing participants in self-control projects. And these figures demonstrate that individual sexuality and sexual identity, like celebrity image, are articulated through interactions with social norms and systems of representation. Likewise, lesbian culture—including the celebrities who galvanize ideas about and inklings of lesbian personhood—is by definition political. In short, lesbian celebrity is about power and knowledge, and that may be why everyone seems so eager to talk about it.

CHAPTER TWO

VISIBILITY NOW!
THE SEXUAL POLITICS OF SEEING

Chastity Bono, national media director of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) and daughter of pop singer-actress Cher and the late singer-songwriter turned Republican congressman Sonny Bono, is talking to a *New York Times* reporter in 1997 about her first lesbian love affair in the late 1980s. "No one was out then," she says. "It was before k.d. lang and Melissa Etheridge. I was really afraid" (Witchel 1997). Appearing in the final paragraphs of a breezy profile, the suppositions implied by the historical benchmarks Bono mentions when recalling her personal distress could easily pass unnoticed. At the same time, her version of the past could be a show stopper. *No one*? And this was *when*? For a reader who came out in 1975, and perhaps for countless others whose acceptance or embrace of lesbian identification predates k.d.'s in 1992 or Melissa's the following year, Bono's version of history seems sadly misinformed. But maybe it's not surprising for someone whose knowledge of lesbians seems to rely upon the mainstream media and for whom the possibility of describing herself as a lesbian—accepting the fact that it's all right to say so—was itself constituted as a media event. Bono's first coming out in 1990 was involuntary, insofar as it was engineered by the editors of the *Star*, a supermarket tabloid that capitalized on her parents' fame by emblazoning her name and face, accompanied by eye-catching headlines that screamed "lesbian" and "gay," on its cover and inside pages. Only five years after this exposé did she enact her "official" coming out by granting the gay and lesbian magazine the *Advocate*, an interview (Bono 1995).

No doubt, Bono's faulty historical knowledge can be attributed to the fact that she has lived her entire life within the shelter or, if you prefer, the



Chastity Bono comes out officially in 1995, aided by the *Advocate*. Liberation Publications.