

What promotional and textual
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and how do audiences respond to
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Faye Patricia Davies

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement of Birmingham City
University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

The following research is concerned with an exploration of the discourses constructed about lesbian culture both within and surrounding the production and lifecycle of *The L Word*. The originality of the approach to and development of this thesis is anchored in a consideration of the show as a symbolic good (Garnham, 1999) which encapsulates not only the meanings inherent in the television text, as often focused upon in traditional Television Studies perspectives, but also producer focused branding and creative justification through promotional materials, and audiences sense making. This means that the thesis is the result of the intersection of a number of theoretical approaches to the study of television production as industrial practice, television as meaningful text, and also to audiences as readers.

This thesis outlines that *The L Word's* textual elements, promotional branding, and the audience response to this wide consideration of the television text altered significantly over six seasons. During this time the priorities of the producer altered from a focus on political representation and a communal sense of lesbian identity, to maintaining narratives and that would ensure appeal to a mainstream audience. This change in focus led to the fragmenting of lesbian subjectivities and formed an ideologically hegemonic lesbian culture within the text. This was further asserted through the othering of lesbian characters considered overtly sexualised, alongside identities of gender and sexuality that blurred the queer boundaries. The developing decoding and reactions of the lesbian audience further support the development of these hierarchies of discourse. Within this thesis it is also argued that the pleasures of the lesbian audience became problematic and their readings had to become increasingly negotiated for them to find enjoyment in the narratives and outcomes of *The L Word*.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my parents who have always supported my decisions and direction in life, I cannot thank either of you enough for the love, approval, comfort, and encouragement unequivocally offered throughout my life, and especially at times of stress during this process. Thank you for keeping me going with the mantra that,

‘every word is one less’.

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INTRODUCTION

The L Word was first broadcast in 2004 on the US based Showtime network and continued until 2009. Considered to be the first mainstream US drama that focused on the everyday lives of Los Angeles lesbians, Ilene Chaiken created the series and is a US based television writer and producer. After securing a pilot for the show, Chaiken recruited a writing team, a number of these writers were previously associated with New Queer Cinema and politicised film productions. This interesting confluence of screen production traditions makes a convincing argument for the analysis of such a show. Prior to *The L Word* most representation of lesbian life and culture had been limited to either art house based or politicised production cultures, the change in production direction engaging a mainstream audience in a narrowcast environment transformed the context of production and thus the potential discourses which are formed from such a text.

The L Word is a significant aspect of televisual representation as it represents the everyday lives of lesbian characters. But its uniqueness does not only relate to sexuality – in its lifespan *The L Word* also represented a diversity of ethnicity, disability, and religion. *The L Word* can be considered a unique text in terms of its breadth of representation. The show has been labelled as “path-breaking” (McFadden, 2014: 1) in terms of its subject matter; an ultimate focus on women who are lesbian, bisexual or experiencing transgender issues which also embraces a wider diversity of issues across religious, ethnic and gender divisions and considerations. The show also encouraged debate and discussion online where it garnered a high number of fans that involved themselves in debates, fan fiction, or discussion about their own experiences of sexuality (Pratt, 2008). In terms of Western television production the collation of these factors made *The L Word* unique in nature and this opened up an array of areas for research. In terms of this research, the focus tried to span

the arising issues involved in the production, meaning and reception of the show – essentially the unique factors about the production as a whole.

I draw on a wide range of sources to produce my primary work. These include a detailed analysis of the individual programmes across several series, published promotional interviews with the creator Ilene Chaiken, audience responses to both the opening and closing of the overall narrative and discursive meaning involved in the show, and the textual aspects of the text which are related to constructing a variety of lesbian subjectivities. The analysis itself builds on my previous published work (Davies, 2007) that reflected on how *The L Word* offered challenging representations of lesbian culture through notions of everyday life, lesbian relationships and community interactions whilst also constructing a sense of the ‘other’ in terms of bisexual identity. A further related example of my published work also reflects part of chapter eight of this thesis that explores audience responses to the discourse formulation during the closing season of *The L Word* (Davies, 2013).

Following Nicholas Garnham (1999) I treat *The L Word* as symbolic good, and the production processes which produced the programme, the promotional activities which presented it as a meaningful text to its audiences, and the lesbian and mainstream audiences sensemaking as essential dimensions of this symbolic good. In doing so I go beyond the simple notion that television programmes are mere commodities to develop a synthesised way of understanding television production as an industrial practice, television as a meaningful text, and audiences as readers.

This research explores the nature of *The L Word* through a variety of discourses by exploring a central research question:

What promotional and textual discourses are constructed over the production lifecycle of 'The L Word' and how do audiences respond to producer decisions within such discursive constructions?

The production lifecycle of the show is considered through an analysis of textual discourses and constructions of lesbian, bisexual and transgender identities within the show. These more traditional versions of textual meaning are contrasted with the promotional discourses that surround the show. In doing so I explore the industrial context in which the multiple meanings of the programme are made and remade in order that we might gain a greater understanding of the implications of the creative decision making amongst the show's producers. Furthermore, the readings and reactions of some of the show's viewers are considered in relation to both the opening two seasons and final season of the show. The purpose of this approach is to give a wider understanding of how industrial background relates to both the textual construction and the readings that audience members may produce. This in turn offers, I will argue, insights into the ordering of society and discursive power in relation to sexual identity. In doing so I offer my analysis as an original rethinking of approaches usually found in more traditional versions of television studies, extending my focus simultaneously to a pantextual sense of the show, to the discursive traditions of alternative cinema, and to the ways audiences make meaning through their commentary on the text and its production.

The L Word was screened at an important moment in the history of mainstream broadcast television and in the shifting arguments of lesbian politics. My detailed analysis demonstrates how we can understand this intersection and intermingling of these usually separate discursive spheres. In addressing the sphere of broadcasting I draw on a range of existing literature to demonstrate how the television landscape in the United States has,

primarily driven by economics, developed significantly since the late 1970s. My focus here is on the underlying conditions of production during the early 2000s where, according to Croteau and Hoynes (2003), the distinct focus for the US television industry intensified on selling audiences to advertisers in what was developing as a diversified and increasingly competitive market.

Specifically, I am interested in exploring the cultural context of economically-driven changing forms of production and distribution, and in the possibilities these changes contain for new forms of social representation, within what Alexander (2004) sees as an increasingly narrowcast environment.

This perspective is interrogated through the case study of *The L Word* in three ways. Firstly through a consideration of Ilene Chaiken's background in commercial television and political experience as a lesbian, and the relation of this to production approaches she took in the making the series. Secondly, in the specific promotional discourses that were generated around the series, and finally through a general consideration of the economic context of the US market. To provide detailed evidence of this production context I interpret these discursive frames in relation to: the stated priorities of Chaiken and Showtime executives; through a consideration of the network's focus on affluent audiences and subscription models of funding in the cable channel market; and in the implications of these 'economics of audience' for representations of lesbian lifestyles and the possibility of the programme as a temporal centre for the representation of lesbian cultural identity.

In addressing the sphere of lesbian political culture, I draw on long running debates about whether distinct identities should be focused on enabling assimilation into what we could

call a heteronormative culture, or whether a distinct subjectivity based on liberation is necessary to highlight and embrace the distinct needs and differences of same sex relationships and the surrounding culture. I further root these debates in the growth of the gay rights movement since the 1960s and the argument that political visibility is central to the improvement and maintenance of rights for gay men and lesbians. In particular, I am interested in interrogating what implications the production and consumption of this programme has for these political objectives in the twenty-first century.

The thesis

Through my exploration of the lifecycle of the promotional, textual and audience generated meanings of *The L Word* I build the argument that the discourses of the *The L Word* move from being initially political and celebratory in nature and later changing to dystopic and more fragmented forms of narrative.

In the promotional material used to promote the show, Chaiken presented her involvement as being motivated by her own lesbian identity and internal politics, and clearly involved writers and creatives linked to the New Queer movement. The show is promotionally constructed as a huge change and challenge to previous representations of lesbian culture and also a creative risk for the Showtime network through producer interviews and promotional shorts aimed at a lesbian audience. These artefacts also aided in the formation of the Showtime 'No Limits' branding and a reputation for offering challenging narratives focused on minority cultures. The celebratory natures of these promotional aspects of *The L Word* were also reflected in audience responses to the first two seasons of the show. The audience share in Chaiken's politicisation of lesbian issues and this added to a sense of community for the audience who gathered online to share their pleasure and experience of

lesbian culture. There was a huge gratitude for Chaiken's work and efforts in relation to bringing *The L Word* to television screens. What is clearly reflected in the results of the research is a sense of shared community and experience and the show allows lesbian viewers to gather online and discuss issues that are important and integral to their own identity. This reflects an audience pleasure being taken in the sense of societal citizenship that is constructed via the exploration of issues that affect lesbian lives. This is individual to lesbian audiences as their previous cultural experience underpins their reading of *The L Word* and also their relationship to key creative Chaiken.

This sense of community is also reflected in the television text. The initial two seasons of *The L Word* are focused around the notion of 'The Chart'.



Alice's Chart – taken from S1: E1

'The Chart' is created by character Alice Pieszecki (Leisha Hailey) and is a representational graph of all the sexual affairs that occur between Alice's friends. It graphically represents 'hubs' of sexual interactivity and links these with lines that represent affairs or sexual interactions. This is a narrative reflection of the intertwined nature of the lesbian and

bisexual scene this links all lesbians in Los Angeles and beyond together, and is a reflection and celebration of sexual interactions. In a magnified sense ‘The Chart’ also allows the viewer to track the relationships between characters in both the past and present, allowing marginal storylines to grow and develop. As the show continues, ‘The Chart’ develops into an online space, essentially a social network, which allows it to further expand and leads to the introduction of new characters. This change (S4) also reflected the development of ‘OurChart.com’ – a website created by Ilene Chaiken which hosted various blogs and profiles related to lesbian and bisexual content. The site eventually ceased during season six of *The L Word*.

In terms of this research ‘The Chart’ is centrally important, as it reflects a sense of community through mutual experiences and offers a new representation of lesbians as a group rather than through the isolated individual previously seen in a variety of visual media. For lesbian viewers this offers a recognisable and viable aspect of their culture rather than tokenistic representation. This arguably challenges lesbian invisibility on screen. The sense of community is also underpinned through narratives that portray lesbians as part of a distinct ‘team’. Lesbian sexuality is seen as uncomplicated and coming out as a positive experience that frees characters from shame, or even possible confusion about their bisexuality. The pursuit of lesbian sex and relationships is unapologetic in the early seasons of *The L Word*. This results in a discourse that is represented as stable and attractive to lesbian viewers in terms of visibility and politicisation. This appeals to lesbians as a niche audience and reflects the target of the television industry in a narrowcasting environment.

When exploring seasons three and four of *The L Word* this thesis focuses on the distinct textual meanings constructed around butch and femme identities, bisexuality and

transgenderism. What is asserted in the thesis is that the most stable constructions in the show are both lesbian and heteronormative in nature. Stereotypically gendered cast members are used in the show to represent the most stable relationships and reflect ideological expectations of femininity. The relationships involving feminised characters are also the most recognisable for heterosexual audiences and so appeal to an audience that is much more mainstream than a mere niche lesbian audience. This results in a greater audience reach for *The L Word* and thus more commercial success for the show. Scenes that involve the most feminine characters draw on traditional orders of discourse and gender around sexual behaviour and emotional interactions and echo previously seen interactions in the wider broadcasting of US serial dramas. Thus heteronormativity is reiterated and supported by this particular construction – meaning that the show begins to maintain and develop both niche and mainstream appeal as it continues in its lifecycle.

The acceptability and normalisation of the gendered world mentioned above is also underpinned by the construction of a variety of increasingly unstable discourses. Whilst feminised and traditional gendered identities are appealing and welcomed into heteronormative culture due to their lack of ideological challenge, butch, bisexual and transgender identities are far more problematic in terms of their portrayal. The character of Shane McCutcheon (Katherine Moennig) and her butch identity in *The L Word* grows to be something that is to be apologised for in seasons three and four. Her identity is seen as inescapable and leads to an unstable state of mind and life experience. Shane is unable to maintain heteronormative ideological standards in terms of family life, sexual relationship and monogamy. This particular type of lesbian subjectivity offers an anchorage point for lesbian viewers in that they recognise masculine characteristics from their own cultural experience. Yet this subjectivity also reasserts heteronormative values for a wider

mainstream audience, and narrative development impedes Shane's butch character from being any ideological threat to the orders of discourse that govern social relations.

Furthermore meanings created around bisexual identity and transgender identity are shown as even more unstable and socially difficult for characters. Bisexuality is consistently represented as a transition point between heterosexuality and homosexuality. This clearly links to bisexuality as being shown as problematic in terms of mental health and also in relation to being able to have a stable (and arguably heteronormative) relationship. Through the characters of Alice Pieszecki (Leisha Hailey) and Jennifer Schecter (Mia Kirshner) we see a representation of bisexuality that is isolated, and not considered as a part of the strong lesbian community asserted in seasons one and two of *The L Word*. Bisexuality is conflated with various discursive tropes related to mental health difficulties, stalker like obsessions and sexual addiction. These connotations offer a negative representation and experience to the viewer and some appeal for those who clearly assert themselves to the solely heterosexual or lesbian as these identities are further reiterated as stable, definitive and settled. This instability can be considered as political in nature as the reassertion of bisexuality as transitory only undermines this identity in terms of social power and acceptability.

Transgenderism is also represented as problematic for both heterosexual and lesbian communities in *The L Word*. The character of Moira/Max Sweeney (Daniela Sea) offers the most prominent characterisation of the experience of transitioning from female to male. A continual 'othering' of Moira/Max increases in intensity as the series continues. The character is excluded from various aspects of life – from employment to family life. Moira/Max is also excluded from the lesbian 'team' clearly asserted in the first two seasons of the show, as the character develops Moira/Max is shown as too butch to take a socially

comfortable part in the gendered and glamorous world of lesbians in Los Angeles. The transgender identity is referred to as 'role playing' and this underpins the visual representation of Max/Moira that alludes that his/her state of identity is not natural or fully acceptable.

The constructions discussed above mean that traditionally gendered lesbians are offered as socially acceptable in *The L Word*. Arguably this then means that the widest possible audience are appealed to. The celebratory response of the lesbian audience discussed earlier reflects that they are happy to watch the show based on an appearance of stable lesbian characters. These are further stabilised by the othering of both bisexual and transgender identities. This order of discourse also appeals to heterosexual audiences as their own sexual identity is further reiterated in a normalised order of discourse. The assimilatory and heteronormative practices of gendered characters appeals to a wider audience whose discursive expectations are served by the particular tropes displayed in relation to family life, expressions of gender, and sexual behaviour.

The final two seasons of *The L Word* are presented in this thesis as the most dystopic and fragmented in terms of narrative. In terms of textual discourses the notion of lesbian identity and experience becomes far more problematic. 'The Chart' again becomes a symbolic focus in these final two seasons, but rather than communicating a sense of community and shared experience the interactions between characters and community narrative is portrayed as being a negative aspect of characters' lives. Key characters in the final seasons find the experience of being part of a lesbian community causes problems in their wider life and impacts on their ability to interact with the wider heteronormative world. Shane's unapologetic sexual nature is increasingly fragmented in a narrative sense and is portrayed

as socially divisive. This even causes Shane to make a decision to be celibate and completely remove herself from performing the sexual practice aspect of her butch lesbian subjectivity. Shane is portrayed as being unable to escape the sexualised aspect of her personality and this causes conflict and issues with those around her. The character even accepts that her actions as unapologetic sexualised lesbian deserve some form of self-punishment via the social consequences of broken relationships. This is a vast difference to the celebratory tone of seasons one and two and arguably offers further support for feminised and heteronormative nature of the socially prioritised lesbian relationships in the show which are particularly pertinent through the central characters and relationship of Bette Porter (Jennifer Beals) and Tina Kennard (Laurel Holloman).

Lesbian identity is also shown as socially problematic through the character of US Army soldier Tasha Williams (Rose Rollins). This character's lesbian subjectivity is shown as negative as it impacts on her ability to carry out and partake in her intended career as a soldier. Asserting a dominant and stable lesbian identity is displayed as impossible due to the United States laws that have previously prioritised heterosexual behaviour. In the instance of the final two seasons lesbian subjectivity is shown as a burden that can lead to mental health difficulties, vocational isolation and suicidal feelings. This is in distinct opposition to the early seasons of the show. The potential of the show to offer a positive subjectivity seems to have been restricted to characters that represent traditional femininity and tropes related to heteronormative expectations of relationships and family. This is concerning as television offers knowledge about social groups which is often reflected in the organisation of social power.

The sense of negativity constructed through the text is also reflected in the response of the audience in relation to the final two seasons of *The L Word*. The dominant feeling of the fan forums explored for the purposes of this research was extremely negative when focused on the final seasons of the show. At this time the sense of celebration that was discussed was related to thanks and pleasure in the mere appearance of a lesbian focused television show rather than related to positive and unapologetic lesbian characters. The positive notion of the end of *The L Word* for audiences related to the space that it allowed for lesbians to act as a community, to discuss the show, and to share their experiences and problems. In this sense there was an increasing audience negotiation in relation to the text in order to enjoy and experience pleasure. The very appearance of *The L Word* was symbolic of a wider acceptability in society and this is what kept lesbians watching until the end of the programme, even though they were not enjoying the narrative fragmentation and lack of resolution.

The general disappointment with the show focused on a number of factors. There was a clear sense that there was no narrative resolution to the end of the programme (although a small amount of viewers celebrated this as ‘creative’). The traditional narratives around death, deviance and punishment of lesbian characters were implemented and this was intensely unpopular. Audience members offered a clear critique of the production team in relation to the narrative choices at the end of the show, and they linked such choices to mainstreaming and commercial intentions. For lesbian audiences - they felt politically used, although they understood that creative decisions have to be undertaken in the commercial context of production. In essence they expected a greater sense of loyalty from the production team, and especially Chaiken. Lesbian viewers felt ‘sold out’ by Chaiken who they posited didn’t need them any longer, as the show had been a success. From this point of view the early

promotional discourse was perhaps part of a wider plan to appear politicised and to appeal to a niche audience. Once that was achieved and *The L Word* asserted as a popular show Chaiken altered her discursive behaviour through the construction of *The L Word's* promotional focus.

In relation to the wider lesbian audience it appears that Chaiken had a burden of representation and the marginal representation of *The L Word* was really their only mainstream outlet in terms of representing lesbian identities at this particular temporal location. In the exploration of promotional material relating to seasons five and six Chaiken clearly starts to distance herself from the lesbian community. She no longer uses discursive tropes that relate to identification with the lesbian community and instead focuses on the text as mainstream, and actually steers her focus away from an LGBT niche audience. This is a distinct change from the promotional information related to seasons one and two, where the highlighted use of writers from the New Queer movement and personal and political lesbian experience was highlighted and foregrounded. There is a distinct lack of proclamation from Chaiken and the information she imparts has a much greater focus on a general and commercial television industry. Her lexical choices are not as vehement or focused on community and this is likely a reflection of her place in the television industry and the nature of commissions and success. Chaiken needed a wider audience, wider sense of creativity outside of 'lesbian' issues, and so she appears to be focusing on a very different construction of 'the self' to widen her own appeal more generally, rather than just to promote to a lesbian audience. She wishes to avoid cultural consternation for the mainstream. This is also a reflection of the increasing assimilation of gay culture in wider society – with the introduction of gay marriage and ending of Proposition 8 in the US. Chaiken's construction at the end of this promotional material is one that integrates the mainstream and LGBT

audience and depoliticises her position, and arguably the on-going specific political needs of LGBT audiences.

In essence, the lifespan of *The L Word* is reflective of the changing and consistently fluid notions of lesbian identity and subjectivity, as political ground is 'gained' in terms of civil rights, marriage, and the increase of gay parenting. These movements appear to be encouraging an assimilation of lesbian subjectivity into what I explore as heteronormative models. The lifecycle of *The L Word* appears to reflect this. Characters who didn't quite fit into typified gender roles or sexual expectations were narratively punished, and their social lives shown as increasingly difficult if they offered a clear separation of themselves from heterosexual culture.

This appears to underpin a notion that lesbian subjectivity in television is continually fluid and flexible. There are so many discursive tropes that lesbian identity draws from in *The L Word*. Each of these tropes brings political and social meanings, and the closure of the show appeared to draw on those that are most palatable for mainstream audiences in terms of gender and sexual behaviour. Overall, for *The L Word* it was always going to be defined by commercial needs due to its position in a commercial television production culture, and this restricted alternative or challenging lesbian identities, but pleasure was mainly negotiated by the lesbian audience due to mere appearance of lesbian culture on television screens.

This thesis underlines the importance of recognising that the television text is not only what appears on a television screen for a unit of one hour at a time. The originality of this work is that it recognises that the television text has expanded to incorporate discursive constructions from promotional material online, interviews, and from magazines. The

construction of meaning is no longer just limited to that which is seen on screen. In this instance the meaning of the text and the reasoning for creative decisions changed the notion of the lesbian subjectivities seen and explored. Television Studies needs to develop a pantextual approach to analysis to fully understand and explore what meanings and discourses are created and prioritised for niche audiences. The link to social power and ideological understanding of lesbian identity is also a key focus in this particular study as lesbian audiences may internalise the constructions of lesbian subjectivity, and mainstream audiences understand and gain knowledge about minorities from television culture.

Outline and structure of the PhD

The thesis is organised into eight chapters. The first chapter outlines the key theoretical considerations related to the application of discourse theory to *The L Word*. The purpose of this element of the work is to fully explain the suitability of a focus on discourse theory in understanding not only textual meaning construction but also industrial context and audience reaction. The second chapter outlines the developing context of US television production through related literature. The purpose of this focus is to provide a clear context of the production of *The L Word*. US television cultures are distinctly commercial in nature and the notion of Public Service Broadcasting is minimised in the US context of production. The information contained in this chapter is central to my later approaches to understanding the foundations of the production cultures involved in making US television drama, which themselves were drivers in the creation of *The L Word*. The chapter sets out ideas that allow us to explore the historical development of the US television landscape and highlights the importance of individuals involved in the construction and delivery of the television text, from both a commercial and political point of view.

Media economic frameworks are outlined as an integral and foundational aspect of US televisual culture, these form the basis of actions of producers and creatives involved in the US televisual industries. These frameworks are focused on two distinct considerations as highlighted by Hesmondhalgh (2002): audience appeal and selling audiences to advertisers. This perspective provides a clear context for the thesis and highlights an area of reasoning behind the analysed and presented decisions in the thesis. This section of the work outlines the development of US networks, deregulation and the move toward a narrowcasting cable environment that focuses on mainstream and minority audiences which have disposable income, this clearly outlines the economic foundation for *The L Word*.

Chapter three contains relevant literature around the development of Queer theory and the areas of sexuality studies that encompasses lesbian and gay cultural theory. This section outlines the historical development of key cultural theory related to the critique of queer, gay and lesbian politics and subjectivities. I aim to highlight the tensions between the fluidity of so called 'queered identities', and the more developed and succinct lesbian and gay political movements are mapped and considered in terms of useful insight into assessing the representation, construction and reception of lesbian cultures as shown via *The L Word*. The distinct positions related to political questions around gay liberation and assimilation are outlined and a summary presented as to the usefulness and political potential of such positions. This, again, provides a critical foundation in relation to identities that are explored as being part of the constructed hierarchy/order of discourse contained within *The L Word*.

What is asserted in the secondary evidence I draw on in this chapter, is the way that lesbian and gay cultures have gained visibility through the formation of significant political groups and a wider social consideration of such groups in Western cultures. However, as I trace, as

such identities become more acceptable in society there is an increasing call for gay and lesbian groups to assimilate themselves into mainstream heteronormative culture. As I show, some detractors of the assimilation movement feel that such attempts at self-conscious inclusion in a wider social world fail to deal with the hegemonic structure of straight society and the true nature and claim that the political needs of lesbians will always be nullified by ideological dominance and normalisation. I am particularly attentive to theorists such as Seidman (2000), who consider that the education of all audiences about homosexual and lesbian life is therefore a key element of any televisual representation. In part then, I use this theoretical work to explore the extent to which assimilatory or politically challenging representations appear in *The L Word*, and to make contextual links as to why commercialism may enable or restrict such representations and meanings.

The fourth chapter of literature review offers a contextual outline of the emerging nature of homosexual and lesbian representation on both US and UK television and the development of what Dyer outlines as making the, 'invisible visible' (2002). This offers a sense of the cultural and political setting to the production of *The L Word* within a global media world in which televisual representations are shared across geographic areas through commercial import and export. This emphasis on a transnational location of the programme is also pertinent as the contributors to the audience debates utilised in my thesis were from a variety of geographical areas. I also demonstrate how the mapping of previous lesbian representation in the Western media offers a further, and more socio-political context, which encapsulates how lesbian culture has been constructed up until the development and broadcast of *The L Word*. This, I argue, offers a distinct insight into the potential expectations of mainstream and lesbian audiences and offers a starting point to consider how the discourses and readings of *The L Word* can be considered as ideologically dominant or

possibly politically resistive. The meanings that are outlined through this history have served to make visible lesbian cultures until the point of the development of *The L Word*, and so provide a clear starting point for the audience considerations of lesbian culture, and also a foundation for assessing and understanding the production discourses and justification for characters and narrative decisions at the commencement and ending of the show.

Chapter five of this thesis outlines the methodological approach to the study. Discourse is outlined as a particular type of communicative event related to the construction of knowledge and resultant relations of power in society, or subsections of society. The founding theory of discourse is pertinent to this study as expectations of what it means to be a lesbian are becoming increasingly prominent in the media through the appearance and development of shows such as *The L Word*. I utilise ideas around what Hall (1997) identifies as the shared and conventional language of culture that fuels the constructed nature of our social identities and I seek to understand and analyse media texts as an integral part of the construction of these identities.

This chapter also outlines the diversity of this particular instance of research. In utilising Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis model (1995), I demonstrate how all aspects of the text can be considered in an integrated analysis. Not only is a textual analysis of the televisual text as individual unit offered, but I also consider audience reception based on a lesbian subjective position. I seek to understand the relationship between the constructed discourses of the programme's textual form and the ways in which this minority audience make the programme meaningful in their own lives and present these ideas in their online contributions to discussions of the programme. Further, I combine this work with a consideration of the promotional production discourses at the commencement and ending of

the show's broadcast lifecycle. This gives a far more rounded sense of what meanings have been produced by a single television text, insights into why they have been produced in the way they have, and also how the textual meanings may have been accepted, internalised or rejected by a lesbian audience. In doing so, I outline how this particular theoretical framework can be applied in such a way to explore how power operates with regard to dominant and alternative discourses in society. My approach owes a lot to Foucauldian (1972) ideas of discourse theory and analysis that allows for a viable critique of lesbian subjectivities that are in flux, consistently changing in their relationship and form. This avoids the didactic focus of structuralist theory and allows for the consideration of alternative perspectives, the use of ideas of surveillance and self-internalisation from an audience perspective; ideas that I have explored in chapter two are argued to be central to the lesbian struggle for power and visibility. What is outlined and implemented in this case is a multimodal discourse analysis of a variety of artefacts (interviews, *The L Word* as television text, audience responses) in order to assess the use of discursive tropes which privilege particular discourses into a hierarchical order.

The results of empirical analysis are contained in the final three chapters of my thesis. These chapters draw on my analysis of interviews, audience reactions and close textual analysis of *The L Word* in relation to lesbian subjectivity. In chapter six I explore the way that promotional material focused on the show presents it as unique in its discursive engagement with lesbian identity and lifestyle. This material focused on a celebration around the appearance of a show and its construction as ground-breaking in nature. Through these promotional texts Ilene Chaiken sets the programme within a discursive field that encapsulates a politically resistive lexis, and this is then positioned as a key selling point for the programme, which is itself branded as 'produced by lesbians for lesbians'. I discuss the

promotional material, the repertoires drawn on, and the discursive work these promotions undertake within the context of the rise in branding for cable networks. Finally, in the approach I take in this chapter, I draw upon interviews with cast members which focus on their own reaction to the show and especially to ‘out’ cast members who relate their reaction to their own experiences of coming out and developing lesbian identities.

In this chapter I am particularly interested in exploring the way that early audience pleasures in the show are linked to celebration in terms of the appearance of the series within the mainstream media. Audience members are gratified to see the appearance of such subject matter and this enthusiasm is evident even before the initial broadcast of the first episode. I show that the lesbian viewers gain pleasure and enjoyment from identifying with both the characters and situations in the narrative. They feel that the broadcast of the show binds them together as a community and this is politically pleasurable in terms of creating a sense of visibility. In their discussions of the show, they outline that they see *The L Word* as a potential site for resistive discourses and stories about lesbian culture. At the same time they also identify that this isn’t what currently appears within the show, and they internalise these debates in terms of surveillance, overt representation and a sense of empowerment.

The textual discourses around the *The L Word* discussed in this chapter also mirror the sense of community that the audience reflect upon. The focus of the first two seasons of *The L Word* is the building, mapping and maintaining of ‘The Chart’ – a metaphor and diagrammatical representation of the sexual connections between Los Angeles’ lesbian community. I show how narrative is used within the programme to further create a sense of lesbian space with the development of ‘The Planet’ coffee shop, where intimate secrets and discussions for such a community can be held. I reveal how, during the initial two seasons,

lesbianism is something that is declared, lesbian visibility is constructed as positive and narratives encourage assertiveness around sexuality and sexual preference. I argue that, overall, lesbian identity, subjectivity and sexual practice is strongly asserted in the opening seasons of *The L Word*, and that the programme is positioned as ground-breaking and pleasurable for lesbian audiences who recognise some of their own experiences.

Chapter seven focuses purely on textual aspects of *The L Word* and ascertains the hierarchical relationships between a diversity of gendered identities that are focused on sexual practice. I show that what is asserted is a normalised and naturalised sense of feminised gender, and that this is prioritised throughout the show, and is particularly developed in seasons three and four. The relationship of Bette and Tina in the show, I argue, is constructed as secure, emotional and viable. This is in opposition to the ‘butch’ character of Shane, who whilst she moves in and out of emotive relationships is unable to maintain an ideologically normative state. Whilst Shane is unapologetic in her lesbianism, the interaction of this hierarchy of discourse represents the tensions between differing types of lesbian subjectivities in the contemporary age. The assimilatory nature of Bette and Tina’s emerging family and emotive relationship is posited as much more attractive and stable than Shane’s isolation through the continuing narrative.

Furthermore, both bisexual and transgender identities are investigated in this chapter and it is asserted that a distinct sense of ‘otherness’ is created through such subjectivities. By building on previous work around the notion of bisexuality as transitional and unstable it is asserted that bisexuality is the ultimate ‘other’ in *The L Word*, constructed through the enacting of tropes belonging to both heterosexual and lesbian sexual practice. As Reed (2009) has noted, transgender aspects in this text are positive in an educational sense, but my

analysis builds and expands upon this assertion and also highlights the divisive nature of the portrayal of a 'stone butch' who then transitions from female to male. I explore the way in which the meanings in the text again pose this subjectivity as outside the realms of what may be socially acceptable within both lesbian and heterosexual communities in terms of gender performance. Within the constructed world of *The L Word*, such an identity only becomes stable once a solid gender performance is enacted consistently.

Chapter eight explores the final two seasons of *The L Word*. I show how these final seasons see a fragmentation of the narrative in two distinct senses. Firstly, the supportive notion of community is undermined for a number of characters. The lesbian community and culture is constructed as problematic in nature and an impediment to their own lives outside lesbian expression and subjectivity. The narrative is also disrupted in the sense that there is no distinct ending to *The L Word*. A murder mystery is posed and never solved. New aspects of characters are introduced via 'interrogation tapes' which are hosted online, and the overall sense of *The L Word* as a space that expresses a coherent and pleasurable lesbian subjectivity for audiences is severely disrupted. 'The Chart' becomes a site of disruption rather than community and shared experience. This is also reflected in the fan reaction to the show later in the series lifecycle, which is distinctly different from that produced around the launch of the show outlined in chapter five. Lesbian audiences are angry that more traditional disruptive identities and subjectivities are presented to viewers. Lesbian characters are presented as incestuous in nature, unstable and potentially violent. The traditional filmic link between lesbians and prison is resurrected. The only real cause for celebration for lesbian audiences in this instance is that the show ever existed and offered a representation of lesbian subjectivities that the lesbian audience feel they should still feel grateful for as a minority in society. But the overall audience construction of immorality

with regard to the role of the production team is clear and there is a distinct communication of disappointment.

I show how this is also reflected in the perspective of Ilene Chaiken during the promotional interviews for the final two seasons of *The L Word*, and in particular through the closing storyline. Gone are the foregrounded discourses related to politicisation and celebration of commissioning a lesbian focused television series. There is less sense of political focus and celebration and the reasons for the production choices in *The L Word* is extended to drawing in and maintaining a mainstream audience. Chaiken steers purposefully away from current affairs and events that may impact on the lives of lesbians and focuses more on setting up an unanswered narrative that sets the foundations for a show spin off that ultimately never materialised. In this instance, her discourse and specific construction of the show is dominated by commercial reasoning and, as I am able to demonstrate, that has a distinct impact on constructed narratives and also the decoding of the lesbian audience. Branding has now become central to the construction of the text and the context of cable network programming and commissioning has led to disappointed lesbian viewers. Arguably then, *The L Word* steers towards being an assimilatory text, which reignites some of the traditional and problematic representations of lesbian culture in order to try and maintain a branded product for a wider dissemination between non-specific audiences in terms of sexual orientation.

CHAPTER ONE

Understanding Discourse and Power

In the introduction I set out my core objectives to study *The L Word* in terms of its ‘pantextual’ meanings. In doing so I align myself with a tendency within television studies to merge a purely textual perspective that has dominated screen studies, with a wider consideration of the institutional context in which the programme was made, distributed, and consumed. For me, this involves an engagement with wider discursive study and reception analysis to provide a developed understanding of the subjectivities and agency of those who produce the text, are represented in the text, and read the text. To achieve this I focus on three distinct, but interconnected fields of discourse: those utilised and articulated within the production of the programme; those created in order to promote the programme to its intended audience; and those produced by the programme’s audience as they comment upon and debate the programme in the public domain. In doing so I conceive these fields of discourse as drawing upon wider repertoires of meaning which are available from the television industry and from identity politics. *The L Word* is a particularly interesting case study for this new form of television studies because these two discursive domains (television industry and lesbian identity politics) are almost always entirely separate.

This study, therefore, finds its originality in not only exploring the meanings of the televisual text, but also contextualising these meanings in relation to discussions from those involved with the production of *The L Word*. I see myself as working at an intersection between the fields of television studies, sexuality and identity politics and the area of critical discourse analysis. I draw upon many of the techniques of screen analysis developed within television studies, but I have reinterpreted them within a theoretical frame that owes much to Norman Fairclough’s (1995) framework for Critical Discourse Analysis, which is itself firmly based upon ideas developed by Michel Foucault. Fairclough’s framework was developed to explore the meaning of media texts in relation to their production and

consumption, as well as their sociocultural contexts. This study also has a self-consciously political objective as I see myself as having a place in a longer history of sexuality and identity politics. In doing so I am also influenced by Foucault's (1972) contention that the concepts of representation and discourse are central to the construction of meaning and knowledge. For me, lesbianism only exists meaningfully with regard to its representation through language and the resultant discourses produce knowledge for a society and are, "simultaneously representing, setting up identities and setting up relations" (Fairclough, 1995: 5).

The greater sense of a 'pantextual' text I use, then, asserts that meaning does not exist in isolation on the television screen, but is the product of the intersections of commercial concerns, political needs, cultural interests, ideological drivers, and potential need for social cohesion and belonging. As I detail later in chapter five, I draw upon my own analysis of a wide range of textual material including the broadcast programming, promotional material, cast interviews, audience reactions in online forums, extra merchandising material, producer interviews, and speeches at political events and award ceremonies. My aim is to produce a rounded discussion on what *The L Word* means to lesbian audiences in particular, and why that meaning may be encoded via culturally-produced subjectivities at this particular temporal location. For this reason I explore *The L Word* throughout its full lifecycle development from launch to post production.

At the same time I address the sphere of lesbian political culture by drawing on long running debates about whether distinct identities should be focused on enabling assimilation into what has been called a 'heteronormative culture', or whether a distinct subjectivity based on liberation is necessary to highlight and embrace the distinct needs and differences of same

sex relationships and the surrounding culture. In order to further root these debates in the growth of the gay rights movement since the 1960s, I engage with the argument that political visibility is central to the improvement and maintenance of rights for gay men and lesbians. In particular, I am interested in interrogating what implications the production and consumption of this programme has for these political objectives in the twenty-first century.

In this opening chapter I want to set out a discussion about the nature of meaning of lesbian identity on television. I also outline the ways in which I use ideas like discourse to explore a single television series as a construction and as a communicative event. This chapter offers a foundation for the exploration of the notion of 'heteronormative culture' as a reference point for understanding wider debates within lesbian political theory as core to the textual analysis I present later, which relates the ways that the relationship of the lesbian audience to televisual texts representing lesbians can be understood in ideological terms.

Understanding discourse as a construction and communicative event

I use a version of Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis as a key 'theory-method' which allows us to explore and analyse culture and cultural artefacts. This means that it is possible to examine the constructed nature of media texts and their relationship to meaning and representation in Western society. In particular the notion of discourse utilised in this thesis is to enable an understanding of power relations, politics and meaning related to the lesbian community and *The L Word*.

In taking this approach it is important to keep in mind Stuart Hall's (1997) sense of discourse as a constructivist consideration of representation that can take into account any form of communication available, and that people who belong to a general Western culture

tend to share a common set of language, stereotypes, and ideological meaning. It is clear that representations underpin meaning in our society by utilising signs, codes and conventions; discourse analysis and an understanding of constructed language is vital tool for understanding media texts that carry and communicate such signs. The constructed nature of the media is especially important to consider when analysing and critiquing the way lesbian culture is presented on television, especially when there are relatively few representations in mainstream media when compared with heterosexuality, and yet, as Thynne (2000) reminds us, they have such an enormous impact on how society sees lesbians and how lesbian culture sees itself. Language is seen as central to our social world through its ability to construct or challenge social acceptances and understanding. This makes this approach valid for understanding the discursive meaning in and around *The L Word* as it allows me to take account of how any discussion, article or aspect of the text adds to the communicative meanings around the show. Only a wide-ranging and comprehensive analysis can start to deal with the complex activities of meaning that are at work with regard to lesbian identity and wider social power relations.

In these terms language is not considered as an individual attribute, but instead each communicative event is reflective of socially shared meanings and values. Each time we express ourselves as an individual (for instance as a media producer or a viewer making a contribution to a forum) we must draw upon language and its cultural and social meaning to express ourselves. This in turn means that when considering wider instances of communication expressed by producers and audiences, and the repertoires from which they draw, we can gain a distinct insight into industry, and consumption expectations and practices. The discourses analysed in texts as diverse as television programmes, magazine interviews, and audience forums therefore offer an insight into various societal groups and

their considerations and expectations of the commercial media with regard to lesbian culture. In doing so we can explore the assumption that media texts play an important role in mediating ideology to society itself. As Raymond Williams (1961:55) explains:

Since our way of seeing things is literally our way of living, the process of communication is in fact the process of community: the sharing of common meanings, and thence common activities and purposes; the offering, reception and comparison of new meanings, leading to tensions and achievements of growth and change.

Discourse, as an approach and concept, then, does not just allow us to consider the current state of meaning and power, it also allows us to consider the change that has taken place both within and surrounding a text through all the forms of communication linked to it. Analysis of these forms of communication allows us to describe, assess and analyse what kind of relationships media texts set up between social groups, particularly between those who have power to make choices with regard to cultural production and those who do not.

Fairclough's framework for the analysis of discourse in media texts aims to understand it as a "social construction of reality, a form of knowledge." (Fairclough, 1995: 18). His emphasis on the ideational (generating representations) and interpersonal (the constitution of relations and identities) functions of language is particularly important to discussions of lesbian identity in a show like *The L Word*. The validity of this approach for considering discussions about production cultures and decisions becomes apparent when we consider that media makers now spend far more time not only constructing a believable world with regard to television fiction, but also time defending, discussing, and responding to audiences about their decisions. This activity was particularly prevalent with regard to *The L Word* as it is clear that audiences for the programme felt that they had some personal investment in the show as it was so clearly related to their political and sexual identity. Following core

ideas of discourse theory, I interpret this as media producers justify their construction of ‘common knowledge’ about lesbians and to make such a construction look natural and ‘acceptable’. My purpose, then, is to uncover the ideological meanings behind these constructions and justifications in order to produce a rounded and coherent analysis that interrogates notions of social acceptability and power.

I have taken particular notice of Foucault’s (1977: 63) point that meaning (and by extension representations in media texts) belongs to specific and historically located discursive formations which are the root of power relations and the production of constructed knowledge in society. While constructed media representations do not reflect the world as it really is, or as some of us experience it with individual nuances, neither are representations straightforward communications from media makers. Whilst representations are diverse they do not reflect the full demographic of our society, and they are not pluralistic in the way they draw upon ideas of gender, race, religion or sexuality. And while the investigation of representation and discourse is not questioning physical existence, it is an examination of distinct meaning and knowledge construction, in which we accept that things in the physical world, “only take on meaning and become objects of knowledge within discourse” (Gross, 2001: 73).

What becomes evident then is that we should question representations and their resultant discourses as partial and therefore problematic in terms of their link to social power. In contemporary society these representations mediate our constructed knowledge and understanding of all aspects of society. Media consumers accept representations of cultures they have never been involved with and construct an understanding of them from the media. When considering the changing cultural understanding and acceptability of lesbians as a

group, the constructionist ideas of representation and discourse are key analytical tools.

Thinking about such concepts in this way helps us to understand representation as a process and not just something that occurs separately from social, political, historical, economic and cultural contexts.

Power and impact on society

In a Foucauldian (1972) sense discourse is concerned with how power operates in a wide range of social, political and economic contexts and this makes it a perfect choice for looking at television industries, production choices and audience reactions. As Fairclough (1992:12) outlines,

Critical approaches differ from non-critical approaches in not just describing discursive practices, but also showing how discourse is shaped by relations of power and ideologies, and the constructive effects discourse has on social identities, social relations and systems of knowledge and beliefs, neither of which is normally apparent to discourse participants.

This perspective also avoids an overly-structuralist model of hierarchical power that is potentially inescapable for its participants. In Foucault's model of discourse ideological theory has developed from a 'top down' structural notion of power into a more complex understanding of how power is struggled over and negotiated in society. The idea that language was used in some sense to control the consciousness of society, widely held and theorised by members of The Frankfurt School, for instance, is reimagined as a more complex and potentially flexible understanding of how power is enforced and negotiated in society. To some extent this shares a lot with Gramsci's notion of hegemony (Simon, 1982), which greatly problematised the earlier Marxist structural consideration of how power is enforced and opened up avenues to explore the notion of resistance. For Eagleton (1991) we need to move beyond a form of overarching ideological argument based solely upon economy, to the notion that ideology offers up the 'right' way to think and a notion of

'common sense', naturalised ideas. However, what is clear from the theoretical development of representational theory is that language, expression and meaning are central to social power, and as John Fiske has asserted "...the textual struggle for meaning is the precise equivalent of the social struggle for power" (1991: 347). This means the notion of discourse allows for the consideration of language across a wide variety of media and from a number of perspectives, whether these be appearing to encourage stereotypical ideas about lesbian culture, or whether challenging and negotiating a new way of thinking about lesbian culture.

Discourse is, for Foucault, a site of power and resistance (1978) and in its wider consideration as a form of governmentality. For the French theorist/historian, the way that society has been controlled and constrained is ever more sophisticated and the development of such perspectives has helped enhance our understanding of how power works. The most pertinent aspect of his theory for this thesis is that of 'self-governmentality'. Foucault encourages the idea that we should think outside of hierarchical notions of the state being a form of 'top-down' power, and this links clearly with prior ideas of hegemony and the negotiation of power in society. What Foucault adds to the discussion of power and restraint is that knowledge can also play a role in enforcing power, widening our consideration of the institutions involved in the enforcement of cultural power and meaning. In this thesis I wish my discourse analysis to be underpinned by the notion that the media form an important aspect of the exercise of power through wider social knowledge, and also the self-management and internalisation of identity.

For the construction, distribution and consumption of *The L Word* that power is dependent on each individual's position in the relationship between various groups in society, and the

various repertoires, based on sexuality, industry or investment from which each can and wants to draw. This position allows for the consideration of potentially ideologically subversive discourses in and about *The L Word* that may be considered as working against dominant ideologies and offering lesbian audiences positive representations, which have been missing or rare in media history.

Foucault's central argument around texts and discourse (1989, 1991) is that texts are not merely a site to be interpreted for some deep and hidden meaning but are instead, (via Mathiesen's (1997) interpretation), networks of relations of 'power and identity' which should be seen as part of a struggle for meaning and to gain power through communicating knowledge about societal groups (2005: 9). Lesbian identity is an especially good example of the Foucauldian idea that the way power is distributed in society has become more complex in nature, and as a group lesbians may feel constrained or liberated in the way they engage with cultural artefacts and representations like those in *The L Word*.

Foucault's notion of self-governmentality as the knowledge produced through institutions which lead participants in society to curb their own behaviour or cultural expression due to the knowledge produced for and about them, is particularly relevant here. This is especially relevant to the minority status of lesbians and lesbian culture, which as I will show later, has only seen wider representation and cultural acknowledgement in recent times. The knowledge produced around this culture may have a profound impact on lesbian considerations of the self, appropriate behaviour and understanding of place in society. A more positive interpretation of Foucault's theorisation is that social discourses constitute the self, but also offer the opportunity for the identification of resistance, as Foucault (1978) claimed that where discourses of power are formed, it is also possible for alternative and resistive discourses to develop. This allows for a balance of critical ideas in the

consideration of lesbian culture as potentially subversive or agreeable to current ideologies through the discourses that produce it, and so is valuable in the construction of this thesis.

The concept has flexibility when applied to how power is organised in society.

‘governmentality’ now suggests a power that is dependent on the various relations between different groups in society and, for Bennett, offers a more useful, “...characterisation of the functioning of culture-power relations in modern societies” (1998: 62) than systemic models such as orthodox Marxism as a grand narrative and critical theory.

It is in the discursive formations related to sexual behaviour, sexuality and gender that we find the many diverse and fragmented influences and factors that produce the ideologies and struggles of a lesbian culture. Foucault’s flexible approach to power and discourse allows a discussion of all these relevant ‘mini’ power struggles that form the current notion of lesbian culture. His work also encourages an understanding the historical development of discourse, rather than understanding the mechanisms of a material world outside society. As Myra MacDonald (2003) has recognised, Foucault did briefly discuss a ‘non-discursive’ realm, the closest he came to the acknowledgement of the material reality of society, but she has also asserted the importance of “...tracing the nature of the relation between discourses about the world, and its material and physical constitution” (MacDonald, 2003: 19).

Applying ideas of discourse and ideological power to lesbian television

This thesis explores the potential for both of these positions in relation to the production, consumption and realisation of a lesbian culture through a televisual text. The political consideration of both these perspectives is assessed and summarised in the literature review of this work and forms the basis of a consideration of hierarchies of discourse in relation to distinct subjectivities related to sexual practice and sexual orientation. Following Weinberg (1996), this perspective reflects the intersections between the lesbian/heterosexual

dichotomy and possible assertions, and considerations of a fully queer culture that reflects a potential fluidity between a variety of sexual practices and identities. My analysis of *The L Word* focuses on distinctly constructed orders of discourse around such identities. The show constructs succinct and ordered hierarchies related to such identities and this is contextualised through the narrowcasting environment and focus on widening audience engagement with lesbian identity and culture.

What Tropiano (2002) claims is evident in such a consideration of subjectivity is that lesbian identity has been somewhat fluid and in a state of flux. Thus any consideration of cultural meaning and this sexual identity should be approached in distinct temporal moments. The 1990s had seen some distinct change in how lesbian culture was represented in commercialised culture. Allen claims this was particularly evident in advertising and popular music culture with the appearance of 'lesbian chic' (1997). Lesbian chic involved a distinct step change in the varying subjectivities related to lesbian identity. Greater ranges of gender practices were considered as integral to lesbian culture with the appearance of more feminised stylistic characteristics that appealed to both straight and lesbian audiences (in relation to popular music culture and consumable products). Such developing subjectivities also discursively constructed or restricted the nature of politicised lesbianism seen in the 1970s and 80s and commenced some heteronormalisation of lesbian culture. There was a much greater sense of cross media existence around alternative queer and lesbian cultures beginning to develop in the 1990s and beyond. Jeffreys (2003) claims meaning construction around this particular identity was widening, fragmenting and diverse. It is important at these sites of cultural change to assess the impact of such changes in subjectivity, both for the cultural group concerned and for wider society in terms of cultural and political considerations. The production period both preceding and during *The L Word* was a time of

great political change and expectation for lesbian and gay culture. Mucciaroni (2008) cites distinct examples with regard to gays and lesbians in US involved in debates over civil partnership, gay marriage, and adoption rights. Thus it is an important site for analysis as subjectivities are constructed that both heterosexual and lesbian audiences will utilise to construct ideological knowledge of what it means to be lesbian.

Lesbian depictions on television raise a number of key issues in relation to gender as much as sexual politics. We live in a gendered society and this obviously has an impact upon our ideological considerations of each other, and any intimate relationship that we participate in will also be gendered to some degree. Biological factors such as chromosomes define our sex characteristics, but as Judith Butler (1990) reminds us, gender is defined by social and cultural factors, and rather than our biological sex, it is our gendered identity which determines even the very performativity of our actions. Clearly the media have a very distinct role in the proliferation of gender ideologies in society that make the roles of 'male' and 'female' naturalised. For Teresa de Lauretis (1987: 5) gender is:

both a sociocultural construct and a semiotic apparatus, a system of representation which assigns meaning (identity, value, prestige, location in kinship, status in the social hierarchy, etc.) to individuals within the society. If gender representations are social positions which carry differential meanings, then for someone to be represented and to represent oneself as male or as female implies the assumption of the whole of those meaning effects. Thus, the proposition that the representation of gender is its construction, each term being at once the product and the process of the other, can be restated more accurately: the construction of gender is both the product and the process of its representation.

De Lauretis' use of this approach to analyse film fiction is also applicable to the portrayal of sexuality on television, and an analysis of *The L Word* in particular. In this thesis I extend this further to a variety of discursive contexts to understand how gender and sexuality identities are produced and sustained through the signification focused on one particular

television text. My analytical approach allows it to extend even further to be framed by an analysis of the construction of production practice through information derived from relevant articles and interviews.

The L Word, Heteronormative Discourse and the Lesbian Gaze

In order to fully understand the relationship of the meanings communicated and constructed by *The L Word* about lesbian culture, it is important to define the notion of heteronormativity as a hegemonic stabilising force in society. In essence heteronormativity has been the standard against which all other sexual preferences have been compared and measured in terms of cultural acceptability. Engel et al (2011: 53-54) outline that this is due to the assertion of heterosexual life as 'normal' and naturalised through various organisations and cultural institutions:

heteronormative hegemony is a formation of power that does not operate in a top-down fashion but is rooted in everyday practices in civil society...is a dynamic formation of power since it is both an effect of and the terrain for social struggles. It is produced, undermined, reinforced and shifted within social struggles...it is not a sovereign law that 'dictates' heteronormativity. Instead heteronormative hegemony gains its stability and power because it is based on compromises that are articulated in social struggles. Given that hegemony, as Gramsci argues, is a formation of power that relies on the consent of the majority of the subjects, heteronormative hegemony can only gain authority through compromises.

Only through the continual employment and negotiation of ideology through altering constructed meanings is heteronormativity continually reasserted. This study of *The L Word* embraces a consideration of how contemporary meanings about sexuality evidence a distinct change in the representation of lesbian identity. What is also explored is the theoretical consideration that a reassertion of ideological power is only based on compromises that reflect and take note of social struggles. These social struggles have seen slow changes in

the representation of lesbian culture, particularly since the 1990s. A focus on *The L Word* allows a consideration of the changing knowledge construction about lesbian culture to be interrogated.

Such changes in representation and the domestication (and thus ‘normalisation’ of lesbian characters) are picked up on by lesbian commentator Sarah Warn who outlined concerns with the television lesbian ‘baby boom’ of the 90s and 2000s (Warn 2003: [online]). This connects centrally with the debate between conflicting political positions over the ground that may be gained or lost through heteronormalisation. Certainly this is central to any investigation of *The L Word* and ideas of normalising representations in order to maximise viewers, and the potential for the programme to present progressive politics for a lesbian audience is worth a depth of consideration. As I have argued already, this consideration of normalisation reflects a concern that lesbian culture is becoming more assimilated through the domestication of the lesbian lifestyle – with a distinct focus on marriage, family and capitalistic values, all of which are key narratives in *The L Word*.

Such normative discourses have been seen via a number of television shows. Warn outlines that a number of shows in the 1990s focused on lesbians starting families and that the narrative was focused on either this or ‘coming out’. Such examples can be found in *ER* (1994-2009) with Dr. Kerry Weaver and also *NYPD Blue* (1993-2005) In HBO’s telemovie *If These Walls Could Talk 2* (2000) we see actresses Sharon Stone and Ellen DeGeneres portraying characters going through a somewhat comical process of IVF in order to have a child. There appears, according to Warn, a distinct discursive pattern in US television drama that means that the representation of lesbians, whilst developing, is not as diverse or all encompassing as it could be. It could be suggested that such representations make the

construction of lesbianism more palatable for mainstream audiences and this is something to be explored through the reaction of fans of *The L Word* via online forum.

It will be interesting to explore whether audiences feel that such storylines are more reflective of the current context of lesbian identity and politics. There is also a currency to these stories in that there has been a push for marriage rights both in the UK and USA (Lee, 2010), a call for more direct access to IVF facilities for lesbian couples (Makadon, 2008) and also a growth in the amount of lesbian couples having children of their own via assisted donor conception (Bonaccorso, 2009). Potentially audiences may see such representations as reflective of their own experiences and political wants. Alternatively, it is also important to posit that there is a clear consequence of normalisation if we consider critiques presented around gay, lesbian, and queer politics (see chapter three) and through an analysis of such storylines on *The L Word*. On balance it is worth questioning if there is a development of lesbian identity that can be seen to be enhancing political meaning in the show or if it has assimilated into heteronormative culture with all its intrinsic ideological issues due to being focused on being palatable for audiences who expect and are comfortable with familiar gendered and familial discourses.

With regard to *The L Word* we see a number of relationships represented through everyday interactions and also sexual acts. The notion of gender here is an important one, especially as Newton and Williams (2003) highlight the potential of television to shape both straight and gay viewers' perceptions about lesbian identity. The gender portrayal of lesbians could viably impact upon how same-sex couples expect their relationships and life to unfold; this is a prime concern when considering the development of identity formation, particularly in newly 'out' lesbian viewers. This also became especially pertinent during the final season of

the show when a variety of lesbian characters became involved in narratives focused around crime and possible murder. This is worth consideration through the audience forums to be analysed. In addition to notions of gendered behaviour in relationships, there is also the appearance of transgendered and transsexual characters in *The L Word*. This culture, often aligned with gay culture, is also worthy of consideration in the context of lesbian subcultural factors and power relations in society.

In relation to audience responses to *The L Word* it would be particularly remiss to not address the issue of lesbian spectatorship and the development of theory around both the male and lesbian gaze. Arguably the foundational work in the consideration of visual spectatorship is Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975), and her further elaboration *Afterthoughts on Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1981). In her original work Mulvey argued that all spectators must be masculinised to identify with the central hero in filmic texts. She reworked her ideas in 1981 to further develop her original theory that the cinematic gaze is unequivocally a masculine one where female viewers can only take pleasure through a masculinised spectator position and are only able to do this due to bisexual aspects present in female childhood development.

However, further work in developing the idea of a viewing gaze has been much more focused on a possible multiplicity of viewing positions and pleasures that do not always assume male or masculine connotations. Such positions allow a consideration of *The L Word*'s lesbian audience and the pleasures they may gain from identification focused on sexual preference. Teresa de Lauretis was central to developing film theory's lack of consideration of issues of sexuality when considering viewing positions (1984, 1987). She extends and critiques Mulvey's position when she outlines that visual culture is not just

gendered but also heteronormative (1987). This extends 'gaze' theory beyond a mere consideration of gender and into the realms of sexuality. This is central to the consideration of developing representations in televisual culture. This thesis intends to continue this development and consideration of not only female spectatorship and pleasure, but also the added dimension of how the relationship between the screen and audience may produce a 'lesbian gaze' which fuels the expectations and needs of a lesbian niche audience.

What is notable about *The L Word* is the high proportion of lesbian sex scenes. Further to the developments around the notion of the gaze provided by de Lauretis, Jackie Stacey (1987) offers a useful perspective and framework for approaching the viewing pleasures of lesbians. Stacey claims that visual culture offers a much more sophisticated range of pleasures to lesbian viewers than Mulvey's previously mentioned theory allows. Through her discussion of *Desperately Seeking Susan* she outlines that the audience are invited to identify with key character Roberta who gazes upon the character of Susan, wanting to be like her. The narrative fulfilment of the film comes from Roberta not being punished for her gaze. For Stacey this encourages a much more complex consideration of visual culture and lesbian audiences in particular and she overtly suggests that theory should not conflate gender identification and sexuality, as they bring very particular cultural contexts to the experience of spectatorship. These contexts are central to the audience-focused research in this thesis and what is uncovered is that desire, character identification and pleasure are inextricably linked.

So far, then, I have established that visual language is an important aspect of the construction of knowledge. This knowledge has a distinct relationship to power relations and expectations in society. From a constructivist perspective language is central to our social

world and cultural expectations. Thus, utilising this theoretical framework when considering *The L Word* will be invaluable in understanding the development of the representation of lesbian culture. This is as media consumers depend upon discourse to form an understanding of society and their place within it. Discourse theory also allows for a consideration of alternative and challenging discourses in terms of *The L Word*. What is clear in this chapter is that the fluid nature of lesbian representation in Westernised culture has seen shifting considerations of lesbian culture and visibility that could be considered to, more recently, have been focused on heteronormalisation of lesbian culture. Studying *The L Word*, also offers an opportunity to expand existing theoretical understanding and frameworks related to spectatorship. The show offers a unique opportunity to analyse the pleasures involved with consuming the representation of lesbian culture as everyday practice.

In the next chapter I outline the historical production context that preceded and encouraged the development of commercial US television production and move to narrowcasting. This is central to my consideration of *The L Word* as an understanding of the production practices and context which has led to the resultant discourses involved in my analysis offer a clear contextual frame for understanding cultures of production and meaning.

CHAPTER TWO

Television Discourses – history, context and practice

So far I have established the broad ideas of discourse and the way they have fitted into wider discussions of textual meaning, social power, and the normalising processes of our culture. I have also set out how discourse can be seen as a theory-method, and how this approach is particularly valuable in dealing with the textual and promotional discourses of *The L Word* and their relationship of these to audience responses over the lifecycle of the series. In the introduction, I proposed that to fully understand these pantextual meanings it was important to link discourses of the programme text to the industrial context of production. As I will show in my detailed analysis this allows us to better understand the changing representations of lesbian life within the programme and the shifting responses of the programme's viewers. Although in recent years there have been specific studies that analyse the construction of televisual meaning through changes in the representation of lesbian culture and identity, they usually neglect the wider context of the media industries. Very little attention has been paid to the media organisations that produce such representations and lesbian focused content, whether this is in the Queer Cinema era, or the contemporary narrowcast era of US commercial television.

This second chapter, then, sets out how studies of the historical and organisational development of the media can be utilised to inform the contextual frame which I used in my detailed study of a single television show. I am particularly interested in showing how these relatively broad studies can be used to drive the development of theoretical approaches that conceive the culture of production that create individual programmes and the underlying discursive practices which drive such cultures. Later in the thesis I show how this conceptualisation can be utilised as a core method of analysis. In doing so I aim to locate my study within its historical academic context and draw attention to the strengths and weaknesses of work derived from both media and cultural studies.

Furthermore, I specifically explore current approaches and critiques that aim to explain televisual industrial discourses in US television. These cultures of production in US television are widely presented as being commercial in nature, but discussion of the production context is most often seen in abstract terms. As I will show, the historical development of the US television landscape and the role of individual programme makers have been central to the way that television texts are made and distributed. It is only in relatively recent times that theorists such as John Caldwell (1995) have begun to consider the impact of distinct and specific changes in the American market on the growth of new or postmodern genres; relating this information to the specific needs of certain networks and channels rather than through an abstracted understanding of the political economy of a wider 'commercial sector'. Using Caldwell's focus as a starting point, I outline media economic frameworks as an integral and foundational aspect of US televisual culture, and explore these as the basis of action for producers and creatives involved in the US televisual industries. To do so I draw on Hesmondhalgh's (2002) work on the notion of audience appeal and the way television companies sell audiences to advertisers. Through these perspectives, I argue, we can better understand the economic foundation for *The L Word* within the development of US networks, deregulation, and the move toward a narrowcasting cable environment that focuses on mainstream and minority audiences with high disposable incomes. Through an understanding of the altering television landscape I will argue that the theorised prime motivation behind the development of emerging genres, and thus new representational content in regard to mainstream programming tend to serve the needs and concerns of institutions on a commercial level.

This study, therefore, becomes more focused on the distinct instance of representational production and investigates the subtle economic and political contexts of television

production. This is especially important in relation to media texts that can potentially be considered as simultaneously entertaining and politically challenging to the ideological mainstream. Mapping the range of approaches and recent development in the study of television production provides a solid foundation on which to explore the wider discussions of the representation of lesbian life and identity on television, which I set out in chapter four. This enables me to investigate the economic and political pressures and influences, which from 1990 onwards, have had such a profound influence on the context in which programming involving lesbian representation has been developed.

I start by setting out some broad issues about approaches to studying television as institutionalised production and distribution of programming, and establish the approach I take in this thesis. In doing so I seek to establish an approach rooted in understanding television as a cultural industry, but moving beyond over-abstraction and crude notions of massification and ideology. In the second section of this chapter I explore some of the most important areas of change in US television in the last twenty-five years, and in particular I look at the academic and industry discussions about the development of ideas of narrowcasting. These are contextualised by discussions about the way cable television suppliers challenged the domination of the over-the-air broadcasting networks and the implications this had for specialist programming and niche audiences. Finally, I contextualise these specifics within the larger debates about new forms of television, ideas of pluralism, and their links to the politics of cultural identity. This final section also acts as a bridge to the arguments I pick up in chapter three about the specifics of cultural identity as it relates to queer theory and the broader debates within gay and lesbian cultural studies.

Studying Institutionalised Television Production and Distribution

This thesis aims in part to problematise some of the more widely accepted conceptualisations of television production. Wider discussion of economics and regulatory change in relation to the US television media, are therefore foundational to understanding why and how new representations of previously little shown sexual orientations have been brought to the fore. The aim of such a review of literature and a focus on developmental history is to uncover, as Picard (1998) argues, how and why this element of the media has been seen to make decisions to allocate resources to fulfil the needs of advertisers and audiences in this area.

Media production and the television industry have been considered through various academic approaches, especially through the disciplines of media and cultural studies. Early concerns about the social impact of media texts and television production are clearly encapsulated in articles which dealt with the concept of massification, most often cited as founded in Matthew Arnold's (1905) *Culture and Anarchy*, and later in the work of socialist theorists such as Adorno and Horkheimer (Horkheimer, Cumming et al. 1973). Such theoretical works related to a wide landscape of media production where we see a distinct focus on the idea of the mass audience rather than an exploration of actual audiences or examples of representation. In particular, as Wolin (2006) outlined the ideas of the Frankfurt School became a dominant view within the field; that the mass media was driven by capitalists in order to create populist media and detract from any revolutionary or educated potential against capitalist 'media' creators.

It remains productive to think of US television as part of the cultural industry. Such a term has been defined by Nicholas Garnham (1999: 133) as "those institutions in our society

which employ characteristic modes of production and organization of industrial corporations to produce and disseminate symbols in the form of cultural good". The potential for such symbols and meanings which may be distributed through this industry have particular limitations in terms of a limited pool of disposable consumer income, advertising revenue, consumption time and skilled labour (136). This means that such projects are carefully commissioned and selected to try and ensure success (see later in this chapter), and so are also indicative of social norms, politics or interests. The issue of lesbian representation, being somewhat controversial and politically challenging, does not sit easily with ideas of passive audiences and ideological dominance that is central to these earlier approaches. For this reason we need to go beyond these simple ideas of massification and ideological domination to fully explore the development of the commercial US television industry and to uncover the context in which the recent representations of lesbianism have taken place. As I will show, this allows us to explore specific aspects of textual meaning and develop a full understanding of why such representations have developed in particular instances of time.

Media texts that appear to be 'new' to the media landscape, or controversial and challenging to the norms of ideology, cannot be considered as existing in a vacuum in relation to economy, politics or culture. It is the purpose of this study to consider lesbian themed media texts in a way which Croteau and Hoynes (2003: 33) claims relates all media texts to the "social processes of production" of which they are subject to. Such social processes will inevitably involve concerns with matters of ownership and control that dominated the Frankfurt School's work, but here I broaden both the idea of ideology and production to one that is less coherent and abstracted. This includes much greater attention to the routine, practices and considerations of media producers at a variety of levels and also the economic

pressures which must be considered on a wider scale when producing and commissioning content for US television. And following Stuart Hall (1997), I see the media industries as a viable area of study as the circulation and production of media texts has some significant impact on our understanding of the world and the social groups within that world.

This approach provides the foundations for this thesis and builds upon the work of such scholars as Diane Crane (1992) and Maureen Mahon (2000) and especially their considerations of contexts of production, production processes, and the role of individuals involved in the creation of a media text. From such a perspective, televisual texts are produced under continually altering and shifting conditions. For *The L Word*, this involves understanding and accounting for those changing conditions that developed from 1990 onwards.

Studies of the US television market began to develop during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Julie D'Acci (2004), commenting on the developing theory around US television during this time, suggests that these changes were most productively investigated through the combined thinking of such British cultural theorists as Murdock, Golding, Hall and Hebdidge in the scholarly collection *Mass Communication and Society* (Curran, Gurevitch et al. 1977). For D'Acci, these approaches had an enormous impact on the way that American scholars analysed US television productions and markets, and in turn led to the concentration on a number of factors in the development of, “a particular brand of American cultural studies – a brand dedicated to analysing the interworkings of industries, programming, and everyday life” (2004 :421).

At the most general level, we need to understand the US television industry as commercially driven, increasingly fragmented, and deregulated. This is an important element of this study as it forms the core industrial context in which lesbian televisual representations have been produced. The growth of cable television, in particular, has raised key economic issues, which in turn may have implications for media texts and production decision-making. These media economics underpin many of the technological advancements of television, and as Alexander outlines (2004) have been a primary driver for televisual content and audience interaction with such texts and their surrounding advertising. In turn this environment is a determinant of the operational facets of the US television industry and especially the commissioning and production decisions made in relation to lesbian themed texts.

Challenges to US Network Television, the Birth of Narrowcasting and the Implications for Representations of Lesbian Life

Michelle Hilmes (2002) notes that the US television industry was subject to a triumvirate network system from 1960-1980. CBS (Columbia Broadcasting System), NBC (National Broadcasting Company) and ABC (American Broadcasting Company) made up American television production, exhibition and distribution. In turn this meant that the networks also controlled the range of small stations across the United States that would carry a large proportion of network produced material (91% of total content). In turn this meant that the networks at this time were a, “de facto vertically integrated national oligopoly” (Hesmondhalgh, 2002: 116) which consequently meant that, “the networks’ oligopolistic control of distribution and exhibition mandated that producers conform to a narrow range of accepted practice” (Hilmes, 2002: 229). This situation led to conformity of the television media, which was dominated by the few, and perhaps partially explains the lack of variety or prevalence in relation to representations of homosexuality, race or class on US television

screens during this era. Hilmes continues that, “with a system that attracted a national audience and a market so neatly divided between the nets, few openings existed for creative innovative productions that challenged the bland, formulaic network patterns” (2002: 230). This further underlines the need to explore how constantly altering market practices and economic contexts needs investigation in relation to representation and the fruition of creative, innovation and challenging cultural ideas.

In part, the appearance or disappearance, or changing nature of lesbian representations, can be understood within the considerations of the economic discourses that came to dominate US television. Picard (1989) imparts that cable channels such as Showtime, through which *The L Word* was distributed to viewers, have had a significant impact on both the previously dominant US networks and on the programme content of US television. The television industries development in the USA has been driven by two different economic concerns: that of appealing to the audience and selling airtime to advertisers. Croteau and Hoynes (2003: 64) have argued that, in recent decades, television broadcasters have focused on selling advertisers their access to very specific audiences. Since the 1990s, the US market has also increased in terms of channels and market diversification with the advent and growth of cable; therefore the demand for audiences is ever increasing to ensure economic survival. It is important to consider this context when exploring meaning construction and audience reactions to TV programming. Creative decisions are clearly influenced by the economic context of production as producers seek viewers from high-income households who can also be persuaded to subscribe for such symbolic goods.

When we are considering any aspect of the cultural industries then, we should not only be concerned with the distribution and meaning of media texts, but also the way that the

conditions of production are rooted in commercial gain and an environment of competition where media companies aim to maximise audience share, income from audiences and their provision to advertisers. For David Hesmondhalgh this has led to an attempt to “outstrip each other to satisfy audience desires for the shocking, the profane and the rebellious” (2002: 4).

Muriel Cantor’s 1970s research clearly represents the concerns of the era’s production context, Cantor’s research involved the interviewing of network television producers and found that they considered the US audience to be made up of a single mass rather than segmented in terms of cultural or social issues. One producer claimed that, “We try not to do anything controversial...Because of this we are a success...The formulas work for television and will continue to work” (1971: 173). These producers felt that their formulas guaranteed their ‘mass’ audience and therefore capital from advertisers. Although other producers did admit that the audience was more intelligent than credited, the pattern of television output remained the same with politically threatening or innovative output thought ill considered and so was avoided. So, although there was some safety in a relatively small market in terms of broadcasters, it seemed that US networks were not willing to admit or tackle the diversity of their audience for fear of losing their commercial income, as unlike other public broadcasting systems their fees came from advertising and not license fees or other payments.

The most relevant structural change in US television production and distribution came with the advent and growth of cable television. Bates and Chambers (2004) outlined this was initially developed as a way to extend local television broadcasting in the 1940s. But, it developed quickly in the latter part of the twentieth century thanks to the technological

innovations of satellite (1970s) and fibre optic technology (1990s). Cable television offered a greater amount of outlets for television and a true multi-channel environment. To compete in such an environment cable stations had to fill their air time with content which would engage viewers and therefore compete with the dominant networks, although they were restricted in terms of price setting by the 1984 and 1992 Cable Acts (Bates and Chambers, 2004).

What is clear is that deregulation had a significant impact on viewing and television content. Statistics that relate to viewers during the period of deregulation (which encouraged cable operators to seek out new sources of revenue from the late 1970s until 2002) underlines a prevalent issue with the lack of diverse, innovative and interesting material and evidences representational problems with what the networks were providing to US audiences. This lack of experimentation and foresight was something that was to provide a commercial lifeline for cable operators. According to Pearson (2005: 14) in the late 1970s the three networks had over 90% of the US television audience, this dropped to 67% in 1989 and 40% in 2002, with 60% viewing cable television during prime time viewing; in this case innovative television was paying off. This shift in audiences showed an unwillingness to maintain their loyalty to stations which were seen as lacking innovation and dealing with topics (through entertainment) which contemporary society found engaging, and part of their social experience.

This situation could have exceptional potential for lesbian or gay representation. Comstock (1989: 83) claims that this was the first time that it was considered that, “There would be a cultural panacea on both elite and mass levels, with Broadway plays and musicals as well as experimental drama...to serve popular tastes, not popular enough for primetime broadcast

television”, and so the notion of the popular being restricted to prime time was rather challenged and the metaphorical gates opened for more challenging content, to fulfil not only mainstream, but niche, multi-channel audiences.

Furthermore according to Comstock, this was not a revolution of television, but rather a, “reshaping” (1991: 39) with cable eventually reaching 98% of homes in the US and impacting on the hold of the ‘big three’ network suppliers. Again, Cantor and Cantor (1992) expand that this was now a medium focused on the interests of those under 35 and interested in more innovation in the form of entertainment and drama. In addition, 1980s children have grown up with an expectation that they will have the diversity of cable (Comstock 1989) and this also fulfils the expectations and needs of advertisers.

This growth in channels and resultant audience fragmentation also meant that high audience numbers was not something that was always the prime focus of channels and their aspiration around audience attraction. As Pearson (2005) explains the network’s prime concern was now about attracting the ‘right’ audience; this meant one with disposable income. An example of such a concern can be found with regard to *Cagney and Lacey (1982-1988)*. The show was actually initially dropped by the CBS network for poor ratings, but in an attempt to compete with cable stations it was re-commissioned as it was actually renown for delivering quality audiences (those viewers with the means to have enough disposable income to invest in advertisers’ goods) week after week. D’Acci (1992) discusses how this ensured its continued success for six years. The notion of ‘quality audiences’ is therefore an important factor to consider when researching the commissioning, production and textual decisions related to lesbian representation. As Julie D’Acci (169) outlines:

Upscale female audiences were the coveted plum of the television industry in its 1980s quest for the ‘working-women’s marker’, and female characters –

acting out the industry's fantasies of the 'new working-women' – were fashioned to lure their real life counterparts to prime time as never before.

Such factors as the search for quality audiences with a high disposable income will have a key impact on the development of contemporary representations (as working women were in the 80s) and the cultural identity that is constructed from such media texts to wider audiences. Bates and Chambers highlight that cable provision since this time has become known as the “television of abundance” (2004: 175), both in terms of the multitude of channels provided and also the diversity of the programming offered (usually through higher fee premium services such as HBO and Showtime). Both of these factors mean that this thesis takes up the opportunity of considering contemporary, developing representations in the light of the search for quality audiences and satisfying advertisers.

Theoretically we have to consider the growth of the market and also potentially diverse representations alongside the strong argument that the US market is non-paternal. This is certainly the case in comparison to the remainder of the Western world. Public Service Broadcasting in the US has been considered as far weaker than in Europe. The US system has always had some element of commercialism and as discussed this has grown substantially through deregulation. McQuail and Siune (1998) trace that this has been to a far greater degree than we have seen in Europe. Public television in the US, “...attracts less than 5% of the audience viewing television. The estimate that nationally 95% of what Americans watch daily on television is commercial programming would overestimate the magnetism of public television” (Comstock 1989: 15). A wide commercial system has become prevalent in the US, which is based on a free market model. Although there is legislation in place to temper commercialism, it appears that decisions in US television are mainly based upon profit. One distinct generic element of US TV which further strays away

from the paternalist ethic and has seen growth is the genre of entertainment (Sinclair, Jacka et al. 1999). Wober expands this point (1998) and posits that the commercial factor and the need to guarantee audiences to advertisers have meant that entertainment has been foregrounded as a key genre. Hartley (1992) also discussed the seeming dichotomy of how the nature of cable television clashed with the notions of appealing to the masses and also the notion of television being instructive and diverse. This notion of construction of meaning and knowledge through a particular genre raises issues about the nature of entertainment and I believe this thesis can tackle issues about whether entertainment can be as political as factually based programming and genres. This justifies my focus on non-factual programming as much of the politics of Western and US life will therefore be explored and represented through such a genre, as will 'quality' issues in the pursuit of audiences.

Commercialism is therefore a key aspect of this study, in terms of ascertaining how such commercial developments in the market either encourage or restrict producers and television content. There are various ways in which this term can be considered as relevant in relation to this study. As outlined already, there has been significant development in the US television market; this has taken the form of deregulation and fragmentation, with a growth in the scope and nature of cable channels. In this instance there is a commercialisation of the market, a market which subscribes to 'free market' principles and this in itself should be further considered as a context for the production of media content, which McQuail (2000) claims is produced and marketed as a sellable commodity and also as a context for the relationship between suppliers and consumers of media. In relation to lesbian themed television both of these points have a distinct pertinence. Clearly the market situation needs further research, as academics we need to gain an understanding of which industrial and

economic discourses have allowed a gap in the television market where such representations can appear. Such a gap is not a turn of fate, but has been dependent on how willing audiences and advertisers are to accept such subject matter.

Another point which McQuail (2000) touches upon in his work is that clearly commercialisation will impact on the decisions made at all levels of the production process, not only commissioning, but also writing and the construction of representations through narrative and visual elements. This in turn can help, or possibly problematise a producer's relationship with the lesbian audience and may impact upon their representation of lesbian politics. This means that the exploration of discursive elements of the text is also of great importance and will further explore whether, "commercial relationships in communication are intrinsically distancing and potentially exploitative" (2000:106) in terms of audience and cultural group politics.

New Television, Pluralism and Cultural Identity

Central to my study has been a wider issue of debate about the implications of these new forms of television and the technological and economic forces that have produced them. For lesbians these questions have been explored through the tensions thrown up by these new forms of distribution, audience and programming. On the one hand, it became possible to argue that the new economics of audience would make new forms of representational texts commercially viable. Cable channels could offer advertising at a cheaper price, along with particular and distinct audiences neglected by the networks pursuit of mass audiences' as Andersen argues (1995) this would lead to a move towards more innovative programming schedule than the networks could provide.

The targeting of audiences and the dissemination of television in the US has been a central issue of debate at the heart of the growth of television, encompassing questions about the diversity of representation. According to George Comstock (1991), cable shows only have popularity if they have persistence in terms of subject matter. Comstock explains that by this he means that, whilst broad appeal is important, they also have to have a distinct appeal to various 'segments' of the audience in a persistent fashion. John Ellis (2000: 28) expands on this idea when he argues that:

numbers still matter in that they provide the bench-mark for the performance of the channel as a whole. But overall audience members can only be increased by a subtle strategy of targeting particular sections of the audience on competing channels and providing something that will appeal to or satisfy them more.

This consideration of US television is also related to the concept of pluralism in the television market where, "competing political, social, cultural interests and groups" ideally lead to a media which is "independent, creative, free and original" and provides for an audience which is "fragmented, selective, reactive and active" (McQuail 2000:70). It is generally agreed that the cable movement has provided programming for 'specialist' and also non mainstream audiences (Sinclair, Jacka et al. 1999) and thus this aids the pluralism argument. John Caldwell (1995) has outlined that the programming which has developed on cable has further encouraged networks to look at culturally diverse audiences as a target, although this doesn't appear to be the case unless cable have seemingly already had success in an area of diversity. Advocates of pluralism relate that this leads to a more open and competitive market which will provide for the eclectic audience without an overbearing sense of dominant ideology, although this study intends to question whether the focus of commercial which drives the plural and competitive nature of the market can then lead to restricted decisions relating to symbolic meaning and representation.

Many liberal-pluralist theorists are concerned with the notion of power and democracy as related to the media and the information provided in regard to politics and social issues. Indeed Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch (1995) discuss their concerns about citizenship and democratic participation being in crisis now that the majority of social and political knowledge is gained through television rather than news media, although this remains unexplored in terms of potential positive aspects of non fictional representations and their potential political impact.

The ways in which US television and other commercial cultural industries have aimed to tackle market competition further problematises this issue as although many producers aim to expand their market share through conformity. Nicholas Garnham outlines that others alternatively aim to produce ‘novelty’ products and tap into alternative markets (1999: 138). This could explain the recent appearance of lesbian representations located on mainstream cable channels and is something that will be further considered in subsequent research into the decisions made by the producers involved in the interviews and articles that will follow in this thesis and further related to the evaluation of the theoretical considerations of liberal-pluralists.

Although clearly commercialism was (and remains) a key factor for the US television industries to consider, there was one attempt to protect programming from the forces of capitalism in the US and ensure that citizens were informed about their social world. Simmons (1978) highlights that this attempt came in the form of the Fairness Doctrine and was perhaps one of the singular attempts of the US government to influence the content of television in the US. This doctrine was introduced in 1949 (Mullally, 1970) and as Cronauer

(1994) discusses was altered to ensure some diversity of coverage up until 1987. This could also perhaps be seen as a movement to encourage the pluralism and democracy of the media in a commercial environment and was perhaps a US version of control in an environment far more commercial than its European counterparts. The maintenance of this legislation was upheld in relation to the argument that this doctrine was based upon a scarcity of frequencies and resources; which is claimed as a current non issue with the development of cable technology and therefore a nod towards the claimed diversity of pluralism, although theorists such as Patricia Aufderheide (1990) do question this issue and request the resurrection of legislation. It is this continued questioning which underlines and justifies an investigation the issue of diversity of representation in US television programming for analysis and consideration in relation to this thesis.

Another important factor in relation to the development of cable programming in the US is that of worldwide export markets. Being commercially driven means that cable networks must also explore and expand into such markets to fulfil their commercial drive and to ensure success. This is especially important as the worldwide market has a potential that offsets a US prime time market audience which “contracts” (Cantor and Cantor 1992: 99) as channels increase in number. This also has importance when considering the impact that discourses around lesbianism in such media texts may have on the wider world of viewers of find themselves subject to such imported media texts. Cantor and Cantor (1992) explain that other countries outside the United States also find such imports useful to maintain and build audiences, thus providing advertisers with a guaranteed outlet.

This thesis picks up this consideration of the relationship between television programming and public life, and also partially reconsiders the political and democratic process, but

restricts this consideration to the impact on one part of our social and cultural framework: lesbian identity. What is also foundational in this work is the economic and social processes which may also impact on such representations, economic and ideological power is something which David Hesmondhalgh claims liberal-pluralists have been, "...in favour of an implicitly optimistic notion of society as a level playing ground, where different interest groups fight for their interests" (2002: 30). Therefore my research aids in evaluating the discourses present in lesbian texts, and also considers the aforementioned wider contexts which impact on their construction and thus the understanding of lesbians as a social group.

Commercial viability seems to be an overwhelming issue in relation to US television content. This is unsurprising when the previously discussed factors are considered and the notion of plurality and open markets enforcing some diversity of content are explored in depth through the subsequent research in this thesis. In relation to lesbian themed texts this raises clear issues for theorists such as Fejes and Petrich (1993), especially in relation to heterosexuality, as homosexuality has typically been portrayed as something that is merely disruptive to heterosexual relationships, rather than an identity in its own right. Therefore an exploration of what contexts have produced increasingly explicitly diverse representations (in terms of an asserted ideological normality and mainstream considerations) is particularly worthwhile and under researched.

In this chapter I have explored the political economy as it relates to the development of cable channels and programming in the United States, and the way different theorists have tried to grapple with the implications of these driving forces for the symbolic goods that these media produce. Contextually this provides an outline of the specific conditions that have impacted upon the creative decisions involved with *The L Word*. The conditions of the

market, technological development, and the fragmentation of the mass audience has meant that there is now a context of production which potentially prioritises and encourages creative risks in the hope of securing audiences with disposable incomes and the means to subscribe to services. This context becomes a major frame of thinking for me in the later chapters of this thesis as I move to focus on the very specific determinants of *The L Word*. In doing so I remain very conscious that the developments outlined above enable the wider representation of lesbian culture as advertisers covet the gay and lesbian audience.

In relation to this it is important to outline the detail of Showtime's particular economic and contextual development. Showtime (abbreviated to "SHO" on television screens and in merchandising) has developed as a premium American cable and satellite television network that was launched in July 1976 and is a subsidiary of CBS (Picard, 2002).

Showtime is relevant to this particular research as it has a focus on producing 'original programming' and uses this as one of the central tenets of its branding (Pope, 2006). The Showtime brand is a platform that is known worldwide through the exportation of various TV shows and films. The impact and importance of US 'original' exports has been felt by markets across the world and led to a domination of Western markets (in particular, British Television) by such programming (Steemers, 2005). Showtime is a significant aspect of the US television landscape and had 23.1 million subscribers in March 2015 (Moylan, 2015) making it third in the US market in terms of popularity.

One of the most interesting aspects of the series, however, is that these strong determining forces of political economy are intertwined with the ideological constructions of lesbian identity. In the following chapter I move on to explore the political context for the development of these gay and lesbian cultures, and the way they have most often been

related to subsequent televisual representations of gays and lesbians, their senses of identity and their lives.

CHAPTER THREE

The development of gay, lesbian and queer politics

The developments in US television over the last two decades that I set out in the last chapter created the circumstances in which for programming like *The L Word* became a possibility and a reality. My analysis of the political economy of US television and the discourses which ordered television programme commissioning and production in the new cable television organisations provides a clear sense of why such a programme became possible for the first time and, as I will show later, why it is vital for an understanding of the way that the show changed over its lifecycle. Such insight, though, is not sufficient to understand why the programme came to exist, why it took the form it did, or why audience members may have constructed their online discussions around the programme in the way they did. To more fully appreciate what is at stake for programme makers and audiences alike, we need to understand the intellectual and political milieu in which Ilene Chaiken came to imagine and then create the series as one which would be speaking to, and representing lesbian culture, and in which the lesbian audience viewed and interpreted the show as being about themselves and their lives. In this chapter, therefore, I deal with the ideas of lesbian identity and the construction of a developed lesbian cultural theory, which I argue constitutes the repertoire out of which the main discursive constructions of *The L Word* were built. These ideas of theory and active identity politics are far more than frameworks of the academy, however. In my thesis they play out both in my object of study (*The L Word* as a constructed programme, promoted commodity and consumed text) and in the theoretical ideas I use to frame my analysis of *The L Word* in its many manifestations.

As I will show these are ideas that centrally inform the conceptualisation, creation and production of *The L Word* just as much as the television production discourses that

originated from new forms of cable niche programming. These discourses of gay, lesbian and queer politics are far more complex and contested than those of the world of television production, and they are rooted in both political activism and academic interests in identity politics. I also apply the insights I develop in this chapter in quite a complex way in the research I present. I will show how the discourses of lesbian identity politics and activism coalesce in tension with the discourses of niche broadcasting to form the ideas which underpin the making of *The L Word* programme. I also show how this tension plays out in different ways in the promotional material that is built around the series and, in a different way again, in the responses to viewers of the programme. To add to the complexity, these are also the key ideas which have framed my own academic engagement, and I use ideas from this field as part of my analytical tool box just as much as I endeavour to use *The L Word* as a case study through which I can explore the usefulness and limitations of gay, lesbian and queer politics and its ideologies.

In what follows, then, I map out the development of key critical positions in relation to the study of lesbian representation in the contemporary era. This section of the thesis explores the historical development of cultural theory related to the critique of queer, gay and lesbian culture and outlines the key concerns and considerations of approaching this study. There are clear tensions between the agendas of queer theorists and theorisation around lesbian identities, and it is pertinent to map out the cultural history of the development queer politics and the lesbian political movements. This allows us to fully understand the tensions within such theory as a field of political action and academic activity while also enabling me to explore the usefulness of the application of a multitude of positions in assessing and

understanding the representation and reception of lesbian cultures shown on US television.

In order to fully understand the queer politics of the late 1990s, and thus the production context of *The L Word* in the early 2000s, it is vital to map how both gay liberation and lesbian feminism contextualise and interact with the development of the queer theory movement. We need to understand the show as produced within a distinctive context that drew on a number of quite specific discursive positions in terms of the portrayal of lesbian subjectivity. I would also argue that the distinctiveness of the context and specificity of the discursive positions that from a very particular production context make *The L Word* a unique show within the history of television. In many ways the audience for *The L Word* are presented with a mainstream television programme form but this is one that, for its time, unusually focuses on lesbian identity as central to the narrative. I also argue that, for the programme's lesbian viewers, who would have been exposed to some extent to the discourses and debates of lesbian politics, their engagement with the programme will be informed as much by the discourse of the political debate as the discourse of the programme. In making this argument I am also contending that *The L Word* can be assessed in terms of these political and liberatory possibilities, at the same time as being assessed in relation to the past political experiences of its producer and writers.

Key to all these discussions is the polar positions of the liberationist and the assimilationist that are characteristic of most critical political stances. These debates have been summarised well for gay politics by both Paul Robinson (2005) and Steven Seidman (2002), for whom the difference is characterised as an argument as to

whether or not society itself needs to change to accommodate a wider variety of identities, the cultural needs of gay men and women, and political considerations in a much more liberatory sense. In exploring these pole positions as key ways to understand debates around the production, promotion, and reception of the L Word, I have structured my discussion around three main areas. The notion of lesbian identity as a liberatory force is important in all these areas. Firstly, I look at the very notion of visibility and the representation of lesbian culture. From here, I explore the sense in which lesbian cultures, and their representational repertoires, have been thought of as ideological positions within the wider culture. In doing this I place a particular emphasis on the idea of ‘queer’ politics and the degree to which it has come to dominate thinking about lesbian representation. I finish this chapter with a discussion by drawing upon the debates about visibility, representation and identity to discuss the factors which I argue are most relevant to thinking through the issues of textual production, promotion, and consumption in *The L Word*.

The Visibility and Representation of Gay and Lesbian Culture

Gay liberation was itself born out of the radical movements of the 1960s alongside a multitude of other forms of liberation activism. In most narratives the Greenwich Village riots at the Stonewall Inn in 1969 are seen as the seminal point in gay and lesbian liberation (see, for instance, Jay, Young et al. 1992). The traditional Stonewall narrative outlines that for the first time lesbians, gays and transgender people fought back against the raids on gay bars, taking out their growing frustration about the oppression they suffered at the hands of the New York police (Kissack, 1995). This was reported by Lucian Truscott of *The Village Voice* (Truscott cited in Bendix 2015: [online]). Typically, this is constructed thus:

A rather tough lesbian was busted in the bar and when she came out of the bar she was fighting the cops and trying to get away. And the harder she fought, the more the cops were beating her up and the madder the crowd got. And I ran into Howard Smith on the street, *The Village Voice* was right there. And Howard said, "Boy there's like a riot gonna happen here," and I said, "yeah." And the police were showing up.

Whatever the exact political significance of this moment it is important to a study of media representation in that it signalled a distinct change to how gays and lesbians considered themselves and their position in wider society and thus began to highlight a change in the visibility of homosexuals and lesbians (as seen through the eyes of the reporter cited above). Instead of being an underground and relatively unseen group, events like the Stonewall riots and the protests in their aftermath meant that visibility, awareness, and identity were some of the central driving forces in gay and lesbian politics.

Homosexuals then utilised early 'Gay Pride' parades to capture society's attention; these were events which Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht (2009) claim would have been considered as socially unacceptable prior to the gay liberation movement, and had the aim of maintaining a presence to highlight the visibility of lesbian and gay identities. The purpose of these events for gays and lesbians was to highlight their presence and difference from the straight mainstream. Of course, now such events are commonplace and take place in cities across the world.

The development and visibility of the Gay Liberation movement is so important to highlight, as it was a significant change from previous political movements that existed pre-Stonewall and were associated with gay and lesbian culture. Jeffreys (2003: 10) outlines that in the 1950s and 60s,

'homophile' organisations were set up...These organisations have been characterised by historians as 'assimilationist', aimed at gaining integration for homosexuals and ending legal penalties. What was different about gay liberation is that assimilation was repudiated in favour of 'coming out', 'gay pride' and demanding the dramatic social changes that were considered necessary for the freedom of women and lesbians and gays.

In terms of visual representation, the critiques of film by those belonging to Gay Liberation groups were also focused on the lack of representation, denial of existence or what Dyer and Pidduck refer to as, "demeaning and derisive" (2003: 222) meanings being attached to any lesbian or homosexual portrayal. With a variety of critics outlining that challenging films were needed to counteract negative representations and to give the gay and lesbian communities, "something to feel good about" (2003: 222).

The challenge that gay liberation and subsequent political movements (based in civil rights) offered to the assimilationist position is still part of a debate around gay, lesbian and queer studies today and has formed a key part of the theoretical development informing the discussion about what Cimino (2007) claims cultural theory and gay movements seek to achieve in relation to gay and lesbian identity and politics. The gay liberation perspective where visibility and political demonstration is central makes a challenge to the conservative idea that homosexuals share what Seidman claims are, "common human bonds" (2002: 3) with heterosexuals and where a schema of normality convinces wider society that social acceptability is about reform and adhering to the traditional and normative; modelled on heterosexual standards.

The increase in images of gay and lesbian characters on mainstream television appears to be a reflection of the assimilationist position of integration. But this potentially has an ideological outcome where lesbian representation may fail to fully represent the contradictions of lesbian identity and as Hollinger suggests, “results in an unrealistic, static, one-dimensional portrayals...One current development which should lead to less stereotypical lesbian representations is the advent of more lesbian film-makers who can bring...their own visions of lesbian life in its various dimensions” (2012: 133). Seidman expands that the assimilationist perspective, highlights that the portrayal of homosexuals doing ‘everyday things’ in ‘everyday life’ in both film and on prime time television can, “educate the public about the common human bonds between homosexual and heterosexuals” (2002:3). For Seidman the attraction of this for gay and lesbian community is explained in hegemonic terms; he claims that most homosexuals, both male and female want to live middle class lives and not stand out as anything else but normative and ordinary. However, this position is potentially problematic as it poses that in order to be fully accepted in Western mainstream society homosexuals need to behave in ways that almost repeat or prove that their lifestyle is ideologically normative and adheres to the nuclear family model. This model is then seen as something to aspire to, to match, and possibly ensures that any homosexual identity which is too sexual, queered or just too much ‘the other’ is hugely problematic and unacceptable to society. This means that these already disadvantaged groups have little to gain from such a position in political terms as it may close down the potential for exploring very particular issues related to subsections of lesbian society such as those related to race, disability or class. A close discursive consideration of *The L Word* will allow a consideration of

whether the meaning constructed within the text encourages a wider consideration of the diversity of lesbian identity.

Ideological positioning, the Representation of Lesbians and the Rise of the 'Queer'

The tensions, applicability, and crossovers of these two perspectives and interests (those of gay liberation and assimilation) are central to understanding the foundations of discourses contained in *The L Word*, and their reception by lesbian audiences. Storylines clearly contain assimilationist narratives around gender, marriage and family; whilst also representing alternative discourses around gender, especially that of transition from one gender to another. The next segment of this chapter will explore the roots of these perspectives and their relation to studying *The L Word*.

The assimilationist position has been labelled by Fassin (2001) as being that of the 'Gay Conservative', which is considered as a movement that seeks to normalise homosexuality through minimising instances of what Robinson (2005) refers to as gender deviance and discouraging the performance of the effeminate male, butch woman, and discouraging the display of any overt sexual acts. An example of a central proponent of this position in the 1990s was conservative writer Bruce Bawer who in *A Place At the Table* (1993) clearly laid out an argument for conservative gay acceptance whilst arguing that feminist, lesbian, or queer politics is too radical and utterly unnecessary for the acceptance of lesbians and gays. Writers such as Bawer represented a position that was embarrassed at the excesses and celebrations seen at 'Gay Pride' events and so are in complete opposition to the liberating and challenging practices which stemmed from Stonewall and still continued, in an arguably less

political sense, at Pride events throughout the 1990s. Speaking of gays and lesbians

Bawer (1993: 183) claims:

self-loathing manifested by activists like the Lesbian Avengers is understandable. Many gay men and lesbians, after all, grew up in households where homosexuality was viewed as an abomination and where homosexuals were dismissed as jokes of nature...Liberated though they think themselves to be, many of them have never been liberated themselves from their parents' view of homosexuality as a joke; in order to live with themselves, they have to adopt a worldview that sees *everything* as a joke, that laughs at everything that has traditionally been taken seriously, from religion to the family...for it would never occur to an individual with pride...to feel a need for a group-oriented pride.

A noteworthy issue with regard to the conservative and assimilationist position and the political visibility of lesbians is that the majority of theorists are white, male and middle/upper class, as highlighted by Rebecca Beirne (2008). Beirne argues that this positioning means that Gay Conservatives have the most to gain from assimilation and not upsetting or challenging the ideological traditions and hegemony of heteronormative culture. She claims that such perspectives do not allow for the 'other' or the diversity of gay and lesbian culture and so homosexuals who belong to racial, class or sexual sub-cultures have little to gain from such a movement; one which often "distances itself from those perceived to have the potential to stain its image" (2008: 23). Thus, it is pertinent to explore the diversity of the representations present in *The L Word*. As discussed in chapter seven representations in the show do support some of the normative roles of gender and mainstream culture around sexuality. With regard to the expression of lesbian culture that Bawer upholds, they could be internalised by audiences and be restrictive in terms of wider cultural experience, and such representations will arguably be hegemonic.

Such a perspective raises a key issue for the representation of lesbians and their ideological positioning in society. The portrayal and implementation of both gender and sex roles are at the heart of constructing an assimilationist, liberationist, or crossover positioning for lesbians. This is because these aspects of identity are key elements of how we consider heterosexual lifestyle or any potential ideological challenges to heterosexual culture. According to Gatens (2003) the perceived passivity of women in a sexual and political sense and their relegation to the private sphere has long been an issue for feminists looking for women to become more active political participants in society. This is a particular issue for lesbians as lesbian sexual practice in itself provides a challenge to the role of the traditional female and its ideological and singular passivity. Female to female sex acts are an aspect of lesbian identity heavily represented in *The L Word* via the characterisation of femme, hard, and soft butch characters as heavily sexualised. Cvetkovich (1995: 125) has asserted that we recognise that, when considering what lesbian sex is, and ultimately who lesbians are, in terms of identity:

(the) focus is ultimately on sexual acts, not sexual identities, but I am interested in how the sexual act[s] of 'being fucked' are represented by lesbians, whose experiences suggest possibilities that need not be exclusive to either self-identified lesbians or women fucking other women.

As I show in greater detail later, one aspect of *The L Word's* uniqueness is that it most often portrays lesbian experience outside of sexual interactions. However, this clearly widens the consideration of lesbian acts as not only challenging in terms of heterosexuality, but also in terms of the gender expectations of women. My analysis of the show allows a consideration of the ideological tensions being played out through both production and consumption.

By studying the discourses present in and around *The L Word* it will be possible to try and assess and critique the tensions between these two perspectives in the production and promotional considerations of the show and also assert what the cultural consequences of this are in relation to resultant representations, the audience and their reactions. This will aid a critique of the extent to which *The L Word* and its representations merely achieve what could be termed an 'assimilationist' position in the portrayal of lesbian identities or conversely if the show goes further to offer a wider representation of lives unseen and unknown by the mainstream.

The variety of debates and developments encapsulated above fractured the liberation-focused community and laid the foundations for the development of more fluid considerations of sexuality. With the representation of a variety of sexualities being present in *The L Word* the development of 'queer theory' in relation to lesbian identity is a vital and pertinent theory to draw upon in order to conduct a rounded and well-considered investigation.

The focus of gay political movements becomes relevant to the consideration of *The L Word* and the possible political motivations communicated through the promotional discourse of Ilene Chaiken. Chaiken's early promotional construction appeals to audiences through discursive links to political history. It is therefore important to consider the development of such history and frame the political nature of lesbian representation. Gay and lesbian political movements have struggled to find mutual interests, this frames very distinct and separate representation of gay and lesbian identity in the mass media. Cohen (2008) has argued that the formation of The Gay Liberation Front in New York in 1969 represents the first faltering of combined US

gay liberation movements. This was just one example of a joint lesbian and gay group that split due to factionalism. Consequently a form of gay rights activism with a narrower focus replaced gay political movements. According to D'Emilio (cited in Jay, Young et al. 1992: xxv) the composition of this subsequent development appeared to be reflective of those who made up the assimilationists: white, middle-class, gay men,

though with some lesbians and people of colour as well, this reform-orientated politics focused on gay issues only and largely abandoned the broad analysis of oppression that animated gay liberation. These activists, many of whom were quite militant in the tactics they espoused, sought entry into the system on terms of equality.

D'Emilio goes on to outline that this change meant the movement was less about liberation and more about prescription politics, “in attacking roles, anonymous sex, objectification, and bar culture.” (2002: 62).

As the split and change over was occurring Yolanda Retter (2000) outlines that lesbian activism developed in three clear stages with distinct reference to Los Angeles. For Retter the initial stage was characterised by the growth of lesbian separatists. The purpose of such separatism was to challenge patriarchy and gender oppression for women. Samois (1981) expands that as these groups tended to lack leadership in any sense, the second stage of development related to groups being formed in relation to very particular and specific issues for lesbians, amongst them: sadomasochistic sexual practices, pornography, and ethnicity issues. This resulted in the growth of distinct and specialised groups due to tensions around the diversity of cultural background and varying agendas. Gender roles related to butch/femme relationships were under particular attack as they were seen to mimic the heterosexual institution. Retter then argues that the third and final stage of the politicisation of

lesbians involved lesbian activists joining with their gay male counterparts to support shared progressive causes. This political context has clearly influenced Chaiken and the discourses that she produces to entice lesbian viewers are often reflective of the development of distinctly lesbian political issues.

The diverse theorisation of queer studies and politics is a difficult one to define, but it is necessary to do so in order to understand, critique and assess the political motivations of creatives who consider their identity to be either 'queered' or lesbian, or whose background has been one related to New Queer Cinema movements. Queer theory expands beyond the boundaries of only relating to homosexuality or heterosexuality, and of relating to male and female. In fact the notion of queer is focused on the predication of rethinking and rejecting categories of identity. Queer studies identifies and critiques the narratives that we perform from a perspective that denies the possibility of an essential and natural sexuality or gender performance. The critiques of queer theory highlight that categorisation and strict narratives of gender and sexuality are implicated in the oppressive production of power.

For queer theorists strictly defined identities are merely social and cultural acts that we complete and perform, this is explained when considering Butler's (1990) point that it is only through the reassertion of ideology that we have the conception of an essentialist and true inner self. Queer theorists such as Weinberg would relate the term itself to not only, "the ignorance and prejudice of a segment of the population, but an aspect of the way power is organised and deployed throughout society" (1996:11). Thus it is important to consider that the notion of queer in film and visual arts is not merely about challenging ideologies related to homosexuality; but rather a

challenge to the normalising and labelling ideologies about all types of sexuality and identity. This is an aspect of *The L Word* that needs close attention, particularly with the series' attention to homosexual, bisexual and transgender issues and the notions of fluid identity within and between these sexual identities.

So, queer theory rejects identifiable categories themselves as a recognition that these categories can be limiting and subject to oppression via social power relations.

Duggan and Hunter claim that the term queer covers those, “who have been made to feel perverse, queer, odd, outcast, different, and deviant” (1995: 171). Again, there is a variety of performativity in *The L Word* and arguably a number of queered characters; but it will be important to explore whether the boundaries that are so strongly asserted in society around gender and sexuality will be enforced through the implementation of cultural tropes due to the commercialisation of the show.

So, although the term queer is extremely useful in approaching and critiquing the heteronormative nature of society and what Adrienne Rich termed compulsory heterosexuality (1981), Queer Studies and the notion of queerness does have a number of issues as Jonathon Weinberg (1996: 12) points out:

As a field of inquiry, queer studies potentially shifts the emphasis away from specific acts and identities to the myriad ways in which gender organizes and disorganizes society. However there is a danger in this shift. If homophobia is everywhere, and everything and everybody is potentially queer, then the specific stories of how gay and lesbian people have lived and represented their lives, as well as the record of their persecution and struggle for civil rights, may be passed over.

The best example of this is the opinion that the queer politics of the 1990s undermined lesbian identity and politics from a lesbian feminist perspective. Sheila Jeffreys outlines that queer politics caused a backlash against the possibility of radical

social change for lesbian culture as it was, “based, quite explicitly, upon a repudiation of lesbian feminist ideas” (2003: 2). The key thrust of such perspectives is that gay men and lesbians cannot share the same political interests as these are not common in nature, and if an attempt in this is made through queer theory this unification can only serve to undermine the interests and political identity of lesbians as a group, as queer combinations of groupings will then only be subservient to the needs of patriarchy. Such combinations are argued to be unreflective of the lesbian feminist approach, as Kelly (2005: 188) claims, ‘the interests of women were – and continue to be – frequently excluded in mixed political organising groups’.

Lesbian feminists have been central to the debate about the problematic unification of gay male and lesbian political interests, arguing that the notion of ‘queer interests’ is ultimately flawed, discriminatory and male leaning (Jeffreys, 2003). As early as the 1970s Adrienne Rich outlined that the interests and concerns of lesbians were not only different from gay men, but also that lesbian culture was threatened by the oppressive nature of what Rich (1979) identifies as a heterosexual and gay male culture.

Problematizing Lesbian Identity and Representation

These issues are also an important consideration as they may problematise the notion of ‘lesbian’ identity and this in itself can be politically problematic for both lesbian viewers and the gay community as a whole. In this vein queer theory has also caused a number of problems for lesbian culture, and in particular lesbian feminists. What appears to be asserted in a wide range of theory is that although the term ‘queer’ is encompassing, this applies wholly to male and not female homosexuals. Lesbians

have been excluded from the theoretical realm and gay histories and the definition of 'queer' continues that sense of being undermined through a lack of clarity and focus.

Sheila Jeffreys (2003: 35-36) outlines that,

The words 'homosexual' and 'gay' did not start out meaning only men, but came to do so as a result of a simple material political reality, the greater social and economic power of men, the power which has allowed men to define what culture is and to make women invisible. For lesbians, having a name specific to women who love women has been crucial to asserting existence and difference of lesbians, and to the assertion of a lesbian pride based not on being an inferior variety of gay men, but wild and rebellious women who refuse subordinate status. In fact, lesbian feminists struggled hard for twenty years to get the word they had chosen to express their specific and different history, culture, practice and politics on the political map.

Jeffreys encapsulates one of the unique issues that lesbian feminists have identified with the notion of 'queer' culture, although this is distinctly polemical in nature. Such perspectives assert that lesbian experience is unique and personal to a particular group; oppression of this group includes issues around sexism, violence, passivity and sexuality – all factors that lesbian feminists would argue they do not share with the rest of the identities that may fall under the 'queer' umbrella. In fact lesbian feminists may disagree or find some of the 'queered' practices celebrated abhorrent or problematic, take for example sado-masochism and, in some cases, bi-sexuality.

This thesis intends to interact with this debate and tease out some of the contradictions of the relationship between lesbian culture, queer theory and gendered identities and will attempt to foreground the consideration and identity of lesbian culture through popular mainstream television. This 'teasing out' will involve a close consideration of both the queer studies movement, which has a focus on the emancipatory and liberating potential of alternative and fluid identities and also the assessment of how constructed identities in *The L Word* may be read by lesbian audiences. This study raises the question of whether truly fluid identities or

androgynous practices of gender are truly achievable, or must the discourses present in the mainstream produced *The L Word* always relate in some ways to the performances of gender as masculine or feminine, and sexuality as straight or gay/lesbian so heavily ingrained into our society and our understanding of what practices and identities are socially acceptable.

The above perspectives are central to the consideration of lesbian themed television as shows such as *The L Word* clearly offer a space for the reflection on the representation of lesbian culture for both lesbian and heterosexual audiences, the show also constructed transgender and bisexual identities – those which would be welcomed into an inclusive definition of ‘queer’. With the background of some of the writers being from the New Queer movement, it will be important to analyse the nature of the representations present, and whether they reflect an embracing queer perspective or more separatist and categorising discourse between lesbianism and other types of sexuality.

This is of particular relevance to the tensions between queer theory and lesbian identity politics. There has been much debate as to whether theoretical approaches to gay and lesbian representation should be about the ideological assimilation (mainstreaming) of gay and lesbian representations where homosexuals (this group being considered as excluding those who are bisexual, transgendered, or ‘queer’) need to simply ‘prove’ their normalcy and the essential nature of their sexuality to heterosexual society and their identity be assimilated into current society. On the other side of the debate there is a discussion as to whether there should be more pressure on society to change and accept a diversity of (queer) more fluid identities in

a much more liberationist sense. This raises a pertinent issue for critiquing gay drama and television, for as theorists we are approaching the narratives and specific stories of contemporary lesbian and queer life – are these to be passed over with an explanation that identity is fluid and performative, or are these identities more worthy in terms of consideration? It appears that the approach to interpreting this particular representation may lie somewhere between the perspectives of queer theorists and their encouragement to look at a wide variety of identities, and the essentialist and politicised viewpoints of lesbian feminists and gay liberationists.

Thus it is important to assess the potential impact or limits of the representation offered in the context of these theoretical perspectives. Is lesbian representation an overt challenge or a move towards normalising lesbian culture and subsuming it into hegemonic society with all its problematic power relations founded in gender roles? The discourses found in *The L Word* offer some close consideration of these issues and also represents the problematic disparity between assimilationist and queer perspectives. This chapter has outlined some of the political tensions and development that have impacted on those creatives involved in *The L Word* and this offers a clear context for considering how such political ideas are negotiated alongside the commercial needs of institutionalised television production. This provides the context and the basis in which I move on to discuss the development of what I will term American and British LGBT TV.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Development of LGBT TV in the US and UK

So far I have established and evaluated the key ideas and background on the new television economy and the development of ideas of lesbian identity politics and representation that underpin my thesis. In this chapter I focus on existing attempts to analyse and understand the representation of gay and lesbian culture and identity on television, and its relationship to political and cultural contexts. *The L Word* can be understood to be just as much the end point of a history of lesbian representation on television as it is the product of a moment in the political economy of US television and an embodiment of theoretical discussions about liberation philosophy.

In this chapter I focus primarily on television produced in the United States in order to give a solid context to my detailed study of *The L Word*, but I do also draw on examples from television outside the US as they form part of the context of the production of gay and lesbian representation, especially as most national television is now available internationally as part of the import and export of television commodities. It is also worth considering that the contributors to the audience forums I analyse later in this thesis are from a variety of continents and, as such, other national experiences are important.

Here I am not offering a detailed historical analysis of lesbians on television. This has been undertaken in notable works such as Steven Capsuto's *Alternate Channels* (2000), Larry Gross' *Up from Invisibility* (2001) and Stephen Tropiano's *The Prime Time Closet: A History of Gays and Lesbians on TV* (2002). Instead, I seek to map out a broader sense of the relationship between the development of gay and lesbian identity in the United States (via both US made and imported UK television) and some selected instances of representations on mainstream television. I also offer some insights into the critiques that have been made of this programming.

Central to my study is a sense that the representation of gay and lesbian culture on television has changed over time, and that these representations play a central part in the politics of sexual identity. The development of gay and lesbian history on television has been problematic and controversial and *The L Word* does not exist in a representational vacuum. When the audiences for the programme engaged at the time of transmission, they did so in the context of their experience of earlier televisual representations of lesbian and gay culture. This context also provides some insights into the potential foundation of production decisions made at particular points in the development of *The L Word*.

Writing at the very same time that *The L Word* was in development, Richard Dyer (2002) argued that the typification of gayness was related to physical ‘invisibility’ of homosexuality within the dominant discourses of our wider culture. For Dyer, homosexuality has no defining genealogical factors that are ‘visible’ as such. It is only actions, language, and therefore discourses that allow gays to be visibly recognised and this is a distinctive factor in this study, these discourses construct ‘knowledge’ of homosexuality. As these discourses change within a historical and cultural context, they also draw on various discursive repertoires which alter the knowledge produced and the relations of power between groups in society.

Historical Contexts – Homosexuals on US TV

Representational studies in this area have mainly concentrated on investigating the maintenance of social hierarchies or dominance of discursive formations that appear heterosexualised, and therefore ‘normal’. In this sense some representational studies have found that historical representations of homosexuals are negative and stereotyped to

foreground the normalised role of the heterosexual. For instance, historically, Vito Russo (1981) has argued that, in filmic terms, homosexuals were only defined by their sexual 'problem' and that homosexuals involved in films from the 1950s to the 1980s tend to be suggestive rather than open, and have been characterised as suicidal, predatory and victims, if they have been portrayed at all.

In many ways this representational politics reflects wider political concerns with the visibility of gay culture. The era immediately after World War II is often cited as a key moment in the foundational politics of an increasingly visible minority US homosexual identity (see, for instance, Berube 2010). This was seen as a time when gays and lesbians returned to cosmopolitan areas in the United States after being involved in warfare. Tropiano (2002) claims that this led to an increase in gay bars and businesses that catered for the needs of a developing gay community. In turn the development of this gay community also fuelled intolerance and fear of gay and lesbian lifestyles, then led to the oppression of homosexuals and increased bar raids and the promotion of homophobia. This continued through the 1960s and 1970s where gays and lesbians were seen as dangerous to US national security. D'Emilio (1992) claims that gays were seen as perverts at this time and were even stopped from being employed by the US federal government by the then US President, Eisenhower.

At the same time, though, the notion of homosexuality as a mental or sexual disorder was also challenged. Dr. Alfred Kinsey presented key statistics about homosexual behaviour in his two volumes, *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male* (Kinsey et al., 1998) and *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female* (Kinsey, 1953) which shook the traditional perspectives around homosexuality. Kinsey's statistical claims that homosexuality was more prevalent

than publically thought was shocking to the medical community and America. Even in the light of such medical and psychological work where homosexuality was a widely contested term during this era, intolerance continued throughout America. As Bayer (1981) has shown, in the United States homosexuality remained labelled as a mental disorder up until 1972.

Initially, the television coverage of homosexuality reflected the general social position of the United States. Much of the early coverage of gay identities on television were also focused on the 'problem of homosexuality'. Tropiano (2002: 3) outlines that many of the shows produced in the mid 1950s were pre-cursors to the popular US talk shows seen across a number of networks today. These shows focused on homosexuality as a problem:

These early broadcasts most likely had positive and negative effects on the public's attitudes. Without question, both TV and radio talk shows brought a complex and taboo issue, previously limited to closed-door discussion, into the public arena. However, the designation of homosexuality as a *social problem* (a term consistently appearing in program titles), combined with a bias of certain experts, may, in some instances have done more to strengthen than alleviate the public's growing fear. Therefore, homosexuality, as with any form of sexuality deviating from the so-called 'norm' of consensual heterosexuality, became a prime target for exploitation and sensationalism by the media.

These links between cultural visibility, televised visibility, and between social and representational change are further supported by the way that television representations of homosexuality seemed to become slightly more overt and diverse in the post-Stonewall period. Before this point there had been a number of "connotatively queer representations, such as Paul Lynde's Uncle Arthur on *Bewitched* (1964-1972), and Wlodarz has further expanded and (2009: 88) has pointed to "one of the earliest coming out scenes in a 1970 episode of *Medical Center*...the doctor reveals his homosexuality to a female colleague who's romantically interested in him". Rather than being obscurely queer, Wlodarz (2009) claims gay characters became more commonplace, although notably the only extended serial presence was that of Billy Crystal's character Jodie in *Soap* (1977-1981).

During this era there appeared to be a much greater focus on the homosexual male on US television. Lesbians, by contrast, were absent in the wider US public and gay programming, and continued to be significantly marginalised by television until the 1970s. Auchmuty et al. (1992) have suggested that this can be explained by the differences between gay male and lesbian experience and the proposition that lesbians did not pose such a threat to hetero-normative society, especially as homosexual men were often ideologically linked to paedophilia and notions of the predatory gay. For Larry Gross (1991) lesbians, as a marginalised group, encountered problems when they gained visibility as their eventual representation reflected “the biases and interests of those elites who define the public agenda” (1991: 21).

Perhaps, the most pertinent time to consider the appearance of lesbians in the mainstream media is in the 1990s; the era of ‘lesbian chic’. Cottingham (1996: 2) claims that this ‘chic’ involved the prioritisation of lesbian identity in mainstream culture through advertising and celebrity culture in particular and that this was, “less an enunciation of lesbian cultural power than a commodification of lesbianism”. Lesbian chic was seen as a fashionable moment that prioritised very particular versions of lesbian identity and according to Solanas (1993) tended to ignore aspects of lesbian culture related to class, race and age. Lesbian chic contained a limited notion of what it meant to be lesbian. Lesbian representations were brought to the fore of societal attention, but limited to the non-threatening, glamorous, and erotic. At the same time, though, this new image was vastly different from the lesbian stereotype of the 1970s and early 80s: the man-hating feminist. Allen (1997) has argued that this shift amounted to a commodification of lesbian identity, as it became an integral part of consumer culture focused on the media.

This cultural moment precedes the development of the *The L Word*, and we can speculate that it had a clear influence on the casting of conventionally beautiful, thin, usually white, middle class, and arguably gender normative characters. 'Lesbian chic' is considered as a time when it was very particular types of lesbian visibility, lesbian issues, and fashion became of interest to the masses. Again, we can speculate that images produced during this time can be seen as having a distinct connection with the popularity of the 2000s-produced *The L Word*, and clearly had a distinct impact on mainstream considerations of what it meant to be a lesbian and all that went with such an identity.

Television Representations of Lesbian Identity in late Twentieth Century US TV

Whilst lesbian characters have appeared on television since the 1970s, avowedly lesbian characters who have a story arc which spans a number of episodes only really found solid foundation in the 1990s. These were the constructions of lesbianism that contextualised the ideological state of television that preceded the inception of *The L Word*. In the US there was the appearance of gay and lesbian characters in popular and diverse series such as *LA Law* (1986-1994), *Will & Grace* (1998-2006) and the US version of *Queer As Folk* (2000-2005). According to Ron Becker (2006: 185):

between 1994 and 1997, well over 40 percent of all prime time network series produced at least one gay-themed episode, nineteen network shows debuted with recurring gay characters, and hit shows like *Roseanne*, *Friends*, *Frasier*, and *NYPD Blue* (to name but a few) seemed to include gay jokes and references to homosexuality every week.

Becker further demonstrates that the appearance of gay and lesbian characters and narratives were typical of 1990s culture and emerged from shifting conceptions of the audience by US networks. During this time US television networks were increasingly shifting their attention towards an intense competition for the socio-economic qualities of their programme's

audience rather than the pursuit of a mass audience, which had dominated television demographics up to the 1980s. This meant that programming content had to be tailored in order to reach the niche audience with the most disposable income, and this opened the door for more diverse gay representations to appear. This meant that distinct audience identities were linked to particular types of programming, these being shaped by the needs of advertising and commercialism

The draw of gay and lesbian visibility is possibly explained by its “cutting edge allure” to what Becker (2006: 187) terms “Slumpy” audiences (those with a socially liberal, fiscally conservative political position). Of course, gay and lesbian audiences were also seen as having high levels of income and affluence; two key attractions for networks seeking out quality audiences.

The early noughties were an era of change in terms of lesbian visibility on US television. There were on-going lesbian characters in the US version of *Queer as Folk* (2000-2005), the appearance of *The L Word* and the open declaration of lesbianism from characters in the ever popular *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003). There was also lesbian representation the long established soap-opera *All My Children* (1973-2011). *All My Children* was a particularly interesting case of lesbian representation as according to Modleski (1982) the daytime soap opera had been rather resistant to the inclusion of homosexuality and attempts to maintain a white, middle class, Christian group of characters. Furthermore Harrington (2003) outlines that in 70 years of US television and radio soap opera there had only been five incidences of gay or lesbian characters or narrative which dealt with lesbian issues. Thus, the appearance of a lesbian character in a text with a lack of episodic closure allowed for a developed storyline which had a sense of social realism through a focused narrative;

the character of Bianca from the *All My Children* was not just a narrative afterthought and, for Capsuto (2000), emerged as a primary source of information about lesbian culture for mainstream American audiences.

The expansion of lesbian characters in the 2000s, therefore, was not just numerical but had a greater sense of diversity than those that dominated US television before. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that this greater diversity tended not to include expressions of sexual desire. Such desire is sublimated through the committing of spells in *Buffy* or made invisible by the portrayal of characters in a completely desexualised way. For Hantzis and Lehr (1994: 113) this lack of, “performance of lesbianism” ignores a key factor in any lesbian’s identity and serves to undermine the cultural construction of lesbians. So although lesbianism and erotic actions are hinted at through symbolism or through discussion between partners, the move to a full lesbian representation on the same terms as the representation of heterosexuality is almost absent; lesbians are lesbians in name only. Even though lesbians were now visible, the sexual practice that defined their identity remained invisible. In fact, *The L Word* was the first lesbian ensemble drama, and also the first serial TV show, to openly portray and seemingly celebrate lesbian sex in all its diverse forms.

And yet, the increased visibility of lesbian identity within television texts cannot be understood in isolation. Lynne Joyrich (2009: 24-25) observes that the narrative attention of US television ensures that it is actually heterosexuality that is realised and reiterated through the establishment of lesbian and gay characters:

As in many films, it is not unusual for television programmes to establish characters who, diegetically, are ‘really’ gay in order to establish (not always successfully) that the other characters are not. Ironically, it is television’s own logic of the closet that requires that realisation; the televisual production of sexuality (even in its heteronormative forms) may rely less on portrayals of love, desire, and erotic behaviour (which threaten to exceed TV’s domesticated

space) than on practices of oppositional location and defense, however self-defeating.

Interestingly the appearance of *The L Word* raises distinct questions for such a theoretical position. As the show is focused on lesbian experience, and rather uniquely includes 'heterosexualised' televisual elements such as everyday living, familial ideologies, committed relationships and sexual acts and intimacy, does it in some ways prioritise certain forms of lesbian sexuality over others rather than heterosexual over lesbian? Is the difference in representation more about seemingly acceptable forms of lesbian representation as prioritised over others (rather than an oppositional locating of heterosexuality)?

In a Foucauldian sense it has been argued that US television has helped to position homosexuality as, "the mark of diacritical sexual difference in our society", which is as Joyrich expands (2009: 27), "...both an effect of and obstacle to television's confessional, familial, and consumer regime, the sexuality produced precisely *as* obstacle, necessarily inside and outside the televisual domain". As the ideological conditions outlined by Joyrich are still at work within the context of production it is therefore pertinent to explore the discursive tropes which are prioritised in what is considered a challenging and unique text in comparison to prior representations of lesbian culture.

The consideration of a more strongly asserted form of heterosexuality over homosexuality is further complicated in other ways by *The L Word*. As the narrative of the show develops over consecutive seasons we also see the construction of an increasing diversity of sexual identities such as bisexuality, transsexuality and also sexual practice related to transgender identity. I shall return to these aspects of the textual construction, explored via discursive

priorities and the reaction of the audience framed within the context and restrictions of commercial production, later in this thesis.

It is enlightening to compare the representations of lesbian identity in UK television with those in US television as a way of bringing to the fore the distinctive state of affairs in mainstream US television in the 1990s and early 2000s. The programming itself needs to be understood within the political context of gay and lesbian politics in the UK at that time. Finlayson (1994) outlines that it was during the 1980s and early 90s the UK Conservative Government espoused a moral mantra of 'Victorian Values'. Plummer (1992) also claims that this era included a 'remedicalization' of gay culture as a feature of a generally hostile response of the appearance of the early 1980s AIDS epidemic (Woods, 2009). This anti-gay position was compounded by Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act which asserted that, "a local authority shall not promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship" (cited in Plummer 1992: 18).

Nevertheless UK television in this period featured a number of programmes produced by and for lesbians. The main difference between the UK and the US was that gay content was not limited to television drama or fictional representations, due to the social, political, and production context of the time particular representations started to appear. McNair (2002) points to Channel 4 as a seminal site for film commissions and documentaries in the 1980s and 1990s, the first of these being *Out On Tuesday* (1989) and *Dyke TV* (1995) which consisted of a number of examples of factual reportage, along with the BBC's late-night lifestyle magazine show, *Gaytime TV* (1996-1999). This in itself underlines the necessity to understand televisual texts within their political or commercial production context, and the

way that analyses of such texts can give a clear insight in both the political concerns of the time.

Certainly, the representation of lesbian sexuality has been more overt in the UK than the US examples outlined above. In 2002 the BBC screened their historical dramatisation of Sarah Waters' lesbian novel *Tipping the Velvet* (2002). *Tipping the Velvet* was adapted for television by Andrew Davies (a screen writer famous for 'sexing up' the BBC's adaption of *Pride and Prejudice*).-It could certainly be argued that in the hands of a male director and screenwriter, and the stereotypical nature of television, the condensed version of *Tipping the Velvet* prioritised voyeurism and titillation for the viewer, although the drama was immensely popular with lesbian audiences and led to the brief, yet intense, focus on the two lead actresses Rachael Stirling and Keeley Hawes from lesbian commentators and lifestyle magazines. This evidenced that there is a lesbian gaze to be served by lesbian texts which include representations of lesbian sexual acts, and this in itself raises interesting questions about what power relations are foregrounded by such representations and how the reading of such may impact on lesbian audiences understanding of their own sexuality and identity formation.

Lesbian depictions – the challenging the nature of lesbian subjectivity

So far I have argued that television has either not portrayed lesbian sexuality at all, or has shown it in a highly stereotypical way (Gross, 2001, Tropiano, 2002). Capsuto (2000) highlights that early representations of both gay men and (rarely shown) lesbians were made for straight audiences and were from a clearly heterosexual viewpoint. More specifically lesbians have been portrayed in one of two ways, either as butch and dressing in a masculine way, or as femme with a "traditional feminine appearance" (2000: 110). Traditionally

television has portrayed homosexuals within the gendered frame of reference and so heterosexuality and theorists such as Glascock (2001) therefore argue that the ideological naturalisation of masculinity as a dominant form of behaviour is naturalised and reiterated through such texts.

For Arlene Stein (2003) both of these positions of gender are considered as problematic from a lesbian feminist point of view as they relate to patriarchal and dominant culture which is underpinned by its ideological foundation. Such maximisation of gender difference is something producers in mainstream television have been unable to escape and so the portrayal of lesbian sexuality, defined through signification and behaviour, is inextricably tied up with gender theory. Historically, representations of lesbians raise questions with regard to masculine behaviour and clear stereotypes have been constructed. Aside from the lesbian chic of the 1990s I discussed earlier, there has been a particular predictability in the characterisation of lesbian relationships on television as having clear butch and femme roles. Even when lesbians are portrayed as more femme or femme-androgynous, aesthetically their gender performance may still be considered as masculine through their actions and reactions to heterosexual oppression, often violently so according to Hoogland (1997). This appears to have been a theme which has repeated the oft represented lesbian in the film noir (Moore, 1998) and horror genres (Benshoff, 1997) where lesbian characters are often portrayed as depraved and anti-social through their violent masculine actions, and, as Meehan highlights (2011) were often punished for their anti-ideological actions.

Newton and Williams (2003) have argued that the oversimplification of imagery and constructed meanings in the media mean that viewers may internalise gender roles, and by extension I would argue that the aspects of lesbian representation should be of concern in a

plural society. Obviously, same-sex intimate relationships are an integral part of a programme like *The L Word* and the questions this raises are central to critiques around what is seen as a 'heteronormative society' and the positive and negative aspects of gay assimilation. According to cultivation theory (Shanahan and Morgan, 1999) if gender roles in the portrayed relationships reflect the naturalised dominance/oppressive nature of male/female behaviour then potentially the lesbian audience may internalise these ideas and exert them through their own life experiences. Meanwhile straight audiences may be more accepting of such heterosexualised gender roles, but will only assess lesbian culture on heterosexual terms, rather than take account of any cultural practices or concerns which may fall outside of the heterosexual ideological schema into which this televisual lesbian culture becomes assimilated as according to Gross (1991). This, of course, would only be a situation which may increase in hegemonic impact should there be a lack of diversity in representation across a number of televisual texts that deal with lesbian representation.

In presenting the findings of my analysis of the textual, promotional, and audience discourses through which *The L Word* becomes meaningful, I have been particularly mindful to understand the complex nature of the gender discourses as much as issues of production contexts, and the politics of sexuality and its representation. For my thesis, then, the question of whether intimate relationships in the show are more about gendered behaviour, than lesbian sexual expression, forms a central part of my investigation. In particular, I am concerned to test the hypothesis that lesbian representations can be seen as transformative on a variety of levels and are perhaps more challenging culturally than merely being considered as assimilationist representations. Ruthann Robson's (1992) exploration of this issue in *Lesbian (Out)law* is especially pertinent to this discussion. She explores the notion of domestication as an assimilationist position, claiming that lesbian culture has become part

of oppressive social structures. She argues that the domestication of lesbian culture and the move to embrace heteronormative scenarios such as marriage, family and employment in the service of capitalism has diluted gay political struggles. She claims that this dilution means that political focus has shifted from gay liberation to equality through being included in the heteronormative world. However Robson also posits that this assimilation raises issues of an alternative, an opposite, and claims that this raises the, “possibility of a feral future” (1992: 18).

One particular genre, which opens up the possibilities of a ‘feral’ and challenging lesbian identity, is that of the ‘prison genre’. The prison genre film, with women as a central focus, made the transition from 1940s and 50s film to television in the 1970s with such shows as *Within These Walls* (1974-1978), *Prisoner: Cell Block H* (1979-1986), and more recently drama *Bad Girls* (1999-2006) (for more on these programmes, see Zalcock and Robinson 1996). According to Judith Mayne (2000) there is as much to be celebrated as disliked about what she terms as the ‘women in prison’ film. Such dramas tend to foreground the victimization of women and also pose women’s sexuality as spectacle, and lesbian is also usually inextricably linked to sadism and exploitation; Joan ‘The Freak’ Ferguson (Maggie Kirkpatrick) in *Prisoner Cell Block H* (1979-1986) being as example in this regard.

Conversely, according to Mayne such shows also offer, “female bonding, female rage, and female communities” (2000: 115). In terms of setting (as much as narrative and characterisation) these programmes offer an ideological challenge to hetero-normativity even within the confines of mainstream TV, and such long-term representations of lesbian characters and plot lines have been packaged in a way that can offer some transgressive potential, particularly if read outside the ideological confines of the male gaze.

The UK series *Bad Girls* is an excellent example of how such shows can be transgressive and a site of positivity for lesbian audiences. Conceptualised by producer and self-proclaimed feminist Maureen Chadwick after a meeting with the founder of the campaign group 'Women in Prison' (Devlin, 1999), the show regularly achieved top ten ratings in the UK. The first series of the show featured the cop killing lesbian character Nikki Wade (Mandana Jones) at the heart of the narrative. The character of Wade is shown as reacting to heterosexual dominance (she was imprisoned for brutally killing a police officer who was trying to rape her partner) and also fighting (sometimes physically) for the rights and needs of the *other* prisoners around her. Producers and writers on the show Maureen Chadwick and Ann MacManus have even claimed that the character was a reflection of their own political values (Herman, 2003). This example of a mainly female ensemble show encapsulates how transgressive meanings and oppositional discourses can possibly be found in mainstream drama and may also reflect the political nature of their producers. Herman offers the term 'homo-normative' for such characterisations that are in opposition to the constraints of the heterosexualised world. But ironically the character of Wade was finally released, fulfilling her lesbian relationship and disappearing – in what was to be assumed to be a reflection of socially acceptable domesticity.

Regardless of the end point of such narratives 'feral' representations of lesbians can be seen as having political possibilities – rather than their transgressions being seen as negative and anti social. Such representations are seen as counter-hegemonic, rebellious and a distinct threat to the naturalised social order of family, marriage, monogamy and a number of other dominant ideological systems. For Robson (1992) this should be celebrated, and narratives that put lesbian characters, their desires and their possible transgressions at the centre of the narrative are positive as oppressive social systems are then questioned; their potential

violence being part of a response to being a marginalised and oppressed group. Arguably, as I will show in more detail later, *The L Word* does not fully sustain the representation of the ‘feral’ and challenging lesbian, but neither does it fully sustain the domesticated and hegemonised lesbian either.

Overall, what these texts offer is lesbian imagery that can be considered as heroic, and this may itself be attractive and politically enabling for a lesbian audience. Sally Munt posits such images as radical in their potential for both personal freedom through the expression of lesbian desire and also sociological disruption. She says that challenging and heroic lesbian characters offer (1998a: 11):

an emancipatory journey that assumes intersections between the phantasmatic and the real and that reading therefore performs a simultaneous function of escape and transformation, throwing the reader back into a perceptibly changed world on her return. Crucially this metamorphosis takes place through a process of identification and desire – we want the hero, and we want to be the hero.

The L Word was certainly one of the first dramas to be completely focused on lesbian communities, but also includes representations of ‘feral’ lesbian forms of violence, and in the last season, criminal (potentially murderous) behaviour. It is also worth noting that an intended *The L Word* spinoff was to be prison based drama *The Farm*; a venture ultimately not picked up by the Showtime network after the production of a pilot. Similarly, *The L Word* arguably offers up female characters for voyeurism.

This degree of textual ambiguity is behind my methodological emphasis on the impact and reading of lesbian narratives and characters by the lesbian audience. The latter parts of this thesis will explore how audiences negotiate these conflicting meanings, whether they do give them a sense of transgression, and how this also links to their sense of lesbian identity

and politics. It is of interest to explore whether audiences both want what they deem to be heroic characters, and wish to be like them.

The L Word offers a new site of identification, spectatorship and meaning construction for lesbian audiences. The literature and research work outlined in this chapter offers a journey through the development of lesbian identity on screen in both the US and UK, and sets the scene for an understanding of what new pleasures and discourses *The L Word* offered to lesbian audiences. It is possible to see the very determining political economic forces I identified in chapter two at work in the positioning and possibilities made available to programme makers at each point in time. The critical frameworks I have used to discuss these programmes have been rooted in the debates about lesbian cultural and political theory that I set out in chapter three, framed within the theory method of critical discourse analysis. In total this work sets the scene for my own, more detailed analysis of one piece of American programming. In the next chapter, therefore, I set out the way I used discourse as a methodological approach, and provide detail on the research I conducted and the ways in which I interpreted the data I generated.

CHAPTER FIVE

Analysing the Pantextual Meaning of identity in *The L Word*.

In chapter one I set out the key ideas of discourse that I have utilised to explore meaning in *The L Word*. In doing so I drew on Norman Fairclough's approach to critical discourse analysis, describing it as a key 'theory-method'. In that chapter I focused on the theoretical aspects of this approach as a frame to think through the issues relating to meaning, the textual object and the role of production¹, distribution and consumption contexts in forming what I have presented as the pantextual meanings of *The L Word*. In this chapter I focus on critical discourse analysis as a method to explore these meanings in greater detail. The chapter lays out the approach I took to studying the episodes of the programme as a lifecycle of production, the promotional material created to engage with the targeted audience and the public discussions about the programme undertaken by its audience members.

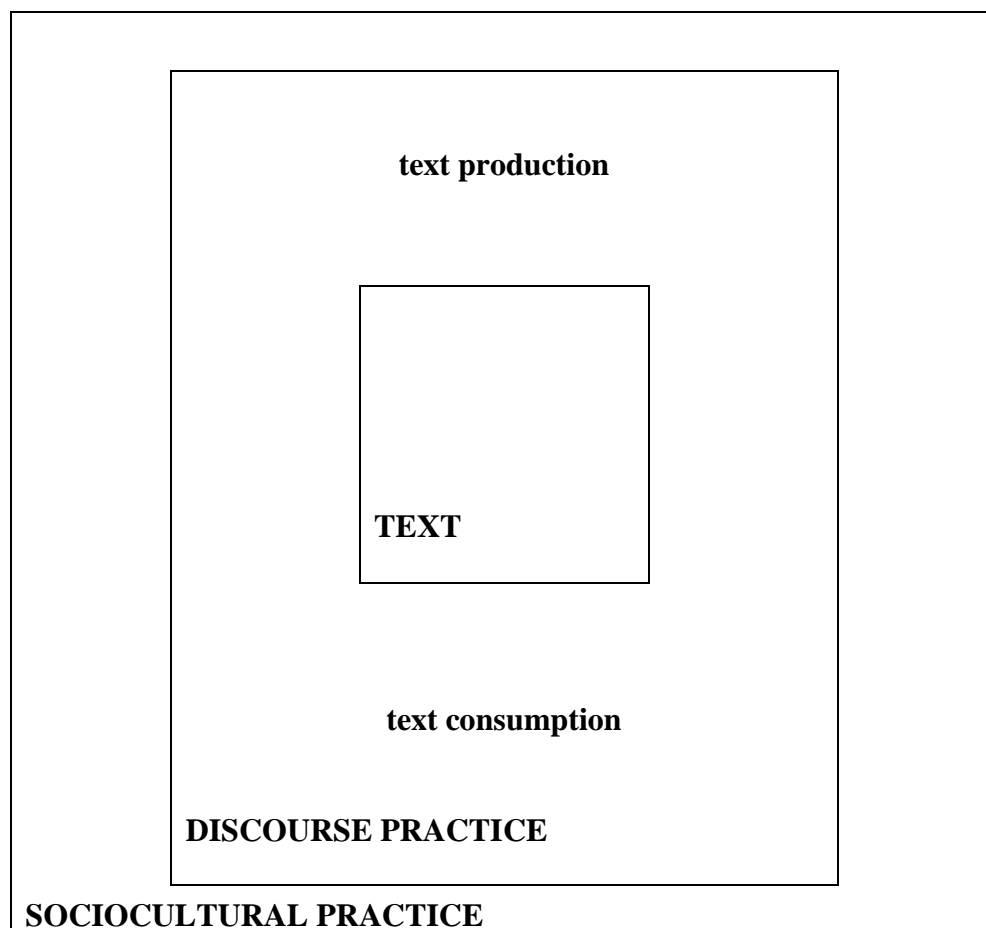
I structure this chapter into three parts, reflecting the tripartite approach in my method. I start with a general discussion about the approach I have taken to analysing *The L Word*, emphasising critical discourse analysis as a research method which defines the scope of materials studied and the way they are analysed and interpreted. I spell out the ways in which my own approach has been influenced by Norman Fairclough (1995) and the suitability of his conceptualisation to the study of representations of lesbian identity. The main section of the chapter sets out the detailed way in which I studied the *L Word* as a media text within my critical discourse method, and I bring to the fore the elements I have taken from the work of Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (1996) in versions of social semiotics and multimodal discourse analysis. I then outline how I approached the study of the

¹ It should be noted that interviews with an individual involved with the production of *The L Word* did take place. That participant was not happy to consent for the interview information to be used in this work as this would lead to them being identified; the detail of the interview meant identification would be clear, therefore this information was not used in line with ethical considerations.

televisual elements of *The L Word* pantextual meanings, the production field of discourse and the field associated with audience comment and response.

Discourse as method

In terms of my approach to a distinct and analytical methodology I aim to employ a discourse analysis framework which has been continually developed by Norman Fairclough since the late 1980s (1988, 1989, 1992, and 1995). His framework (1995: 59) is graphically reproduced below:



“A framework for critical discourse analysis of a communicative event”

Fairclough provides a set of useful analytical tools for considering influential factors on the production of dominant and resistive discourses in what he calls a single

‘communicative event’, such as a *The L Word*. For Macdonald (2003: 27) such an analysis is concerned with the, “...operation of power” through symbolic form. This framework not only includes the analysis of the text and wider social context, but also the wider discursive practices related to the very production and consumption of the media texts which are the primary object of study. Fairclough (1995: 60) argues that the relation between text and sociocultural practice is not a direct one and he develops a consideration of discursive practices drawing upon ‘orders of discourse’ as a way of conceptualising and analysing this relationship. For Fairclough these orders of discourse shape the features of a media text and are defined within specific historical contexts. In this formulation, discourse analysis allows a rounded analysis of a media text which, in Schroder’s (2002: 106) words:

...stands at the core of the model...The second dimension of analysis concerns ‘discourse practices,’ for instance, the processes through which specific media texts are produced in media organisations and consumed, or ‘decoded,’ by audiences in the context of their everyday lives. These discourse practices are understood as mediators between certain delimited texts and much wider ‘sociocultural practices’

Therefore, as Parker (1999) imparts, discourse analysis has a distinct advantage over approaches rooted in semiological theory or content analysis that may lead to presumptions about meaning without a distinct consideration of historically specific contexts. Given my earlier discussion about the political economic conditions within US television at the time that *The L Word* was produced, and the ideological state of lesbian political debate in the period up to the broadcast of the show, Fairclough’s approach provides the necessary breadth of analysis required for my study. This plural emphasis on the textual, the relevant discursive practices of production, consumption, and the wider sociocultural practices of the media is useful particularly as it enables me to conceive of the show (and its meanings) as the product of,

“...discursive creativity (that) is an effect of social conditions, not an achievement of individuals who have particular (creative) qualities” (Fairclough, 1995: 61). Such an emphasis also allows me to deal with the consideration of the representation of a lesbian culture which is ground-breaking and produced by an ‘innovative’ network and, by reminding ourselves that individuals are not solely responsible for discourses, can offer insight into the cultural relations of power in society.

Fairclough terms his approach Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to emphasise the nature of the critique of language and its relationship to wider social systems. For Fairclough (2013) critique is often based on normative values and often involves the assessment of what, has been, what is, and what could be with regard to society and a range of political positions. Therefore, in terms of my study, a consideration of how the promotional, textual and audience readings of the text can be understood in relation to social order and organisation. Critical research is about the investigation and explanation of how discourses inform both considerations of lesbian culture by wider society, and also internalised by lesbians individually. This gains credibility in terms of potential social understanding and change, as Fairclough (2013: 88) eloquently explains:

the critical analyst, in producing different interpretations and explanations of that area of social life, is also producing discourse. On what grounds can we say that this critical discourse is superior to the discourse which its critique is partly a critique of? The only basis for claiming superiority is providing explanations which have greater explanatory power. The explanatory power of a discourse (or a theory, which is a special sort of discourse) is its ability to provide justified explanations of as many features of the area of social life in focus as possible.

Critical Discourse Analysis allows us to analyse choice, construction, and the relation to power, economy, and politics related to lesbian culture. In turn, a focus on the audience response and opinion via online forums also allows us to see the

construction of any potentially resistive discourse to assess whether the construction of lesbian culture in contemporary society is an accepted and internalised discourse in terms of self-governmentality. Fairclough's model underpins the three distinct areas of focus of this thesis: that of the television text, its distinct production cultures and consumption cultures. Although I focus on the textual form of the programme, which allows access to information and insight in these areas, I produced a full discourse analysis that takes account of all the aspects of Fairclough's framework. There is no doubt that within any representation of lesbian culture there are various plausible discursive practices that *could* be included in a mainstream media text, but only a few are selected. Identifying these selections alongside a discussion of reasoning from media producers offers insight into economic orders of discourse prevalent in a production context, which mediates between sociocultural practices and the text.

The L Word is a particularly good case study to explore Fairclough's conceptualisation of the "interdiscursivity" of discourse theory (Fairclough, 1992: 10). As I have emphasised already I aim to explore how dominant social discourses relate to sexual identity, sexual practice, and gender through a case study of *The L Word* show. Analysing their inclusion in lesbian culture allows for an exploration of how that may be attributed to the surrounding repertoires or, in Fairclough's terms, the orders of discourse. These repertoires of ideas, representations, and meaningful forms of expression are the material available to producers, promotion teams, and the audience. These repertoires already have distinct power relations ordered within and between them. In thinking about the state of US television in the early twentieth century, I have not only thought about the determining elements of political economy, but also the discursive repertoires that we have available through analysis to think

through how *The L Word* could and should be produced. At the same time the politics of lesbian identity generates a completely different set of available ideas, terminology, and senses of possible productive activity. As I show in greater detail later, *The L Word* was produced, distributed, and consumed at the confluence of these orders of discourse and draws upon the respective repertoires in very different ways.

Analysing Media texts

This study analyses a number of types of texts. In order to understand the discourses present within and surrounding *The L Word* I have focused on a number of objects of study for analysis. I analysed the show itself alongside production discourses that were found through promotional interviews with and about television production staff involved with the creation and continuation of the show. I focused in particular on the Executive Producer Ilene Chaiken, who made the majority of creative decisions about the production. I examined all selecting thematic scenes and examples from episodes of the show to support and evidence my thesis. I also analysed ten collective examples of either online or magazine articles, and visual artefacts. It is important that such artefacts are considered in the context they are produced (for audiences, commercialism, promotion and fans). These artefacts were found online, for broadcast on television, and also in magazines. I did attempt to get one to one interviews with show production staff, but as any media scholar will confirm, it is immensely difficult to achieve such access in the commercial media.

These objects of study related to the production of the show were combined with an investigation of the responses and reaction of some audience for the show. The core data here was taken from Showtime's fan discussion forum

(<http://www.sho.com/site/lword/interrogation.do>), which contained 11,980 posts up to

March 1st, 2010. The series ended in the US on March 8th 2009, this meant that the timeframe I used to look at these postings was pertinent to the broadcast of the show in both the US and UK, and also encapsulated reactions to the subsequent webisodes from the final season of the show. My reasoning for the choice of this particular forum was that it was consistently used by fans and focused mainly on the show. In terms of placement, it was part of the Showtime web identity for the show and so I considered would be attractive to lesbian audiences who wanted to share information, and considerations of the show. The forums also appeared alongside the weekly appearances of the seven 'interrogation tapes' that accompanied the end of season six and so also generated discussion on this aspect of the text. The selection of the temporal aspects of these audience related artefacts was based upon peaks in audience reaction within the lifecycle of the show and based upon focus on the show as a text rather than general issues being discussed. This organisational tactic meant that the selection of relevant and focused posts was rationalised by topic.

Fairclough's own approach as a linguist is unsurprisingly mainly focused on linguistic elements of media texts. In the study of a television programme, and drawing on other methodologies from television studies and analyses of media representations where the visual is as important (if not more so) as the words, my focus is on both visual and verbal language; a focus which traditionally discourse analysis has avoided (Fowler, 1991, Bell and Garrett, 1998, Jensen, 2002 and Iedema, 2003). In relation to *The L Word* as television show, television is a highly visual medium and it would be methodologically unsound to approach this study concentrating only on the linguistic elements of discourse involved. What must be acknowledged here is the multimodal

nature of television, it being formed from audio, visual and text based elements. For MacDonald (2004: 4) expansive focus on language acknowledges that:

Visual signification of this kind forms part of the system of communicative practices intrinsic to discursive formation. Images also have the symbolic capacity to epitomise key historical moments in discursive form....Sound constructs mood and atmosphere: image anchors the discursive memory of the event.

Television also now expands outside ‘the box in the corner’ and the material available online (such as interviews or extra material) needs to be considered as a text. There is often supplementary material available online in linguistic form and so subsequently analysis should apply a number of perspectives to fully analyse and critique the text. A useful approach to the nature of expanding and developing media texts is outlined by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (1996) who suggest that a discourse semiotics approach is the most useful for tackling what are termed multimodal texts (which have a variety of ways of communicating with the audience). Their approach has striking similarities to that of Fairclough, but their multimodal approach allows for a wider consideration of what constitutes communication and acknowledges, “the specificities and common traits of semiotic modes which take account of...social, cultural and historical production” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001: 4).

In order to fully engage with the discourses in my selected artefacts I have taken a number of approaches. To aid in fully understanding the many ways in which a communicative event can construct a discourse there are a number of aspects that need to be taken into account. Moving away from the fictional television text *The L Word* and looking more closely at production and consumption contexts, there is a clear pattern in the material selected for analysis. Both the production and audience based material is heavily focused on conversations and interviews, although the

material is variable in nature (from being speech based to written in expression). This underlines the justification for the use of conversational analysis. There will need to be an account of tone, intonation, facial expression (where relevant) and also non-verbal elements. Such aspects of conversational analysis should be paired with more traditional semiotic modes of analysis, which will also take account of visual and aural elements of the text. What is clear here is that the analysis of texts subject to convergence is complex and involved.

Usefully, Gunther and Kress (1996, 2001) developed and outlined a number of concepts and tools that allows a media analyst to move beyond mere description of features of the text to synthesise information and analyse how these features of communication work together to construct meaning. This means that the focus on the language of the entire text is a key element of this study. The critical analysis involved in the variety of media texts presented in the study is not only used to highlight the meaning and symbolism of the texts, but also to highlight exactly how that meaning is constructed. As David Machin and Andrea Mayr (2012: 9) point out:

In Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) we are interested in showing how images, photographs, diagrams and graphics also work to create meaning, in each case describing the choices made by the author...The job of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis is to identify and reveal these choices through a careful process of description guided by the tool provided. But what is central to Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis is the sense of being critical...Texts will use linguistics and visual strategies that appear normal or natural on the surface, but which may in fact be ideological and seek to shape the representation of events and persons for particular ends.

As my choice of texts were wide ranging and consisted of magazine articles, online interviews (both written and visual), a television text, fan forums and social media the tools and approaches to MCDA had to be varied and diverse. A number of the texts

combined certain aspects of communication and each text required a unique approach to the analysis of the text. All texts contain some form of language and so that seems a natural and evident place to begin a discussion of an MCDA approach.

The basis of MCDA is founded upon the notion that language is an active choice. As producers of language, and therefore meaning, individuals have a number of paradigms they can select from to construct a position. This position allows an insight into the motivations and meanings intended by television producers, as we are not only interested in the meanings constructed, but how and why they are constructed in such a way. Kress (1985) highlights that the discursive choices that producers of meaning make is in itself ideologically significant and all linguistic choices can be political in the way that they construct and shape our understanding of the world, and in this particular instance, of lesbian identity and culture. This is widely known as the social semiotic view of discourse and is based on the idea that, “since language shapes and maintains a society’s ideas and values, it can also serve to create, maintain and legitimise certain kinds of social practices” (Machin and Mayr, 2012: 18). Analysing discursive choices will therefore provide an insight into the nature of knowledge and power around lesbian cultural production.

This foundation of social semiotics is also useful in outlining an approach and justification of focus in relation to the visual elements that construct meaning within the texts that have been analysed as part of this study. Again with regard to visual signs and codes there is the sense that meaning can only exist within the boundaries of language (Van Leeuwen, 2005) and its rules. To understand communication we must have an awareness of this. But to some extent the notion of visual communication and

realism becomes more pertinent when looking at such language. It can be claimed that the nature of visual codes and their link to verisimilitude and our experience of reality means that visual communication does not just represent the word to us, but instead it actually constitutes our understanding of society and ideologies (Machin and Mayr, 2012) and legitimates the practices within it. What social semiotics also involves is the consideration of the context of signs, which is why it is relevant for this study. Having been privy to lesbian culture and politics and also aware of the expectations of television commercialism, I used these types of knowledge in order to fully analyse and extricate an understanding of the constitution of meaning within the texts analysed, rather than a mere straight semiotic reading (Barthes, 1973). Obviously this goes some way to tackling the problem of visual language, in that it can be open to interpretation and suggestive rather than as definitive as linguistic elements of language. In order to fully understand visual language and intended meanings it is important to focus on how distinct groups are constructed through language choices, this is especially pertinent in relation to the variety of audiences watching and how they are constituted by producers both explicitly through interview and also implicitly through the televisual text and visual codes. This will offer some insight into the potential choices made by producers and their reasoning for a focus on a particular target audience at certain points in the show's production.

As the analysis will focus on very different modes of constructed meaning it is worth outlining some contextual considerations that need to be made when analysing using the MCDA method. During this research there was the analysis of interviews and discussions with 'real' people (both those involved in the production and also audiences), interviews involving fictional characters, and interactions in a constructed

realist world in the form of a fictional television text. It is therefore also important to outline how social semiotics and discursive practices can relate to everyday gestures which then form a sense of identity about particular roles (as in a television producer and their link to the wider commercial industry), or cultural groups (as in the characters in *The L Word* constituting what seems to be a developing lesbian stereotype). Overall, what is relevant are the discursive similarities or disagreements, which have become obvious across the range of networks of social relations explored in this study. It is these discursive intricacies that will uncover what constitutes *The L Words* lesbian culture, some of the reasoning why it was constructed in such a way, and the patterns in the way audiences received, read, understood and took pleasure in the text. This will require detailed and careful description of the semiotic choices that the textual producers of meaning made in constructing each selected artefact. This approach can then aid in uncovering how these choices may offer alternative ideologies about female homosexuality and sexuality issues, or whether such choices serve the needs of commercial institutions to the detriment of political awareness and diversity.

Analysing the TV text

In terms of the televisual text, it was also important to consider the construction of everyday identity. This is particularly pertinent, as during its early broadcast *The L Word* was considered a ground-breaking show in that it was challenging a lack of lesbian characters on television. This very context of production means that the ‘everyday life’ constructed for the variety of lesbian characters needs particular focus. These constructions have been carefully chosen and selected for portrayal based on initial and in-depth considerations of the ‘everyday’ practices foreground in the show.

In terms of analysing the television text, it would have been impossible to analyse and detail every theme or narrative from six seasons of *The L Word*. In order to enable a detailed analysis that was focused and thematic, I selected a variety of scenes, which were representative of a plurality of discourses that had been foregrounded by both the audience and producers as being of importance and concern. Obviously this took some initial synthesis of themes and materials, but this ensures that the thesis was solidly developed and not overloaded with description. The scenes selected were also indicative of the narrative highlights of the show (again in relation to audience concerns) and so mention may be made of similar narrative positions or clarifications without a wider discussion of further scenes. This is to avoid repetition or over-elaboration of certain aspects of the thesis.

Clearly television is a visual text, but there are a variety of factors that need to be considered, as there are a variety of ways that the television text communicates. This sense of communication also alters depending on the 'type' of broadcast text. This study also looks at filmed interviews and so what follows here was also considered when analysing that particular form of communication. Firstly we need to think clearly about the way image contributes to the making of meaning. Here it is useful again to utilise the semiotic approach of Roland Barthes (1977), especially in terms of how signs construct ideological meaning. This theory allows us to consider what ideas and concepts are connoted and ideological regarding the combination of a variety of complex signs that we see on the screen and Barthes' approach also provides us with a number of terms for describing and uncovering the constituted discourse. My approach to uncovering this discourse was narrowed by also taking a number of other

televisual and narrative factors into account. Scenes and characters were also considered in relation to their attributes. This meant there was a distinct focus on the clothes they were wearing and objects that surrounded them. These objects could be in their home, workplace, or social setting. Clearly these attributes also link to social status and have some bearing on the semiotic development of stereotypes, this is especially important with such an under-represented group.

Meaning construction was also related to the setting that characters and narratives took place in. This was important, as it may have uncovered whether particular identities were linked to particular surroundings and thus encouraged a distinct ideological consideration of a specific part of lesbian culture. Lighting, framing and editing can all have rhetorical impact in relation to settings and this also formed part of the description of the pertinent scenes selected.

Clearly television also involves characterisation and I felt that this was an important area of my research, especially as I was considering *The L Word* as leading the way in terms of the formation of lesbian stereotypes which could be seen as challenging or reiterative. There is no neutral way of representing an individual. Characterisation is a key representational strategy in television culture and characters are seen as an easy way to communicate a particular stereotype or aspect of culture by aligning an individual identity with certain kinds of discourses. This has been explored across a wide variety of studies involving what can be termed 'social actors' portrayed through what Van Dijk refers to as representational and referential strategies (1993). For Atkin (1992) these are particularly pertinent when relating to minority groups, and for Lee and Carpenter (2007) different representations of age and adults and so the

consideration of this aspect of the work is well supported by the theoretical focus of the discourse analysis field. Characterisation allows certain aspects of the social world to be highlighted or hidden. Again, in this instance such choices have been made through production processes and a consideration of these choices alongside the reasoning of production staff may offer some insight into the commercial pressures which have led to the development and construction of lesbian culture through *The L Word*.

Van Leeuwen (1996) offers a variety of ways in which characters or social actors can be considered. I selected what I felt were the most worthwhile to this study, as many of these approaches tended to be better suited to factual or news based content that often forms the basis of discursive analysis. Van Leeuwen's approach allows researchers to apply a systematic approach to how characters can be classified and also to think about the ideological impact of the resultant discourses. Firstly Van Leeuwen highlights that individuals can be personalised or impersonalised through meaning construction. Van Leeuwen's examples link more succinctly to linguistic construction but in relation to *The L Word*, it was possible to apply this approach to visual language too. There are a wide variety of characters in the show, but we are invited to become more knowledgeable and aware of particular characters through rhetorical devices, camera work and narrative inclusion. They are put at the forefront of the discursive construction and lead the way in constituting a lesbian focused fictional world. This is further enhanced by Van Leeuwen's consideration of concepts such as individualisation, specification, and anonymisation (1996) which can make audiences and readers feel more closely aligned with certain characters and forgetful

of others who pass through the narrative only to be subject to a brief and relatively inconsequential inclusion.

I also found that the notion of functionalisation (Van Leeuwen, 1996) to be useful in my reading of characters. Van Leeuwen outlines that this concept relates to the actions of an individual; they are then understood by their actions and what they do. I consider that this can be related to generic meanings around certain parts of lesbian culture and this was particularly useful when considering how sexual practice was portrayed within the show, and also the potential heteronormative practices, and gendering of some of the characters. In this sense functionalism allowed for the consideration of patterns or orders of discourse which related to particular parts of lesbian culture. This allowed for the discussion of these thematically in relation to wider discourses expressed paratextually.

For Fairclough (1993) the combination of input related to production, consumption, and text also allowed for a consideration of suppression of what is absent from the text is as important as what is present. Audience study has been useful in this research as consumers of television are now much more vocal about their textual expectations and this raised a number of themes around suppression within the text and wider audience expectations. Certainly a consideration of these concepts allowed for a much more rigorous and systematic approach to the television text, whilst also allowing for links to a variety of other types of discourses from the wider CDA framework outlined by Fairclough.

Analysing interviews, magazine articles and audience forums

As outlined above each type of artefact will require a specific approach. In terms of looking at interview material, it is vital to remember that the individual is representing themselves in a certain position and role – this is the very reason for selection of some artefacts in this thesis. Participants will clearly use signs and codes that serve their needs and purposes within a particular situation and this has been considered within the contextualisation and exposition of results. This also applies to analysing the discourses used by audiences, although it is worth bearing in mind that they do not have the means of dissemination that television producers have in terms of promoting both their product and prioritising the considerations of television creatives about the creative process. The artefacts considered are not created in a vacuum and it is necessary to also consider which signs and codes may be employed to work in the favour of the ‘speaker’ or meaning creator. If this does not happen it may be that the nature of the discourse may not be fully explored.

With regard to the interviews that involve or refer to producers, or link to promotional content and find their root in the commercial television industry, there are some distinct considerations to be made. These points are also relevant for the consideration of large amounts of audience-produced forums. During the analysis of the interviews there was a particular focus on lexical choices, although for the reasons previously outlined other visual codes were considered in order to give a full contextualised analysis. Lexical choices are important when considering the responsibility individuals and institutions take for, in this case, production choices. For Fairclough (2000) language can be used to conceal responsibility or clearly allocate it. Interviews and online forums are clearly about answering questions, queries and outlining a

position and this was the focus of analysis in relation to these particular types of artefact. Lexical choices in themselves can link to a particular cultural group and give a sense of authority or understanding. Leitner (1980) imparts that a focus on the importance of lexical factors can make links to particular types of audiences, thus giving the impression of groups being connected and having an intrinsic link to an audience through topic focus.

As interviews spanned the duration of the show there was also a focus on what Fowler (1991) considers to be possible overlexicalisation of certain terms or concepts and aiming to understand if there were any distinct patterns related to this. This meant looking for a density of terms that related to a particular concept. As such, this is seen as a clear marker for pre-occupation with a certain group or concept for the author of the meaning and flags potential concerns for producers or audiences; it evidences anxiety, concern or importance to the author. Conversely it was also important to consider the suppression of certain terms, or what is considered to be lexical absence where terms I may expect to be present, or topics that would likely be discussed were absent. Such a perspective can also mean a consideration of the editing of filmed interviews where discussions were cut short due to time restrictions, but result in a lack of clarity or expansion in relation to particular topics.

When considering interviews that production and industry related participants create for the purposes of informing fans and the audience, it can be asserted that there will be a level of rhetoric and persuasion employed. The purpose of producer interviews in the case of this study is often to both inform audiences and persuade of the potential reasoning for narrative development, or the impending absence of certain characters.

For this reason I focused on the rhetoric of the interviews undertaken. Considering linguistic rhetoric entails detailed focus on the use and selection of language involved. Fairclough (1995a) highlights that metaphors are an important part of linguistic communication and persuasion so should be considered carefully as they often mask underlying power relations whilst also giving the sense that they are uncovering them. He claims that this is because they make complex and distinct processes seem abstract and general. So for instance, if there was some allusion to production processes in my interviews, they may often be dealt with using a metaphor; understanding this may offer a greater insight into the pressures of commercial television when it isn't directly addressed in the interview.

I also considered that production discourses might be constructed as institutional, rather than personal in the production based interviews, this being particularly pertinent when dealing with audience criticism. This led to a wider consideration of what Hodge and Kress (1979) refer to as the functional use of metonymy and modality in both the production and audience based artefacts. For audiences, the use of metonymy could be used to create a sense of a 'group' which were asking for particular changes or to enhance the construction of their power in relation to the show. With regard to production interviews it allowed for the consideration of how 'blame' or 'responsibility' may be constructed in relation to aspects of the texts that were either celebrated or attacked by the audience. The use and consideration of metonymy in this instance could help conceal and defend, or increase and attack. For Hodge and Kress the notion of modality (1993) is the expression of personal opinion through discourse and importantly can signal doubt from participants. The employment of these strategies meant the discourses selected were considered in

depth and took account of potential concealed meanings. Fairclough (2003: 166) calls this aspect of modality, “texturing of identities” and posits that this allows an insight into how a discourse may evidence caution or commitment. In this instance the discourse is not only informative, but it enables the analyst to consider the relationship between the participant and discursive meaning in far more depth.

What must also be considered when taking this approach is that discourse differs from a strictly semiotic and ideological approach (such as that taken by Fiske and Hartley, 1978) and the analyst must be aware that they cannot stand outside discursive practice that is occurring; the subjectivity of the researcher is relevant in this or any discourse analysis (Russell, 1999). This is especially central to this study as lesbian politics and culture (and related discursive practices) is an integral part of my social existence and construction of my subjectivity. In this sense discourse analysis is an advancement of structuralist ideological investigation. Such discourses have shaped my considerations and experiences, and I believe they only offer further insight into the area of lesbian culture. Personally, I envisage this knowledge and understanding of lesbian culture to be a benefit when discussing this particular culture and social context and that the outline of Critical Discourse Analysis and wider considerations of language in visual media goes some way to exploring all the discursive angles of this research.

Why the audience?

Audience focused research can be used to investigate the meanings audiences read from *The L Word* and highlight their reactions and considerations of the text. This is in order to give a specific insight into the readings of lesbian audiences in relation to

their identity construction and acceptance or otherwise of *The L Word*. This approach was fostered to allow depth and insight to be continually developed from the more traditional textual findings of this study. There was also some consideration of straight audiences (although at times it was difficult to ascertain the sexuality of ‘neutral’ posters who didn’t make their sexuality apparent through their postings). Lesbian audience responses were also only highlighted as so if they explicitly labelled themselves as lesbian, this is an evident limitation of the study. It would have been possible to become involved in the forums and ask about the participants’ sexuality, but as I outline below, I wanted the process to be as organic as possible. The responses I gained were self-motivated and in direct response to the show and its surrounding discourses rather than in response to research questions.

The perspective adopted for the purposes of this study finds foundation in the development of audience study, and the relationship between texts and audiences developed by the Birmingham Centre of Contemporary Cultural Studies from the 1970s onwards. This particular focus doesn’t account for the positivist approaches to media effects as this would be incompatible with discourse analysis and the notion that discourses and thus the production of knowledge and power can be ever changing and possibly resistive and empowering for audiences.

It is now widely accepted that the audience is active in Media and Cultural Studies. Stuart Hall’s seminal work *Encoding/Decoding* (1973) clearly posited the audience as active with the meaning of a media text being in the very act of consumption. Hall outlined the various ways that audiences could construct meaning, even allowing for an option to construct an ‘oppositional’ reading of the text, making them active in

dismissing and even rejecting the intended encoding meaning from the producer. This particular study firmly encouraged the development of audience studies as an academic area and took account of the variety of cultural positions from which audiences consume; essentially this position encourages us to take into account how cultural factors can impact on meaning. The audience study aspect of this thesis is intended to make sense of audiences where meaning is decoded as oppositional or negotiated, and how identity is understood if meaning is decoded as preferred. This particular perspective is pertinent to my study as politics for an emerging cultural group such as lesbians is of great importance – the notion of what the constructed culture means and may mean for the experience of lesbian life is central to the notion that discourses can self regulate as well as encourage particular sorts of stereotypes and expectations about particular groups. I don't wish to labour the point of active audiences in this section of the thesis as my study assumes that this audience is active by the nature of the activity analysed.

What should also be taken account of is that the experience of consumption has altered greatly and this potentially has an impact on media messages and the practice of decoding for audiences. This means that the model of reception analysis must be a dynamic one. An audience analysis of *The L Word* does not just now involve the discussion of the singular television text with audiences, but also of surrounding examples of discourse such as websites, magazine articles and interactions with the text on a variety of levels. Audiences are not to be considered as being spoken to from one position but instead need to be considered amongst a variety of discourses, with each potentially impacting on the decoding and understanding of *The L Word* and their position in the world as lesbians. As Lull argues (1988: 17), “viewers not only

make their own interpretations of shows, they also construct the situations in which viewing takes place and the ways in which acts of viewing and programme content are put to use.”

Clearly by looking at audience reactions online, it is important to consider the context of these responses, the interactions between audience members, and also consider that there may be some impact on audience ‘feedback’ due to these reasons. This is why thematic chapters were developed in line with a review of the producer, audience and textual discourses. There is some expected imbalance of focus on each of these distinct areas within each findings chapter. This is due to the level of content present in each of the areas, as this cannot be expected to be in complete balance in every chapter area.

Considering the audience online.

The exploration of fan cultures and active audiences is a clear move away from the consideration of consumers as passive ‘dupes’ merely subjected to the whims and needs of a commercial industry. The seminal work *Textual Poachers* by Henry Jenkins (1992) firmly stressed the importance of the activity of fans and also highlighted their interaction with fan communities. The work highlighted the cultural work of fans through such output as slash fiction and conventions. Jenkins is important in that he provides clear evidence that the consumption of texts expands beyond the screen or ‘water cooler’ moments and has now found an embodiment elsewhere; online.

Although this work does not explore fan practices such as fan fiction, it does explore the reaction of audiences to the portrayal of a variety of characters and their sexuality. This could be considered a form of fandom as the members of the forum engage with the notion of what Pullen (2000: 54) calls, “an alternative community that rebels against mainstream norms and creates a space for...open communication”. Although it is not evident in all the postings that were considered that fans engaged on the all encompassing level of ‘Trekkies’ where fandom is a huge aspect of social life (Tulloch and Jenkins, 1995).

For this research I selected a particular site with a number of online forums that had been active. According to Pullen (2000) online spaces have allowed for fandom and discussion of television texts to become more accessible and mainstream. Cyberspace is a location where researchers can gain access to a wealth of information about audience opinions as it has enabled there to be a space where fans can chat, share interests and proliferate quickly. My selection was focused on capturing not only the die-hard fan who belong to forums which also had slash fiction and merchandising opportunities, but also the less active audience member who may post to social networking areas (such as the Facebook page which then linked to the Showtime hosted area) and not feel they have to undertake other fan activity. This decision was motivated by this study being more about audience reaction and related discourses than fan activity and fan created content. I felt that this approach would give more balance to the study and be more representative of the wider audience.

The initial count of posts to the Showtime site, which also included the Facebook linked posts was over 60,500. This was not a manageable amount of posts for this

study and in this instance it became obvious that not all of these posts were focused on the aspects of *The L Word*, its textual meaning, or particular reactions to promotional and creative issues involved. Thus, I implemented a system to break down the amount of posts, so that the ones analysed would be relevant to the research. Initially this meant that I dismissed some posts based on the topic that they were posted under – many topic areas were not related to the text of *The L Word* directly, and, for instance, were related to the lesbian social scene in various locations around the work, or lesbian parenting. As these were not focused directly on the show, I didn't select them for consideration or closer analysis. Once this initial purge was undertaken, the total amount of posts remaining for consideration was approximately 11,980 posts (up until March 2010). I then analysed overall topic threads in terms of content mentions for the most focused information in relation to textual meaning, branding, promotion or reception of *The L Word*. This was a laborious process but I felt that an unobtrusive approach to the research would be the most productive, as the information that follows will support.

In essence then, the research was a form of virtual ethnography. Virtual ethnography has been seen as a risky and controversial approach to research. Christine Hine (2008) highlights some specific concerns about the nature of virtual ethnography. Of course, the easy accessibility of online material makes it an attractive prospect for any researcher. There is a wealth of information and my access to the number of participants in the study would be severely restricted if on a 'in person' basis. One key aspect of virtual ethnography, which can possibly undermine these positive factors, is the notion of verifiability (Bell, 2001). In this instance there is no way I can verify the claims of participants in terms of their sexuality or gender, but I took

significant time to immerse myself in the forums being studied as outlined and recommended by Taylor (1999) and selected participants who had a variety of postings which reiterated their stated identity.

Although I don't consider that I took a significant and directional part in any of the forums as recommended by Hine (2000) I did take part in a non-researcher capacity, often posting my personal thoughts on the episodes but not unveiling myself as a researcher. This decision was quite context-specific as from early experience in 2008 on another 'test' forum related to *The L Word* (thelword.wikifoundry.com) where I had taken part as a viewer and then highlighted my research intentions, responses were not particularly positive – or were limited and soon my questions went unanswered. It seemed that on this occasion that a number of posters were not happy to have me researching and analysing their viewing habits, considerations, or received meanings in relation to *The L Word*,

Why are you asking these questions? Are you some sort of guy perv pretending to be one of us we aint your guinea pigs or here for that we are trying to talk about this that really means something to us so butt out! Don't think this is some sort of pickup place for your fantasy

Chickysgirl, January 7th 2008.

This particular instance was quite representative of the responses I gained to questions about *The L Word*. This often seemed to be anchored in previous experiences online, where lesbian participants had discussed or trusted matters to others, to find they were misrepresenting their identity for other reasons. This is similar to the experience of a Hudson-Smith (2002) who saw changed behaviour during a virtual ethnography, which even led to researcher stalking. For this reason I located other forums which were suitable and changed my approach. I felt that becoming a participant-observer allowed me to escape the label of the 'lurker', which

Heath (1999) claims is a one-way process where the results can become detached from the research. It also allowed me to fulfil the expectations of ethnography where I could, as Spadley (1980: 54) recommends, “maintain explicit awareness of everything that is going on”. The notion of the researcher as ‘lurker’ in Netnography is one that has been heavily criticised in relation to research. Christine Hine (2000) argues that visible activity is central to online ethnography as the ethnographer then mirrors the activity of the group and gains greater understanding of the interaction. In essence Hine claims that ‘lurkers’ don’t act in a meaningful way in an online forum. I also didn’t want to leave the forum in a situation which would have disadvantaged other potential researchers; audiences go to forum areas to interact with each other and post opinion, their primary concern shouldn’t and isn’t likely to be academic research.

My emphasis was on collaboration with the audience members but I was keen not to prompt them into any particular position or expand an interaction into something that wouldn’t have occurred naturally to them. I am aware that my participation as a researcher would have transformed the forum and potentially closed down certain opinions or led the discussion in a particular direction. This is why I foregrounded my identity and activity as a viewer first and foremost and I feel that this had a positive impact on the research and audience discourses available. It also enhanced my understanding of the group whilst enabling me to explore my own feelings and readings of the text. This research is about the considerations of the audience and I didn’t want to put the detail available at any risk; my research really relied upon the generosity of the audience in terms of their opinion. So, in essence I didn’t want my presence as a researcher to lead to what would constitute a fabrication of results. This

approach combined with the decisions below aimed to maintain sensitivity to the context of the forum involved.

I felt comfortable keeping my researcher identity quiet as all the forums involved in the study were publically available and were not subscription or password protected. This meant that I felt happy about the ethics of using online 'handles' or pseudonyms, which were often created in such a way that maintained anonymity. This research intends to only identify participants in a way that they publically and openly identify on the sites selected and to make them anonymous on the rare occasion that they have used their full name. This is particularly pertinent in relation to virtual ethnography and online material. Discussions about sexuality can be considered controversial, even dangerous depending on the legal position of the country from which you are posting. Meho (2006) claims that the Internet often encourages people to post material or discuss topics more openly than they would in face-to-face situations. Whilst this is a positive aspect of the research in informational terms it is important to ensure that participants are not explicitly identified if they have asserted an online 'handle'.

My data collection consisted of noting key patterns and themes within the discussion on the forums through reflective field notes taken at the time of posting or in the days following, my focus was during 'posting-heavy' periods. These periods tended to fall after an episode, the end of a season, or the commencement of the season. I felt that this gave me a set time period in which to collate a thematic understanding and also some examples that encapsulated a theme that audiences were motivated to post about. This made the management of immense amounts of data an easier task. Of course, there is a distinct limitation to this approach in that it wasn't physically

possible to read and make notes on every posting to the forum, but I still believe that this allowed a wider ranging analysis in terms of both demographic and opinion than face-to-face interviews or focus group.

In my discussion of method set out in this chapter I outlined not only the approach I took in conceiving meaning within an analysis of *The L Word* as a pantextual symbolic good, but I also demonstrated what considerations I took into account in conducting such an analysis. In the next three chapters I present the results of my primary research. I organise my argument in part around the lifecycle of the series itself. Chapter six starts off looking at seasons one and two, to explore how the show was presented to its audience in its core televisual text and the promotional material that supported it, and how it came to be understood by a particularly vociferous group of the programme's viewers. Chapter seven takes a broader sweep of the whole series to focus on the key idea of heteronormativity, which I argue allows us to understand both the way that the narrative and representations of the show, and the audience members' discussion are structured and how they can be productively related to the debates about lesbian identity which, in part, it emerged. Finally, in chapter eight, I explore the final fifth and sixth seasons, the two stretches of narrative that attempt to conclude the emerging organised representation of lesbian life. I weave the evidence from the different forms of analysis through these chapters in order to better present the individuals they can tell us about meaning in *The L Word*, but also to highlight how they relate to each other in generating a dynamic pantextual semiosis, rooted in changing political economy of US television and in a long history of identity and sexual politics of lesbian activism.

CHAPTER SIX

By lesbians, for lesbians – seasons one and two of *The L Word*

Before the initial opening of season of *The L Word* in 2004, there were a number of prominent interviews in the media which introduced the show to its audience and foregrounded the discursive uniqueness of the show. There was also some distinct reaction by lesbian audiences on fan forums, setting out their expectations of the show, and articulating the potential value of the show to them as individuals. I explore these interviews and online comments from the early lifecycle of the show as being explicitly located within the wider developments of lesbian cultural and political theory that I traced in chapter three. This chapter, therefore, explores how the producer's initial promotional discourses around the show constructed the distinct meaning that the storylines and lesbian content of the show were in some way part of gay liberation rather than assimilation. This was achieved through discourses that constructed the show as unique, challenging and also familiar, in a cultural and personal sense, to the lesbian audience. This was a situation that arguably hadn't occurred in terms of programming framing before *The L Word*.

This section of the thesis, therefore, incorporates a discursive analysis of the early seasons of the show in terms of textual construction. My aim here is to highlight the initial stages of a dichotomy that started to appear around lesbianism in a televisual text and promotional material that was ultimately produced within a political economy of profit-maximising cable television. I argue that the textual meanings constructed within the core televisual text did not always adhere to the early promotional promise that the series offer a narrative that emerged from, and represented gay liberation. As I evidence in later chapters, these discourses became increasingly incoherent at the level of the show, and increasingly problematic for some of its audience, in future seasons.

I start with an initial focus on the promotional material and interviews that surrounded the first two seasons of the show. This is followed by an analysis of the audience reactions to both the launch and early seasons of the show. Finally I outline the key discourses asserted in relation to lesbian representation and identity and consider how these can be interpreted in relation to the political models and context outlined in chapter three.

Promotional discourses - visibility above all else

Initially, many of the promotional texts produced for the show were edited from wider interviews with Ilene Chaiken, the executive producer of the show, along with quotations from members of the cast. As I will demonstrate, these were essential pantextual aspects of *The L Word*, framing the series through a number of key discursive tropes which were also the discursive repertoires for the discussions at the forefront of initial audience consideration. This position was especially relevant to the lesbian audience who were seeking out information about the show from the moment that it was announced as being commissioned by Showtime. A pertinent example of this position was an interview undertaken by well-known three time Oscar nominated actress Laura Linney as part of a US PBS (Public Service Television) broadcast. This choice of host immediately lends discursive credibility to the promotional material. 'In the Life' (PBS, 2012: [online]) is a gay and lesbian news magazine aired on 130 PBS stations across the USA and so is accessible to all gay and lesbian viewers in the United States of America, it was also widely hosted online for further audience access. This exemplar segment was screened between season one and season two of the show. What is most interesting in terms of this particular broadcast is that it is specifically aimed at lesbian viewers and clearly celebrates the cultural uniqueness of

the show and acknowledges the industry reluctance to easily embrace lesbian representations,

Laura Linney (show host): Over the past few years, Showtime Networks has introduced two shows that not only feature queer characters but are also set in queer cultures, and one of those shows, "The L Word" is also the first commercial television show to develop major lesbian characters at all. So tonight, "In the Life" goes behind-the-scenes for the new season of "The L Word".

[Shot of the thelwordonline.com website. Another shot of several people casually gathered around a table in a production meeting. Photo of Ilene Chaiken on set, talking on her cell phone.]

Ilene Chaiken (Executive Producer, "The L Word"): I sat down with a couple of executives and I said, "I know this is kind of a crazy idea but I just think we should do a lesbian ensemble drama." (chuckling) And they kind of looked at me and concurred that it was a crazy idea.

[Photos of Leisha Hailey, posing for the camera in a black shirt. Shot of the cover of "The Advocate" featuring Hailey on the cover.]

Leisha Hailey (Alice Pieszecki, "The L Word"): I didn't have any representation of somebody gay on TV so I would go into this sort of fantasy world when I watched television. For instance, "Facts of Life." I really thought that Jo and Blair, like, had something special going on. (laughs) It just goes to show that when you're left with nothing you have to sort of make do.

[Shot of "The Advocate" cover. The caption reads: "How a little lesbian drama exploded into TV's hottest new phenomenon".]

Ilene Chaiken: I have some recollection of them saying, "I don't think we could ever sell this to the suits upstairs."

[Shot of the people gathered around the table in a meeting again. Shot of the cover of "Curve" magazine, featuring the characters of Bette, Jenny and Kit on the cover. Quick shot of the article inside, and a photo of the characters of Bette and Tina standing together. Shot of someone writing on a copy of a script. Photo of the cast taken on the Venice Beach boardwalk. Photo of the cast at a premiere party.]

Through the linguistic and visual discourses available a sense of professionalism is initially constructed around Ilene Chaiken, we see her via long shot in a production meeting; this framing highlights Chaiken as the driving force and creator behind *The*

L Word, she is also linked verbally as such in reiteration. At the same time we are told via narration that Chaiken had little expectation that executives would take up the idea of such a themed show. This puts an emphasis on Chaiken as negotiator and persuader for gay visibility against the habits and notions of what may or may not be a commercial success for a media producer. The choice of words around the show being “a crazy idea” reflects a prioritisation that gay representation and resultant identity politics is something not heavily explored by mainstream commercial television as it may not be deemed acceptable in a commercially driven world focused on the maintenance of the mainstream audience.

This particular commissioning battle was a reflection of the changing nature of US commercial television during the 2000s where Jaramillo (2012: 169) claims, “many basic cable networks have sought to attach intangible qualities to their names in order to cultivate loyal audiences.” Although it is clear that the US televisual landscape was altering at the time *The L Word* was produced, this is something that Chaiken doesn’t acknowledge discursively in an open sense and the promotional discourse is one that is selective in terms of information for the lesbian audience. Instead she discursively foregrounds the ‘problem’ of commissioning at this particular historical moment and linguistically highlights the brevity of the situation through tone and choice of lexis. This enhances the sense of a notion of celebration and thus foregrounds the construction of a unique moment in television history.

Pertinently other scholars have argued that both prior to and during this era there was actually a rise in branding around cable networks in order to deal with the increasing issue of the fragmented audience market (Caldwell, 2006). This branding has been focused on what Temporal refers to as an establishment of brand, “values and

associations that are wrapped around the basic product or service” (2008: 43) which have linked to the emotional and identification needs of the audience (Selznick, 2009). Arguably this commissioning would have been a sound branding and financial move for a network such as Showtime, whose own branding tagline as far back as 1998 was ‘No Limits’. The promotional discourse encapsulated by Chaiken could be considered a wider link to the emotional needs of the lesbian audience within the context of the fragmenting market and targeting of audiences outlined in chapter two of this study. This particular lesbian focused discourse was not linked to Showtime’s overall branding (challenging and at the limit of representation). Instead, in such instances *The L Word* is promoted as beyond current ideological cultural limitations.

The combination of this personalised discourse with *The L Word* actress Leisha Hailey’s insight about the distinct lack of lesbian representation on TV (in a personal sense) aids in the construction of *The L Word* as not only discursively unique but also an emotional experience for lesbian viewers. The promotional discourse is focused specifically at this point on lesbian identity rather than a wider queered range of identities such as bisexual, transgender or transsexual. This is underpinned by Hailey’s constructed status as the only openly lesbian actress involved with the programme. These promotional discourses position *The L Word* as discursively focused on the celebration and identification of homosexuality by lesbians rather than a vehicle for challenging the heterosexual norm through a wider range of queer identities, although this would not be the continuing textual nature of the show in forthcoming seasons as I shall discuss in chapter eight.

The combination of such discourses place the creator of the show as persuasive in relation to the cultural worth of the show for women who identify as lesbian, she is

also highlighted as personally responsible for some of the politically challenging representations it offers. In other promotional reports Chaiken seems to acknowledge the difficulty of lesbian representation in the US mainstream media as she recognises that the shows cast are typically Hollywood in their feminine aesthetic but, assures us that, “I think everyone will be represented eventually” (Ferber and Sabo, 2003: [online]). This promise is, again, political in nature and embraces the gay liberation mentality that visibility should be a target for gay culture. By asserting that this situation can be reached in a matter of time Chaiken is linking *The L Word* with the possibility that there could be the provision of a wider representation of lesbian lives that are unseen or have not been represented thus far by mainstream US television.

Chaiken is clearly constructed as an individual who represents the creative production and mentality of *The L Word* as an entire production as a whole. Though these promotional discourses she is highlighted as a media maker held in high regard. She is speaking to and for the lesbian audience. Her discourse dominates the promotional material and so is displayed as critically important to the show’s development in a personal sense; she is a figurehead. The meaning that is made through her choice of lexis is persuasive, dynamic and central to the development of the show; even though this is also flippant and non-threatening in terms of the casual visual rhetorical presentation in the PBS segment. Whilst the presentation is unthreatening in nature and not verbally political in terms of discourse she is portrayed as centrally involved at various developmental stages of the project and as central to the initial development of a discursively unique media text. This uniqueness is underpinned by the pantextual labelling of *The L Word* as a “crazy idea”, a meaning constructed completely outside the narrative of the text.

The visual choices that we see in the clip display an institutional discourse within an institutional context. The audiences are clearly expected to link Chaiken with the text produced by drawing on the inferential frameworks (Koester, 2010: 4) displayed. This pantextual promotion is also mapped in mainstream articles such as those contained in *US Vogue*, who don't actually interview Chaiken and the production team directly but highlight the distinct lesbian qualities of the newly launched show in the face of the potential exploitation of representations of sexuality, "Is *The L Word* a lesbian manifesto or pansexual exploitation? It's produced by Ilene Chaiken and directed mostly by Rose Troche, whose 1994 film *Go Fish* established impeccably lesbian credentials." (Buck, 2004: 256)

In this instance, *The L Word* is framed as authentic in terms of its lesbian culture through its connection to only two of its production team. This discursive authenticity is linked to producers usually external to mainstream cultural products and who have previously been externally 'queered' through their involvement New Queer Cinema. This product is linguistically reclaimed by lesbian culture and the notion of authenticity. It is also something positioned as 'new' to mainstream US television, the US public and thus is seen as dangerously anti-commercial; a topic that commercial institutions would usually want to avoid or steer away from; unless the show fulfilled the expectations of exploitation. This position is further referenced and reinforced through the image of Chaiken's idea as inciting some sort of discomfort or fear in the hearts of American television executives. *The L Word* is further constructed as something that hasn't been produced or considered before or since (Cleahane, 2009: [online]) and is described by lesbian actress and writer Guinevere Turner as, "the first of its kind" in the season one DVD extra material *The L Word – Defined* (Chaiken, 2005). Turner's viewpoint is particularly pertinent as she was formerly heavily linked

to New Queer Cinema productions and joined *The L Word* during its first season as both actress and writer; this further enhances the discourse of lesbian authenticity linked to the show.

In summary, at this early point in the development of the show Chaiken is constructed as the driving force behind the production and the topical uniqueness of the show as authentically and politically 'lesbian'. This was further underlined by shots in the PBS produced segment of *Curve* (one of the best selling US lesbian magazines), *The Advocate* (a top-selling US gay and lesbian publication) and a number of shots of cast members gaining attention at premiere events and being constructed as popular celebrities.

A discourse of celebration is constructed through a discussion of the final commissioning of the show. It is posited as an unexpected situation; as groundbreaking ideologically. This particular discourse reflects a distinct political sensibility that only serves to enhance a construction of Chaiken's actions as politically motivated and beneficial to lesbian identity on a broad scale. In relation to gay and lesbian visibility politics Dan Brouwer (1998: 118) highlights that, "... 'being seen' and 'being heard' are beneficial and often crucial for individuals or a group to gain greater social, political, cultural or economic legitimacy". Chaiken's discourse of production process highlights these key political points and the importance of the commissioning of the show for a lesbian focused 'ourselves'. However it is worth considering that Chaiken was more than aware that this promotional discourse was being produced for a lesbian audience (potentially the viewers). It was this audience that needed to be maintained and their interest piqued to ensure the show would be initially successful in terms of viewership and Showtime's brand identity as 'No

Limits'. In later chapters an alternate construction of this promotional discourse for mainstream viewers will be explored within the context of the potential commercial development of other Chaiken led projects and the end of *The L Word*. What is clear in this part of the thesis is that the discourses produced by Chaiken are clearly framed by the needs of the show (and producer) in a very particular temporal location.

The notion of challenging television was continued in the reporting of Chaiken throughout the production and broadcast of the first and second seasons. As the executive producer continued to comment publically during the second season premiere, she often referred to timely events surrounding the legal ruling that gay marriages could go ahead in New York City. Chaiken's discourse during interview and appearances at this time is continually framed around gay and lesbian focused political events and the standing of lesbian culture in Western society. When asked for comment on the show and its political context by *The Villager* weekly newspaper (Schmalbach, 2005: [online]) which serves Downtown Manhattan:

With quiet and determined pride Chaiken said, 'In the face of a political climate that is stunningly, regressively oppressive to women, to gays, to any culturally marginalized or unprivileged class of people, the need to go on proclaiming ourselves and shouting out our stories is ever more compelling'.

The tone of this discourse is clear, and the lexical choices of Chaiken highlight the political nature of what she believes the show provides. She clearly chooses words such as 'regressively oppressive', 'culturally marginalized' and 'underprivileged' to fully foreground what she feels is happening to 'our' lesbian communities in the wider Western world. She contextualises the narrative worth of *The L Word* within the context of 'our' equal rights for marriage and so further frames it as politically important through proclamation and visibility. The order of discourse created is not

one merely of promotion. In this particular instance promotional aspects of the interview and appearance are overshadowed by the political nature and motivation for Chaiken's production. By utilising these terms she makes a clear distinction between the experience of lesbian and heterosexual culture and sets up an ideological difference in life experience. This only enhances the sense of what Bakhtin and Holquist (1981) would refer to as a lesbian 'discourse community' which surrounds a group of people with ('our') common interests and concerns that impact on members of the group. Chaiken clearly locates the text within contemporary lesbian experience and political movement.

Chaiken and cast as part of the lesbian community

In contrast to the aforementioned PBS clip, *The Villager* is a publication that is aimed at a locality of Downtown Manhattan in New York. This is a locality that is considered as both straight and gay. At this point in her discussion and promotion of the show Chaiken seems to be vigorously defending and celebrating the inclusion of the storylines seen throughout season one and two, such as Jenny Schechter's transferral though bisexuality to her 'coming out' as a lesbian (S2) and Dana Fairbanks' concerns about, and then decision to, go public with her sexuality thus putting her sponsorship as a pro-tennis player at risk (S2: E11). Chaiken doesn't appear to be altering her discursive position on the show at this stage of its existence and fully acknowledges its lesbian content as provocative to all possible audiences. Chaiken's position at this point in her discursive representation could be still considered as gay liberationist, regardless of the inclusion of a straight audience. She locates the stories which *The L Word* deals with as part of a proclamation of sexuality which hasn't been seen in quantity before, this is a new kind of visibility which

Chaiken posits will be politically developmental for lesbians as a group. This further underlines her focus on lesbians as needing to be explicit in an identifiable sense and to create an overt lesbian identity that may be challenging to mainstream society.

Chaiken also discursively constructs her own identity as lesbian in this interview when she utilises the lexical choice of ‘ourselves’. She places herself clearly within a distinct group by using this term and doesn’t separate herself from the lesbian viewer or wider lesbian community of viewers and pantextual consumers. This appears to be central to Chaiken’s discourse in many interviews which have promoted *The L Word*, and this is particularly prevalent in the first three seasons of the show. Other clear examples of this personalised lesbian discourse related to Chaiken outlining that the show contained, “storylines and some characters inspired by people and events in her own life” (Pope, 2005: 66). In some senses this can be said to make a clear connection with the lesbian audience and authentic cultural experience, Chaiken not only produces the show, but also locates her personal identity as being the root of the character experiences in *The L Word*.

This liberationist and politically challenging discursive position of Chaiken as producer is further enhanced, constructed and framed by the notion of celebrity interaction which formed around seasons one and two in particular. The pantextual promotional discourses over the launch period of *The L Word* focused upon celebrity actresses; these individuals are used heavily in the initial promotion. This was a situation that continued throughout the run of the show (as is to be expected with commercial television), but in this instance it is pertinent to consider the initial

discursive nature of the meanings offered by the inclusion of the cast and celebrities in promotional material.

The L Word cast members are not only shown as popular celebrities and typically and ideologically aesthetically acceptable in terms of promotion, they are also used to personalise a lesbian political discourse and evidence a cultural understanding of lesbian life and experience. Leisha Hailey, who is highlighted as the only out lesbian actress involved in *The L Word* discusses her personal feelings about the representation of lesbianism on US television via 'In This Life'. The choice of language in framing the *The L Word* as politically 'new', liberating and challenging is clear when Hailey outlines that she hasn't had, "...any..." representation to look to as a young lesbian. The rhetoric in this section of the PBS segment links to the historical need for lesbian viewers to re-appropriate pre-existing narratives (Dyer and Pidduck, 2003) in order to gain any sense of identity when watching mainstream US television. The overall context of this short segment frame *The L Word* as challenging to mainstream dominant discourses around heteronormativity and unique in nature, as such representations have not been available for lesbian culture in the past. This position is again explicitly celebrated in the segment when actress Laurel Holloman (PBS, 2012: [online]) claims that, "It's a beginning. It's a celebration, I think; of...this show is here. It's about time. And what I hope is that we just keep on telling great stories".

Whilst these particular discursive choices construct Hailey as isolated in her past, they also construct a sense of personalisation, celebration and clear identification around

the experience of being homosexual women. This further enhances the link with the lesbian (as pantextual audience) community and it is the show that seems to be held accountable for this positive and alterative discourse. It is clearly arguable that the commencement of the series is celebratory, unique, and politically visible in terms of meaning. There is a real sense that the show is ground-breaking and seminal for lesbians as discursive individuals, as viewers and for the representation of lesbian culture.

During the course of *The L Word* the members of the cast have also become popular as a focus for lesbian audiences. Laurel Holloman has overtly identified herself as bisexual and Leisha Hailey as lesbian and this has only further enhanced both their celebrity status and the audience consideration of their thoughts and insights as akin to lesbian community experiences; in essence they are celebrities who are ordinary in terms of experience for a lesbian or bisexual audience (Rojek, 2001). The meanings constructed around the first two seasons of the show, in particular, foregrounded such cast members as individuals that lesbian audiences could personally identify with in terms of experience. When interviewed in *Curve*, a popular US lesbian and bisexual focused magazine, Hailey discussed her personal experience of sexuality. The links between this and the experiences of the audience outlined above are clear to see, “I started going to gay bars, but I’d go in secret. I’d go by myself after school. And I was sort of discovering this life by myself.’ Finally she told her parents. ‘I was scared, even though they’re probably the most open loving people on the planet,’ she says, laughing now. ‘It was still scary to think that I might be disappointing someone or hurting them.’” (Lee, 2005: 42).

So, in order to make sense of Chaiken's proclamations and the celebrity discussions outlined above we can look to celebrity theory. As P. David Marshall (1997) points out, these particular kinds of discourses are affective in relation to the audience as the purpose of television celebrities is to break down the barriers between audiences and enhance their identification with the familiar, the cast interactions referenced here make a distinct link to the lesbian audience and experience. This is particularly affective through the language used, which is interconnected with the personal lesbian sphere of experience and also the celebratory nature of a new, unique, and seemingly culturally aware media text. Thus not only is a discourse of gay liberation referred to in reference to *The L Word* and its initial promotional material, what is also found is a discourse of familiarity. Hailey and Holloman talk distinctly about their personal experiences and preferences. They map many of the experiences which lesbian viewers refer to in message board postings (see later in this chapter) where the experience of their sexuality and lesbian culture is heavily discussed, and the resulting actions from 'coming out' compared. Marshall (1997:190) refers to this distinct form of discourse as quite unique to television and claims that it, "tends to privilege a form of sympathetic identification that makes it distinctive from the production of audience identification in film".

The imagined lesbian community

Both producers and celebrities outline their personal experiences and private lives in the promotional material for the show. Chaiken even claims that her life is the reason for the show and so this could be construed as 'authentically lesbian'. This appears to enhance the brand loyalty that lesbians have towards the series, especially in the earlier seasons. It speaks to and for them at this point. Chaiken and her production

team have very little to react to in terms of feedback but the celebratory and inclusive discourses created enhance a sense of liberationism around the conception and launch of the show.

Essentially *The L Word* is a commercial venture; it is easy to see from Chaiken's discussion regarding commissioning there were concerns about whether the show would work for viewers or the Showtime cable network. But in this discussion of initial discourses surrounding the show it is important to remember that the purpose of such ventures is to pull in audiences who will subscribe and pay for a cable network. Some explanation for the impact of the discourses can be found via Ellis Cashmore (2006: 175), who outlines that, "buying something being advocated by that celebrity can be seen as a way of 'hitching your wagon' to the star". Considered in the context of promotional material, the producer and cast of *The L Word* go to great lengths to identify with a lesbian audience. This identification is seen to shift in topic basis as the show continued its run (see chapter eight). Even though the material isn't considered direct advertising or trailering, it is clearly important and directed at the lesbian audience.

So far I have argued that the promotional material surrounding the show and audience reaction highlight the theme that a lesbian community was being constructed through the selection and construction of the promotional discourse selected for analysis.

Community in this sense is understood in Anderson (1983) to be a constructed 'imagined community'. There are clearly differences between the lives of lesbians across a multitude of cultures, but the community in this instance supersedes these 'local' communities. It encourages the construction of a culture which in this instance

is celebratory and is posed as previously lacking in mainstream society forcing lesbians to seek out an identification of culture where they possibly can. Evidently this construction is intended by the producers of *The L Word* to be a rhetorical affect of discourse, a discourse created by a multitude of texts brought together at the time of production and creating certain expectations and considerations of *The L Word* in the mind of the audience. As Veronika Koller (2008: 2) outlines lesbian discourse and the notion of a lesbian community is the result of:

accumulations of texts that particular people produce, distribute and receive in a particular way and as a form of social action. As such, any identity of discourse participants, including their collective identity as member of a community, is always preliminary, negotiable and open to change...research into lesbian discourse will not reveal any typically lesbian way of using language. Rather such research will uncover the discursive and cognitive repertoires down upon by self-identified lesbian writers at various points in history to construct and negotiate an image of lesbian community.

It seems that at this early point in the life of *The L Word* there is a clear creation of meaning around comradeship and homogeneity for the lesbian community, and this is created before even looking at the available discourses in the actual text. In much of the talk around the televisual text there is a celebration and sense of achievement in relation to *The L Word*, and a strong sense of shared political needs and expectations relating to understanding lesbian sexuality and the drive for equality via gay marriage.

In terms of the constant reassurance of the familiar discourses available in the material researched. These may also go some way to helping to build and maintain a sense of shared lesbian community and purpose with regard to the show. The technology available to fans and viewers now allows them to further enhance the notion of Anderson's "imagined community" (1983). Anderson claimed that many people belonging to a national community did not know each other, or speak to each

other and yet became convinced that they belonged to a community. The nature of Internet has allowed for a wider access to and from audiences. Information from conventions and access to gay information and publications has only enhanced this feeling of togetherness, and enabled members of the lesbian community to come forward to share stories and political concerns.

This sense of community appears to be enhanced by what can be considered as a 'collective memory' of experience for lesbian audiences, especially when it comes to sharing stories about their experiences of 'coming out' and early lesbian experiences in gay venues, at work and in relationships. This is heavily anchored in remembrance and history and seems to pull the community even closer together. Halbwach (1985) identifies historical memory as being a key factor in the construction of national identity but this is also applicable to this case as it enhances the sense of familiar and community discourse for lesbian viewers and also the sense of political and necessary representation enhances the standing of Chaiken as producer. There is a selective recollection of past events in the lives of producer, cast, and viewer that is considered to be most important for a group that is often mis- (and under-) represented. This discursive construction of lesbian identity is told and shared by the various groups involved in the construction and consumption of *The L Word*. This strengthens the sense of imagined community. This underlines that narratives around communities (be they national or based on sexual orientation) do not appear essentially or exist within a vacuum. The production, consumption and further created discourses around *The L Word* reproduce and spread such discourses and in effect create a positive lesbian narrative for participants.

The forums and promotional material that involve Chaiken and cast members has also allowed a distinct connection with the lesbian audience. There is a similarity between many of the postings and also the experiences of ‘out’ cast members Leisha Hailey and Laurel Holloman. These experiences form the notion of a common history with lesbian viewers, many of which share difficult and often traumatic experiences of ‘coming out’ to their friends, colleagues and families.

The show allows a number of discursive locations to exist – in the promotional material, online where fans and viewers can exchange stories and information and actually within the television text itself. In this first subsection we have seen those locations provide an ever changing and emerging community with a platform with which lesbians can identify. This appears to be a rather idealist homogenous mass at this stage of the show’s development and it is important to remember that the lesbian community is ever changing akin to any other social identity. That it is, “discursively...produced, reproduced, transformed and destructed” (DeCillia et al., 1999: 153), this is a pertinent point to remember when we consider the audience reaction and change in discursive construction seen in relation to both the textual developments and producer discourses with regard to later seasons of the show (see in chapter eight of this thesis).

Early audience pleasures: textual uniqueness.

So far I have argued that the promotional discourses around *The L Word* constructs and engages with a connection between the show and the lesbian community in a liberationist sense. In order to further explore the link to the lesbian community and initial lesbian audience response I now draw on the postings displayed on the

Showtime-hosted forum during and after the run of the show, to explore the way that some members of the audience express the celebratory pleasures they feel in the show, and how they articulate gratifying links they identify to a broader sense of community. I focus on this in order to explore not only the liberatory construction of the producer, but also the gratified nature of the lesbian audience and their use of *The L Word's* particular lesbian focused narratives and pantextual discourses during the first two seasons of the show.

Of course, all the results of this analysis of the forums cannot be regarded as representative of all lesbian viewers but what can be gained is an insight into how at least some lesbian viewers experienced *The L Word*, and how they make distinct links to their own sexual preference, experiences, and identification as a community group. In essence, I explore how *The L Word* was experienced as a community event rather than an isolated televisual text. It is also important to note that the analysis of these postings entails an approach to the forum as a discursive text in itself, where audiences themselves will call on societal ideologies, discursive tropes and culturally-shared meanings. We should not simply take such postings at face value and I follow Ien Ang (1985)'s approach to search behind what is explicitly written to link this to the structures of meaning and discourse that pervade the collective contributions.

Even during the final seasons where many viewers disagreed with Chaiken's narrative choices and expressions of the show being for the 'mainstream' (see chapter eight) there was still some sense that the discursive content of *The L Word* had offered a sense of personal liberation, celebration, and identification for the lesbian viewer and wider community. This particular chapter explores early reactions to the show and

develops notions of cultural citizenship and shared communal experiences as a clear part of the wider audience discourse surrounding the first two seasons of the show.

Many of the posts from lesbian viewers posted to the forum during the first two seasons of the show were celebratory in nature. This was notably prevalent during the early seasons of *The L Word* where the mere appearance of the show was greeted with posts that reflected the promotional discourse discussed previously; that this was a challenging and alternative lesbian offering to those previously seen on US television. The sense of celebration appeared to be linked to the appearance of lesbians onscreen, where characterisation was on-going through the narrative and lesbians were not merely a societal problem.

Lesbian viewers expressed a sense of gratitude to the makers of the show. Therefore the organisation of the viewers' pleasure was not just focused on narrative conclusions and generic expectations. Clearly *The L Word* offered entertainment to the viewers but the gratification that they felt was linked to a sense of self-representation and their cultural framework impacted on their overall identification and reading of the show,

"Thank you" does not seem to convey enough gratitude to those responsible for bringing us 'The L Word'. I love the show and will support it no matter what...Please, please, please, continue following your instincts and writing great storylines. I even love the parts that irritate the hell out of me...You have a loyal fan in me. Thanks again for sharing your visions and dreams with us.

Emae29, 22nd January 2005

This particular viewer responds to *The L Word* after a season of the show had already aired, she clearly identifies as lesbian in other postings. In this posting (which is indicative of the Showtime forum and early responses to the text) appears to negotiate

around aspects of the text that this viewer finds 'irritating'. This is the result of constructing a meaning from the show that is celebratory due to the mere existence of the show; even going so far as to state that nothing could ruin the adulation she feels, not even the narrative direction of the show. In fact the celebratory aspect of her pleasure is what dominates interaction with the text.

There is also a liberationist tone in such postings with a sense that the show signals a step change in the nature of lesbian visibility and politics and a sense of pleading that this change should continue to be visible in society, this can be considered as being at the heart of the gay liberationist agenda,

Yes Thanx Showtime for this amazing show. Thanx for going where no one eles has gone before. And thanx for a second season.

CeeJay, 21st November 2004.

I am SOO glad to FINALLY have a show for "US" to watch that actually has a story line to it. My girlfriend and I have watch QAF from day 1 and sarterd on this from day 1 also and it just goes to show times ARE changing whether people want them to or not. Channels like Showtime make it possible to get it out there! A BG THUMBS UP TO SHOWTIME FOR TAKING THAT RISK!!!

Boobean, 10th November 2005

In essence this is a celebration of an inclusion in societal citizenship. It appears to link the show to lesbians as a communal group and forms part of what can be considered as an alternative and emerging discourse around lesbian lifestyle and sexuality not previously included in mainstream culture as socially viable. It can be argued that this visibility is celebrated as viewers have an ideological awareness that television is something of a 'teacher' of society more widely and the lack of mainstream lesbian

representation on television or in film prior to this point is a social and cultural issue in terms of understanding and visibility. The lexis chosen by this poster where they use the term “US” also highlights a sense of ownership and shared experience in relation to the show and reflects the sense that the wider community of lesbian viewers have often had to make do with texts that are not directly representative of lesbian lifestyle. This reiterates my earlier evidence where promotional discourses related discursively to temporal lesbian experiences of marginalisation through identification with the media. This lesbian community is constructed as one that is grateful for what is a rarity in the representational landscape. This feeling of gratitude is reflective of a particular temporal point with regard to lesbian representation in mainstream television and can be partially explained by Koller’s (2008: 4) viewpoint that:

lesbian notions of collective identity, and the discourses that effect and transport them, are not generated in a void, but influenced by the host culture in which they are embedded. Such influence may take the form of lesbians uncritically adopting society’s view of them, as can be seen for many texts of the 1950s.

Essentially, due to the lack of total representational focus on lesbian culture in a single instance of a mainstream US television series the importance of *The L Word* in creating a sense of community is located in its appearance and existence. The pre-existing discourse of the visual lesbian as outlined by Becker et al (1995) as marginalised and sorrowful has arguably been internalised by viewers who have celebratory reactions such as those referenced. Pre-existing ideas of what it means to be part of lesbian culture are internalised through self-surveillance and what could be argued to be a panoptical dominant heterosexual culture where oppressive meanings about homosexuality are displayed via the media and subsequently construct notions of what it means to be homosexual. Even the pantextual potential of this televisual

discourse existing is exciting for these viewers as it is potentially an escape from such internalised meanings and has an alternative potential from, “Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorising to the point that he is his own overseer; each individual thus exercising the surveillance over and against, himself.” (Foucault and Sheridan, 1977: 155)

This means that the commissioning and broadcast of *The L Word* is read by these viewers as so challenging because it constructs a potential alternative to pre-existing ideas of lesbian subjectivity. It offers a positive way for lesbians to appraise their identity and subjectivity. This occurs regardless of the meanings constructed through the initial early season characterisation and narrative in the textual artefact. The audience responses are representative of an ideological escape from dominant society and mainstream television’s inspecting gaze where heterosexuality is dominant and lesbians are restricted to problematic or titillating roles where the subsequent subjective internalisation of homosexuality as abnormal, undisciplined and psychologically destructive. The very fact that lesbians are being posited as a viable and noteworthy social identity through the actual commissioning and broadcast of such a show is a cause for celebration and appears to override concerns around textual meanings contained within *The L Word*. This new potential addition to constructing lesbianism as an identity and tackling the representational problem of Dyer’s (2002) invisibility of sexuality is positive for lesbian viewers, but certainly seems subjective due to their societal position. Such thankful and celebratory responses weren’t as overtly evident or particularly notable from identifiable heterosexual viewers.

This means that the textual decoding of *The L Word* is foundationally underpinned by the social experience of discourse and it appears as a new celebratory alternative discourse for lesbians; something of a discourse intervention. This discourse is constructed via the language that has so long oppressed lesbian culture through narrow, partial, and marginalised characterisation and representation and thus gains a greater credibility (Foucault and Sheridan, 1972). This again is a reiteration of the meanings constructed through the promotional discourses discussed earlier, that focus on the commissioning being ‘surprising’ and ‘unexpected’.

Early audience pleasures: cultural citizenship.

John Hartley highlights an important idea that also aids our understanding of the interpretation of this reaction from the lesbian audience and also raises the issue of cultural citizenship. In *The Uses of Television* he states that, “cross demographic communication is more important than identity, although the effort to communicate respectfully and equitably is recognition of identity and difference” (1999: 32). It appears that the responses from the lesbian audiences referenced reflect a new type of constructed meaning around their difference as lesbians being overtly displayed in society through the medium of television. The distinct focus on an everyday lesbian culture in *The L Word* only serves to further enhance a growing sense of representational equality that begins as a small symbolic kernel with the appearance of lesbianism as part of the wider cultural citizenship (Hartley, 1999) of society.

Cultural citizenship appears to be the primary factor that underpins celebration with regard to the lesbian audience’s response to the initial launch and broadcast of *The L*

Word. The context for this celebration is outlined clearly by Phelan (2001) as a Western society (both US and UK) where LGBT people have held an ambiguous identity that has been marginal and not fully included or excluded in terms of wider social citizenship. In this instance it appears that three types of cultural citizenship are the focus for celebration and pleasure from lesbian audiences. Diane Richardson outlines the following ‘sexual rights’ discourse, which provides a useful framework for understanding where the boundaries of “inclusions and exclusion are sometimes drawn” (2000: 108) in terms of belonging to and being accepted as a wider part of society:

- 1) Seeking rights to various forms of sexual practice in personal relationships (e.g. campaigns for sexual freedom and safety).
- 2) Seeking rights through self-definition and the development of individual identities (e.g. the right to be lesbian and gay; female sexual autonomy).
- 3) Seeking rights within social institutions: public validation of various forms of sexual relations (e.g. interracial and same-sex marriages).

The basis of this framework is not focused on the assimilation of lesbian identity into an ideological and heteronormative culture. This focus is on the introduction and highlighting of pronounced and specific behaviours and identities that are discursively lesbian in nature and culture. This discursive challenge is focused on an identity that is formed around liberation rather than assimilation through the mimicry of heterosexual relationship practices and culture at this point in the consideration of the show by audiences. This means that for lesbian viewers the early potential (even before seeing a full season) of the lesbian subject constructed by *The L Word* is political, challenging and socially reflective of the distinct differences between lesbians and mainstream heterosexual culture, for the following posts it embraces the

idea that cultural citizenship involves the right to be ideologically different and offers legitimacy for marginalised identities and lifestyles (Pakulski, 1997):

It is about time we had a show like TLW that tell our stories and breaks ground for similar shows in the future. All involved in this project have my sincere thanks and deepest admiration.

mustang_run, 5th May 2004

showtime,
thanks for producing a well-written, entertaining series about lesbians.
it's good to see a drama about our lives and issues on TV.
the cast is excellent, too.

Baldt, 11th July 2004

why back in the *day*, one could only image "The L Word" being on TV... after all, Ellen simply uttered the words "I'm Gay" on her hit sitcom, and she was gone... I'm grateful for all the woman that came before me, and those who are now... we will make tomorrow better for the rest of us.

shotrial, 22nd January 2005

It's about thr real relationships that women on women go through. Some episodes are really fast paced because of the time issue but I think it's all done in style and really well executed by all of the actors. You can tell a lot of work goes into each episode and that everyone is working so hard. I think it's about the messages. That's me. I could be wrong!

cattay, 10th April 2005.

These posts draw out a distinct difference in the experience of being lesbian and heterosexual when encountering representations of relationships, sexual practice and, most importantly identity through television. The discursive construction from the audience alludes to meaning construction within this media text that is new, original, and an area that US television hasn't portrayed before. If sexuality has been discussed, as in the Ellen DeGeneres example, it is labelled as socially divisive and has the potential to cause a separation and problem in mainstream culture. In fact this example doesn't label DeGeneres' proclamation as politically successful or liberative

but instead highlights it resulted in a complete (although short-lived) dismissal from cultural visibility.

There is also a sense that distinct lesbian issues are explored in some depth from the audience's perspective and this links clearly to Richardson's second and third framework areas around self-definition, an individual identity and public validation. It is evident that all of the audience quotations above link to the idea that this is a ground-breaking representation and this is also heavily personalised in other similar postings. This further highlights the political and liberative potential of the appearance of *The L Word* in a personal sense,

So very happy to see a show called the L word that almost represents the life we woman have now..Just wish T. and I had some true friends like on the show. Not in this town. Look forward to reading this board evryday that I can.

rvalley, 26th September 2004

This poster is indicative of a number of American based posters who cite problems in their lives with regard to recognition of their identity and some level of acceptance. In this and many other instances this is indicative of their geographical location, this tended to be a response which was linked to less cosmopolitan areas of the US (such as New York, Los Angeles and Boston) and focused on the southern United States. But this was also a perspective shared by some posters in small towns and villages from across the globe that stated that they were encountering social problems or bigotry due to their sexual identity. It appears that the show is giving a group accustomed to hostility around their sexual identity some comfort and mobilisation through a familiarity with depictions (and at this time of posting – the mere potential of depictions) that are reflective of a distinct reality that is little known outside lesbian culture; lesbian relationships, friendships, and everyday practices. The continual

discursive construction of this particular type of ‘new’ lesbian subjectivity hails the lesbian audience and is supportive through inclusion in mainstream televisual culture, and again reflects some of the promotional discourses highlighted earlier in this chapter.

Therefore these posters embrace *The L Word* as their ‘own’ and its appearance as what Richardson (2000) outlines as potential (and in some cases realisation) that their self-definition and individual identity can be asserted and accepted, even within the difficult situations they are encountering. This enhances their sense of increasing cultural citizenship, even though this is symbolic and not realised within their immediate experience. For these lesbian audiences these discussions are not about heterosexual assimilation, but are instead about introducing a personalised lesbian based discourse to the wider sense of what cultural citizenship means. This subjectivity is about being a viable and yet different part of society represented through mainstream television.

Early audience pleasures: personalisation

A further aspect of the lesbian audience experience was related to the personalisation of viewer experiences to events and characters on-screen.

I find a little of myself in each character... After thinking about it, I realize that somebody somewhere is or has gone through this phase in her life. This show may help her get through a rough spot.

Emae29, 22nd January 2005

According to the responses given much of this pleasure that viewers take in the narrative of *The L Word* could be related to personal experience and this underlines Stuart Hall’s claim that the decoding of media texts is be related to audiences

understanding of “meaningful discourse” through what Hall (2006) would refer to as their own “frameworks of knowledge”. The gratification of the audience members quoted is framed by their own social experiences and sense of inclusion and exclusion based on the experiences of their sexuality and expression of sexual preference.

In particular, many audience members described how the show allowed them to begin a discussion of their sexuality with family members, how it encouraged them to ‘come out’ publically, even relating the consumption and existence of the show to their own acceptance of their sexuality. The pleasure for these audience members was not just in the watching of the show, but also its impact and integration into their own lives.

I just want to thank the L word because it was a show I got into as I came into my acceptance of being gay. I relate most to Phylis confused all her life and than discovering something that she never saw before. Watching this show with my partner of now almost two years has been so wonderful.

Suzy Yaqub, April 29th 2009.

...But I have to admit that it played an enormously huge role in my life...You guys pulled me out of the closet and continuously giving me courage to be out...

Ryuen Zhou, May 1st 2009.

For these audience members there had generally been a clear construction of lesbianism as a representation which was finally visible to society through the six years of the show. In the light of these and many other similar postings perhaps it can be posited that the dominant audience pleasures for lesbians can be considered as more about ‘experiencing’ *The L Word* as a site of recognition, identification and community support rather than as a television text.

Not only is *The L Word* a text that allowed lesbian viewers to celebrate the first appearance of a lesbian themed television show. It also represented an identity beyond lesbian sexuality and the 'lesbian problem'. What was evident in the meaning constructed by audiences was a sense of community, identification and support. These audience positions also read that lesbian sexuality is now part of mainstream culture, but it appears that these readings don't relate to this being assimilatory in the early seasons of the show. These reader positions are reflective of a consideration of lesbian sexuality as adding a new identity to mainstream and what could be argued to be challenging to heteronormative (televisual culture).

Arguably then, the celebration and pleasure of early seasons is formed from a very particular type of subjectivity and is constructed from the existence and early narrative meaning of *The L Word*. This expands beyond the text and is not only about meaning within a media artefact, but also the pantextual nature of *The L Word*, as it is considered to add to wider cultural understanding and experience. This could be seen as a challenge to dominant stereotypes and ideas about homosexuality. In these instances *The L Word* is an additional subjectivity to society, and an important change in how lesbian sexuality and identity can be considered distinctly and individually.

Textual discourses and lesbian subjectivity for lesbian audiences: liberation and community.

In terms of textual discourses meanings around community, togetherness and lesbian culture are further underlined. The appearance of these alternative and challenging

discourses only go to further support the construction of a lesbian subjectivity that is distinct from visual culture of the past, and far removed from isolated representations and can be considered as political and liberative in nature when compared to traditional cultural tropes constructed around femininity and female sexuality; both heterosexual and homosexual. It is very hard to do justice to the complexity of two seasons of a television series in a few thousand words. For this reason I have chosen to explore the richness of textual discourse through three main themes. Referencing one narrative device, one location and one character, I want to demonstrate how *The L Word* early representation of lesbian identify functions. I take the idea of 'The Chart', the café location of 'The Planet', and the character of Shane McCutcheon as a way of exploring wider characteristics of the show's initial phase of broadcast narrative.

A key focus of the first two seasons of *The L Word* is 'The Chart'. 'The Chart' forms the centre of the narrative during the opening episode and is a diagrammatical representation of the sex lives and relationships of the lesbian of Los Angeles, which Alice (Leisha Hailey) seeks to develop. This is a discourse that is asserted through a graphical representation of all the lesbian sexual activity that is taking place in Los Angeles (and possibly beyond). 'The Chart' is initially represented on journalist Alice Pieszecki's apartment whiteboard (S1:E1). As the first season continues 'The Chart' becomes a lesbian generated online space where lesbians link their own sexual encounters that are happening within the lesbian community. By its very nature 'The Chart' is inclusive in these early seasons as women are shown as adding their own names to the diagram (which becomes virtual) and lesbian sexuality is displayed as inclusive, embracing, lacking in hierarchy. 'The Chart' appears to be owned and is in fact created by an ever growing and numerous lesbian community. This is only underlined by 'The Chart's' inclusion of closeted characters. Early in the pilot episode

(S1:E1) we see a conversation between Alice and Dana Fairbanks (who is notably closeted due to her tennis career) about the nature and possibilities of such a diagram, they link to each other by connecting four women who have had sexual encounters with each other. Seemingly even the closeted Dana cannot escape from this community and the construction of herself as lesbian subject. The scene is ended by an overhead panning shot from their own mini chart to the overall lesbian ‘tree’ and main chart and is dubbed by the end of Alice and Dana’s conversation, which relays,

Dana: We have this whole crazy tiny little world.

Alice: Crazy yes...but not tiny.

(S1:E1)

This conversation is indicative. Throughout the initial two seasons of the show lesbian sexual practice is represented as complex, diverse and yet somewhat utopian in terms of its polyamorous nature distinctly framed within an unmoveable community. This particular construction further creates a sense of lesbian subjectivity that is in distinct opposition to expectations of both female and heterosexual sexual practice previously seen in mainstream televisual culture. This is an identity which is totally abstract from heterosexualised and male culture and in a narrative sense is not subject to the interventions of masculine determining agents. The sexual participants in ‘The Chart’ are unequivocally female at this point in the programme, and it is focused on lesbian encounters rather than any other. In the early stages of *The L Word* (seasons one and two) this is a central aspect of the text that is portrayed as a key part of the lesbian community where kinship is supportive and celebrated even though it is sexual.

For lesbian and gay viewers, then, the diagrammatical representation of ‘The Chart’ offers a recognisable and unique aspect of gay culture that moves beyond mere tokenistic representation and links to sexual practice, identity and community

discourses outside of the televisual text. This textual construction acknowledges lesbian sexuality as distinct and in existence, even in the face of closeted characters; the notion of community and belonging are prioritised in terms of lesbian subjectivity. 'The Chart' is a symbol of how a new sense of lesbian difference and experience is being produced through mainstream television and this particular aspect of the show encapsulates an appeal and focal point for the political representation of lesbians an individual and distinct in terms of identity.

'The Chart' challenges the notion of what Wilton (1995) refers to specifically as lesbian invisibility on screen which can lead to an internalised form of silence for lesbian viewers. Textually a sense of community is clearly created and encouraged through this narrative device. Although this device is based on sexual interaction rather than anything else, it is distinctly lesbian in nature and the physical links that are graphically displayed encourage a sense of togetherness and community.

Arguably this is a new way of speaking of a lesbian subjectivity on-screen and is political in nature through its distinct difference from heterosexual ideological assertions about relationships and sex. 'The Chart' as an aspect of US mainstream television adds to the representational landscape of what it means to be a lesbian and during seasons one and two this is more focused on being part of a communal whole rather than an isolated individual. This is a construction that encourages an addition to the complex representation of what it means to be lesbian during the contemporary era.

A further aspect of the text that underpins a sense of community is 'The Planet'. 'The Planet' is the café location for the majority of the lesbian community led scenes throughout the entire run of *The L Word*, but this is particularly used in seasons one

and two. The café is the location where characters meet and discuss their sexual conquests, their work (S1:E13), their plans to have a family (S1:E1), the perils of being pregnant (S1:E8) and where they have affairs (S1). When in this location we see a representation of lesbian living which reflects and related to other discursive tropes that Akass and McCabe (2003) argue are also seen in US television drama where women meet, discuss and uncover their own culture for viewers.

The construction of café culture in the show entails a gossipy focus of *The L Word* and this is not only reflective of feminine discourses around gossip, but it can be posited that this discourse is also reflective of a wider cultural discourse related to lesbian culture. This can be considered positive and assertive in nature and also reflective of what Haggerty (2000: 338-339) considers to be a wider lesbian experience:

This need to acquire knowledge of intimate and personal aspects of other community members' lives occupies a central role in lesbian gossip because there are very few other ways to satisfy this need to acquire accurate information. Often, gossip is more reliable and complete than information released through authorized mechanisms, since candid and open self-description is rare and limited to close friends...Information of such a highly personal nature is not likely to be accessible to the modes of inquiry more standardly perceived as legitimate...Trading intimate information satisfies community need and indicates intimate relations among lesbian women. In addition, gossip reaffirms community norms by bringing social pressure to bear on their enforcement...This use of gossip functions to demonstrate lesbian unity, and it works to sustain community norms.

This aspect of the textual culture of *The L Word* asserts a particular discourse that can be related to lesbian communities. Although the gossip in the show is diverse and usually sexually focused there is also a discourse of trust and confidentiality that is maintained during the early seasons. It is pertinent that that the site of gossip in the show should be a private and feminised space which is related to the domestic. This is

arguably a space where women can talk about issues which impact upon them and according to Jenkins (1992: 86) this is explained through societal expectations of female gatherings:

If the public discourse of politics was reserved for men, the private and intimate discourse of ‘gossip’ offered women a chance to speak about controversial concerns in a forum unpoliced by patriarchal authorities because it was seen as frivolous and silly...yet it was also a way of speaking without being overheard about the most repressive aspects of those gender roles, a way of challenging those expectations with directing attention to the political dimensions of that debate.

It can be suggested that the construction of this discursive area for group and community interaction in *The L Word* means that the discussions about lesbian concerns and experiences are within a safe context that isn’t politically overt in nature, but deals with and highlights distinctly lesbian political issues for a lesbian audience. Here lesbian subjectivity is constructed in a space that is mutually supportive rather than divisive. One such example of how the discursive realisation of gossip aids in constructing a sense of community and yet is constrained in terms of confidentiality and an understanding of an unmasking of lesbian identity as potentially problematic is with regard to the character of Dana Fairbanks.

Dana Fairbanks is a seminal character in the early seasons of *The L Word*. Dana is initially portrayed as a closeted international tennis player who is in great fear of being outed due to the pressures of her corporate sponsors. Dana engages in gossip at ‘The Planet’ on a regular basis but this gossip is posed and framed within the safe space of the lesbian community and characters that support and understand the pressures of her vocation. We are consistently reminded of Dana’s lesbian credentials through her inclusion on ‘The Chart’ and also via other characters within the lesbian group who assert she is, ‘...so gay...so, so gay’ (Tina Kennard, S1: E1) to which

Dana responds with, 'I know, I know', acknowledging that her closeted identity is far from ideal for her personally or the wider lesbian community. The support Dana gets from the lesbian community in the show results in her eventually coming out in public, facing her concerns about parental reactions and her sexual identity equating with commercial success through a Subaru campaign entitled, 'Get Out and Stay Out' (S1: E8), arguably a liberating discursive act where her sexuality is foregrounded in a positive outcome.

This portrayal of a character going through the acceptance and declaration of sexuality is positive as discursively it exists within the space of the lesbian community and is reflective of lesbian experience in relation to existence within a heterosexual culture. Coming out is a common experience and this particular discursive trope in the construction of a particular type and expectation of lesbian subjectivity equates with a sympathetic and supportive portrayal. This potentially enhances a sense of Anderson's imagined community (1983), which is relatable to and supportive of wider lesbian experience. This links to enhancing a sense of community as the experience makes reference to a reality that is not encountered outside of lesbian or gay experience and this itself discursively encourages a sense of self-identification with the character and context of supportive community. The dominant discourse here is focused around acknowledging that embracing a lesbian identity can only be liberating and positive in ways you can only imagine before the act of coming out. But closeted identities are also supported through community understanding, even though they are much lower in the Fairclough's "order of discourse" (1995: 60) as realised in season one and two.

Textual discourses and lesbian subjectivity for lesbian audiences: Lesbian liberation and sexual practice.

The character of Shane McCutcheon is also a central character with regard to the construction of a distinct type of lesbian subjectivity. The character has clear visual attributes which link to notions of 'butchness' in the lesbian community. She has unkempt hair and a thin androgynous body. The character also wears clothes that signify butchness in the lesbian community: shirts, school ties, suit jackets. Arguably Shane's behaviour prioritises the sexual and restricts emotional interaction through characterisation and this is a key theme which runs from season one and into season two. This behaviour not only challenges a traditional feminine discourse that can be located in a heterosexualised society, it also prioritises lesbian behaviour. Shane's character is unashamed about her sexual behaviour and this offers somewhat of a discursive priority and celebration of alternative meanings around women, sexual practice, and relationships.

Visual and verbal discourses in the show portray Shane as the most sexually active character in seasons one and two. She is sexually promiscuous throughout the show and cites her lack of ability to commit as ingrained in her nature (S3: E6). She is also graphically represented in the show as the centre of 'The Chart'. In season one Shane's sexualised character is asserted quickly. After a brief scene in 'The Planet' where she is on the receiving end of a sexual advance from a stranger, café owner Marina Ferrer refers her to as 'Don Juan' (S1: E1), which draws on pre-existing discourses of overt sexuality in literature. Shane then appears in the next scene taking an unidentified woman to Bette Porter's swimming pool where there is an inaudible and inconsequential conversation. Via a long shot, which minimizes any form of

intimacy, the two women have sex in the pool. During this scene both characters have their backs to the camera and this sexual act is constructed as unemotional and purely for gratification purposes. Jenny Schecter, who watches through the neighbouring garden fence, also sees the act. At this point in the narrative we believe Jenny to be heterosexual and living in a heterosexual relationship.

In terms of lesbian subjectivity Shane aggressively pursues sex and is unapologetic for this. Bette Porter describes Shane as uncaring towards her conquests (S1: E1) and that this has been a continual character trait. Although other characters discuss this at times and label the behaviour thoughtless, this is an accepted aspect of the character and she is embraced as a part of the lesbian community. The key point of this construction is that it is unapologetic and lacks the shame of previous representations of, and related to, lesbian sex in mainstream television and Hollywood film. Much of Shane's sexual exploits are connected to 'The Chart' and the lesbian social scene (the location of this public discourse) and she encapsulates an overt representation of lesbian sexual practice. Potentially this offers a lesbian subjectivity that is confident and displays an ideological ownership of sexual practice. This can also be linked discursively to the explicit identification of individuals as lesbian to achieve political visibility, status, and identity. This practice is portrayed as an essential and important part of lesbian culture, one that separates the culture from traditional feminised sexual practice and asserts a distinct identity through this particular character.

Shane has a distinct subjectivity constructed through her representation and this potentially places her in conflict with what could be considered as an assimilatory and hegemonic integration of lesbian identity into mainstream culture. Although there are identities in *The L Word* which could be considered more distinctly in terms of

assimilation (as will be discussed in chapter seven) Shane maintains her characterisation. Shane's subjectivity is clearly constructed as a celebration of lesbian culture and the lesbian social scene in particular. This is arguably threatening to lesbian integration through assimilation and is displayed as much more political through the overt portrayal of a variety of forms of lesbian sex throughout the run of the show. As a character Shane has no subjective problems with her sexuality or sexual practices.

The overt discursive display of Shane's sexual practice is arguably politically assertive in relation to Richardson's (2000) frameworks for sexual citizenship in wider society. There is an unashamed and explicit display of what it means to be a sexually active lesbian. For lesbian audiences the construction of this subjectivity challenges institutionalised heterosexual norms and sexual practices and introduces diverse and alternative sexual practices into mainstream television. It also offers a distinct challenge towards particular societal exclusions around sexual acts, which are based on naturalised ideas about sexual practice and the use of bodies in relation to sex. It is pertinent to note that the first sex scene we see in the show involves Shane and has a heterosexual character watching from a hidden perspective. This is relatable to Judith Butler's theorisation of a naturalised heterosexual matrix that exists in society. This is related to dominant norms around the use of human bodies for what Butler (1993) claims are ideologically traditional notions of sex and sexuality. The lesbian subject is constructed in opposition and challenge to this matrix and the character of Shane offers alternative possibilities in terms of sexual practice; possibilities which are sexually gratifying and for which the character is unapologetic. These practices also gain the attention of Jenny, as they are seemingly forbidden from her social experience and a heterosexual viewpoint. Shane is discursively radical.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Heteronormativity and lesbian subjectivity

I have so far argued that there is a strong relationship between the material produced to promote the launch of the series, the online discussions of some viewers and the televisual text itself. In the last chapter I demonstrated how this operated at the launch and in the opening two seasons of the show. I paid particular attention to the idea of lesbian life as a liberation identity within the discourse of the producer encoded in promotional material, in the discussions of some audience members and in the programme. I took three prominent aspects of the early episodes – the idea of ‘The Chart’, the location of ‘The Planet’, and the character of Shane McCutcheon as ways to discuss these televisual discourses. In this chapter, I offer a very different way to read this text. I take on a central idea from lesbian cultural theory and examine the degree to which it functions within *The L Word* and the extent to which it could be used to frame our thinking about the representations of lesbian identity in a wider range of mainstream and alternative discursive constructions.

I have already defined heteronormativity as a hegemonic stabilising force in society (chapter one). In essence heteronormativity has been the standard against which all other sexual preferences have been compared and measured in terms of cultural acceptability. Engel et al (2011: 53-54) outline that this is due to the assertion of ideological normality as heterosexual. In this chapter I use this as a frame with which to think through the programme and relate it to three different aspects that are telling of the show’s ideological functioning. First, I connect this to femme and butch as representations of sexuality, gender, and sexualised behaviour. Next, I explore the way in which bisexuality is constructed as an unstable identity within the show’s narrative and characterisations. Finally, I look at what can be seen as the most complex, but maybe troublesome (in both narrative and political sense) identities in what I have called ‘the construction of the strange’. Through this concept I look at butchness, transgenderism and queered spaces as unstable discourse.

The L Word contains a variety of sexual practices that can be related to lesbian culture. Here I focus on an analysis of such practices and relates these to gendered identities. The purpose of this analysis is to unravel the relationship between heterosexualised and assimilatory identities that may be more palatable to mainstream audiences, and identities that may be seen as more controversial through their rarity in US television cultures. By exploring this relationship this work will be able to outline an awareness of the order of discourse which dominates this particular televisual text and the interactions between sexual identities which are portrayed as more secure and acceptable to a wider range of audiences; both lesbian and heterosexual.

Sexual practice and performing gender

When examining and analysing sexual practice and emotive relationships in *The L Word*, it has proved impossible to separate sexual practice from gendered performances that relate to male and female identity. It is also worth positing that this is central to the ability of the show to appeal to a wide range of audiences in a narrowcasting environment. I have previously written about this matter at length in the published work *Paradigmatically Oppositional Representations: Gender and Sexual identity in The L Word* (Davies, 2008). My argument there relates specifically to the opening two seasons of the show and outlines that particular lesbian relationships are constructed as inherently stable. These relationships exclusively involve characters that would typically and traditionally be considered as stereotypically attractive in terms of femininity. This section of research intends to build upon those assertions and argue that traditionally coded characters (in terms of feminised gender) are posited as stable, emotional, and most likely to be able to assimilate into heteronormative patterns of relationships and existence. These stable identities are posited

against more challenging gender and sexual identities. Whilst these identities are not portrayed as abhorrent in nature, they do form a sense of otherness that portrays traditional and heteronormative discourses as viable, aspirational and ultimately normalised. This work intends to build upon my previous published work to assert that gendered positions are continually displayed as the series moves through season three and four.

In the early seasons of *The L Word* we are presented with a specifically solid and accepted identity for the characters of Bette Porter and Tina Kennard. This couple are displayed as a well-established couple, living in the suburbs of Los Angeles. They both have a clear professional identity (Bette managing and curating an art gallery, Tina working at a film studio). Their established relationship is symbolically displayed through pan shots of their suburban home and is symbolic of the US middle classes. Viewers are more than used to seeing shots of such areas, especially in shows that relate to relationships and family environments (Davies, 2008). So what we already see in the early incarnation of Bette and Tina's relationship is the use of well-established discursive tropes that construct a normative sense to their relationship. In essence, they are 'like any other couple', heterosexual or lesbian in these early structures of visual grammar. We are shown the couple asleep in bed together instilling a sense of symbolic casualness (S1: E1), are swiftly alerted that they have been together for seven years and are trying to conceive a child. Any problems they have in their relationship are not based on their sexuality, which is arguably not the case for other sexual identities (as will be discussed later in this chapter). Their relationship is seen as long term and any issues that they deal with are arguably identifiable within a heteronormative culture. As I shall explain, this is further enhanced in seasons three and four of *The L Word*.

Symbolically feminine

What is pertinent about the majority of initial characters in *The L Word* is that they are symbolically feminine. Even the character of Shane is clearly female and all characters can be considered stereotypically attractive. Shane stands out from this femininity through her actions and sexual behaviour, to which I will return later. However, clearly both Bette Porter and Tina Kennard are presented via the traditional aesthetic view of femininity (Wodak, 1997). They wear make up to accentuate their feminine features and their costuming consists of expensive and designer wear. Bette Porter is played by Jennifer Beals, a well-known and substantiated actress in the US who had had a number of heterosexualised roles in US film and television since the early 1980s (Biography.com, 2013: [online]). This already underpins the audiences understanding of Bette as for the heterosexual gaze; Jennifer Beals is already highlighted as feminine and attractive in the mind of the audience. But, visual discourses are not the only way that traditional gendered practices are asserted for this particular lesbian couple in *The L Word*.

The L Word really was the first presentation of a diverse lesbian culture through the genre of drama. But the characters are feminised to a greater degree than is informed by actual participation in lesbian culture. It is therefore not only the ideological expectations of femininity which impact on the visual and casting choices made with regard to *The L Word*, it is also posited here that this is an adherence to the generic qualities of US drama and soap in the mass media. The repetition of femininity that we see in *The L Word* therefore enables some visual and discursive stability for the audience. Typically attractive characters and romanticised situations provide the delivery of both female and male mainstream audiences; they expect to see the generic aspects of drama (Mumford, 1995)

As stated in my previously published work (Davies, 2008) the shooting of sex scenes involving feminised characters such as Bette and Tina appears to draw upon and embrace a traditional order of discourse around gender expectations through sexual behaviour. They are one of the few couples whose sexual behaviour consistently takes place in their home via close up shots of their faces and reactions to each other, which reflect intimacy and an emotional relationship. Neither party is sexually dominant in their sex scenes. This is in distinct opposition to the portrayal of Shane's butch encounters (as briefly referred to in chapter 5 and to also be further discussed shortly). It is no mistake that such shots also echo those often seen in television drama in a romanticised heterosexual relationship. Essentially what is portrayed in the opening seasons is the very construction of symbolically feminised emotional and sexual commitment that is recognised as 'femme' by lesbian audiences and heterosexualised by straight audiences (Munt, 1998b). This sexualised behaviour is also related to dominant emotional discourses in the show and one that is generally attributed to the female gender more widely in society (Reay, 2004). This forms an important basis in *The L Word* and is not only central to the sexual relationship between such characters but extends into the portrayal of the domestic realm too. The subjectivity of this particular aspect of lesbian culture can be seen as borrowing from a naturalised discourse around femininity and attaching distinctly recognisable feminine attributes for a mainstream audience. All aspects of their relationship relate back to emotional attachment, even when their relationship falters and this is what is clearly encapsulated in seasons three and four. This appeals to the nature of audience expectations and experience as Best highlights, "our abilities as readers of culture to think beyond the perimeters of heterosexual and gender conformity as we define romance... is limited as we are rarely presented with alternatives to a heteroromantic template." (2013: 197).

Whilst arguably the gender roles are challenged in this relationship in that there are two women taking part of it, their lack of challenge to established gender boundaries arguably makes the characters and feminised narrative far more palatable to the audience.

In the opening of season three we see that Bette and Tina are recovering from a break in their relationship and are having some sexual issues. Whilst their role in the aforementioned episodes was one of woman to be looked at in order to assert an identifiable element for a wide range of audiences, this role now develops to be one that is far more maternal and emotional in nature. We do see them taking their daughter to a nursery, interacting with other parents and children and they are clearly involved in providing the emotional needs of their child (S3: E1) and acting as a family. In fact this is prioritised as one of the reasons that their relationship has been maintained and reignited. The couple are portrayed in S3: E1 as visiting a sex therapist and this example underlines the heteronormative nature of the portrayal of these feminised yet committed characters, especially from an emotional perspective.

Sex Therapist: Alright, now one of you lie down on this lovely couch and the other one come and pick some material.

(Bette follows Tina and puts her hand on her shoulders)

Bette: Mama T why don't you why you be the lie-er down and I'll go and choose some material for us.

(Sex Therapist is about to open a cupboard and immediately stops and removes her spectacles)

Sex Therapist: Noooooo! *(laughs)* Please!

Bette: *(frowns)* What?

Sex Therapist: *(gestures to Tina)* Do you also call her Mama B.

Tina: Er...well yes, sometimes I do call her Mama B.

Sex Therapist: Okay, *(then points to Bette)* you, go sit down *(Bette sits, the therapist shakes her head)*. The guiding principle here is that we are trying to rekindle the sexual spark in this long term relationship, and Mama B and Mama T do NOT make mad passionate love to one another, they make cookies.

(Tina and Bette look to the floor, embarrassed by the conversation)

Season three and four sees the development of the 'femme' as a heteronormative character. Whilst the focus in early seasons was on asserting the female nature of the characters subjectivity through the use of typified sexual situations, poses and aesthetics, the narrative then alters to construct an alternative type of feminised characters and this likely reflects the life encounters of a mainstream audience. We see the situation above where a couple have sexual issues. We see Bette worrying about maintaining her job, being able to provide enough to cover a mortgage and also fully adopt their daughter Angelica (S3: E2). What is asserted in such interactions as the one above is the ideologically normal status of a relationship once a family/children are a priority in a relationship. What such constructions also serve to maintain is not only the institution of gender as normal and naturalised but also what is represented is that a particular type of lesbian subjectivity, interaction and relationship can be considered as 'normal' and this is a relationship which mirrors or can be easily assimilated into the practices of a heterosexually dominated society.

There is little doubt that the development of this narrative in these mid seasons reflects a pre-existing order of discourse about women's emotions, maternal needs and family commitment in mainstream and ideologically asserted mainstream culture. Social roles and responsibility are foregrounded as important to these heavily feminised characters. Their actions are led by the birth of their child and their emotional state.

The overall meaning that is constructed with regard to the 'femme' symbols of Bette and Tina is one that creates a type of lesbian subjectivity that is increasingly welcomed within the normalised confines of mainstream culture. This particular aspect of lesbian culture seems to be assimilatory as it adheres to pre-existing gender relations and expectations of beauty, emotions, motherhood, responsibility and the family. These are all aspects of lesbian culture that, according to Mucciaroni (2008) are being continually debated and defined

through discussions of gay marriage, adoption issues and ideologically normalising ideals around civil partnership rights.

Interestingly heteronormative relationships are the only time that Shane, our key 'soft butch' character finds any stability in *The L Word*, but in opposition to characters such as Tina and Bette, she is a character who cannot maintain this normalised relationship and so is often constructed as destructive, divisive with a distinct inability to be faithful. Whilst Shane's lesbian subjectivity may be radical and unapologetic in terms of her sexual practice in seasons one and two (as discussed in chapter six) her inability to maintain relationships or express her emotions in a feminised way sets her apart from the stable characters of Bette and Tina and raises ideological issues with her symbolic masculinity. This narrative direction is enhanced in seasons three and four.

As an example of this, part of season three revolves around the relationship of Shane and Carmen. Carmen is a Latin American character who is 'out' to friends but at home maintains the tradition of Latin culture. She claims that lesbianism is something 'just not talked about' (S3: E1) in her culture. Carmen does get Shane to interact with her family and they make her an integral part of their family life. Shane eats with the family, parties with the family. Symbolically, although it is presented in a comedic fashion, the family also dress her in a white dress and use hair extensions to feminise Shane (S3: E4). Discursively this is no mistake. The more feminine Shane's character becomes visually in this episode, the closer her relationship is with Carmen, and more and abstract her butchness becomes.

This symbolism is also repeated in season four, when Shane becomes involved with Paige, a single mother. Shane also has her half brother Shay staying with her in Los Angeles. She has

to assert the role of mother, providing for Shay's medical bills when he breaks his arm (S4: E4) and going to speak at Shay's school about her sexuality and her and Paige's relationship (S4: E7). At these points in her characterisation we see Shane settle into a more feminised gendered role, she is both mother and partner, she agrees to marry Carmen and also commits to a family home with Paige. However, ultimately Shane's gendered characteristics will not let her settle into the normalised ideological status that Tina and Bette inhabit and this further enhances their status as femme: successful, assimilated and normalised. Shane's two relationships both fail – as she is unable to control her sexual urges or maintain a sense of monogamy with either Paige or Carmen.

The supremacy of gender

As an example of this is at the conclusion of season three (S3: E12) we see Shane interact with her previously estranged father Gabriel on the eve of her wedding to Carmen, she sees her father kissing a woman in a bar and is surprised to see it is not his wife, Carla:

Shane: Who is she? Who...is she?

Gabriel: *(turns to unnamed woman)* What's your name babe?

Woman: Patty.

Gabriel: Her name is Patty. *(to Patty)* This is Shane my daughter. Will you excuse us a minute *(Patty walks to bar, Gabriel turns to Shane)* I'm sorry. I'm not proud of this. It's just who I am. Okay? *(Extreme close up shot of Shane, and then Gabriel)* I know you know what I'm talking about.

(Gabriel leaves, extreme close up remains on Shane, her face shows a sense of realisation)

It is after this point that we see a variety of characters at what should be Shane's very traditional wedding ceremony. Shane doesn't attend the ceremony and jilts Carmen who is waiting, feminised in her white wedding dress and surrounded by her family who have also accepted Shane, sending a message via Alice that, "she's not proud of this, it's just who she is" (S3: E12). The visual aspects of this message are pertinent, we see Carmen in traditional dress breaking down in tears, the shock on the faces of the guests present as they shake their

heads in disbelief. Shane has broken all the rules of what was to be a hegemonic act and her access into part of an assimilated traditional culture.

The construction of Shane is that essentially she cannot escape her butch identity, and although Shane is a 'soft butch', she is symbolic of a distinct cultural problem both within and outside of lesbian culture; what Kristina Jalas (2005:52) calls a, "failure of masculinity". Whilst she expresses her sexuality freely it appears to be an impediment to her access to any assimilated or ideologically normalised world. Her isolation comes from her being unable to open up to traditionally feminised emotions and the masculine and sexual aspects of her personality inescapably anchor her. Up to the point of her almost accessing the traditionally ideological state of marriage she has already been unfaithful to Carmen (S3: E5) having inconsequential sex with a married woman, in a swimming pool using a strap on dildo. This is in itself symbolic of normalised and pre-existing sexual repertoires that are linked with butch lesbian culture and pornography, and far removed from, for example, the emotional symbolism of Bette and Tina's relationship based intimacy. It seems that Shane will not play by the discursive rules and so is isolated by the narrative, labelled as a "crazy little freak" (S4: E1) by her married conquest, being physically beaten by Carmen's brothers and labelled "pathetic" (S4: E1), and losing herself in drink and drugs (S4: E2).

In *The L Word* there is a clear subjective supremacy of gender created through the emotional and sexual actions of the characters discussed above. Shane reinforces a very distinct kind of lesbian subjectivity. One that is far less palatable than that offered by Bette and Tina to both assimilatory and mainstream viewers. Shane's discourse is the opposite to what can be considered as the prevalent in contemporary lesbian culture which has seen gay rights be aligned with the rights, habits and tropes commonly shared in heterosexual culture

(Mucciaroni, 2008). Thus narratively, Shane cannot ultimately be emotionally fulfilled in the long term. Instead after each relationship fails because of “who she is” (essentially butch and driven by sex), we see her isolated, out of control and lower in the hierarchy of lesbian cultural discourse.

Shane has her distinct place in *The L Word*, she offers a butch construction that is reflective of the growing acceptance of lesbian culture and sexuality, is representative of aspects of lesbian sub-cultures whilst also still managing to maintain a message that reflects that social acceptance in terms of mainstream ideology is still subject to narratives that show an adherence to dominant ideologies. She serves a dual role in terms of meaning construction for the audience; she is both discursively restrictive and celebratory. She is both threatening to gender and social roles and also possibly to the integration and assimilation of lesbian culture in an ideological sense, and she highlights lesbian culture as possibly political, distinct, and unrepentant. For a lesbian audience she offers a site of identity and strength, and for the mainstream her narrative threat is consistently nullified. She is labelled as isolated and different from characters that enact and encapsulate heteronormative narratives. In essence her characterisation is representative of the tensions inherent in lesbian subjectivity that is constantly changing, as integration into mainstream society seems more prevalent.

What the distinct characterisations discussed above reveal is that *The L Word* provides a wide sense of lesbian subjectivities. These are pertinent to different aspects of the potential audience of the show. These subjectivities do not only fulfil narrative repertoires and genre expectations of mainstream US drama, but they also highlight the tensions inherent in a

constantly changing and developing lesbian culture. This is a culture that borrows discursive tropes from a variety of forms of media, ideology and naturalised expectations of society.

None of the meanings analysed above are constructed as ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ for the diverse audience of *The L Word*. Instead a distinct purpose of the commercial imperative is fulfilled. Heteronormativity is privileged over an overt and sexualised lesbian subjectivity (Shane). But this ideologically alternative representation also provides a distinct marker and explicit stereotype for lesbian audiences to identify with in terms of unashamed sexual practice and overt identity. Depictions of ‘femme’ lesbians are displayed in opposition to Shane’s characterisation for the plurality of the audience and in order to reflect the tensions of a wide variety of subjective lesbian identities. The remainder of this chapter will discuss how both bisexual and transgender identities also enhance a growing hegemonic sense of lesbian culture.

Unstable discourses - bisexuality

As *The L Word* continues into seasons three and four it is arguable that a number of the representations portrayed become more focused around heteronormative standards for both gender and sexuality. In some senses this can be considered to be positive. This alters the order of discourse (Fairclough, 1989) that tends to traditionally underpin television drama in the portrayal of heterosexuality as normalised and attractive against the ‘other’ of homosexuality or bisexuality in order to avoid social isolation, and this speaks strongly to the arguments around the assimilation of gay and lesbian culture. This section of chapter seven will outline how this reordering of discourse takes place and balances the consideration of this in a wider representational sense against a discussion of how the constructed and increasing heteronormalisation of lesbian sexual practice and relationships

in the series may serve to politically undermine any challenging notions against dominant ideological norms related to gender and sexuality of a variety of kinds. In this sense it appears the *The L Word* develops in such a way as to be both liberatory and restrictive in its portrayal of sexuality. This is of pertinent interest to this study as, “language connects with the social through being the primary domain of ideology, and through being both a site of, and a stake in, struggles for power” (Fairclough, 1989: 15). An analysis of this particular aspect of *The L Word* will provide an insight into whether norms around relationships and traditional ideological practices are being challenged, negotiated or maintained by the series. This on-going analysis will link further with chapter eight, which continues to explore the reasoning and direction of the creative decisions behind the show and the relationship to commercialised industrial cultures.

In terms of lesbian identity it appears that none of the characters in *The L Word* really have difficulty in expressing or asserting their sexual identity. We see a variety of characters in the show and, certainly through seasons three and four they express their comfort and stability through both their domestic and professional environments (as discussed previously), there are also clear constructed assertions of other identities in *The L Word*. This increases in textual intensity into seasons three and four with the exploration of the territory of transgender identity and transsexual transition. This section of the thesis will explore how such identities serve to reiterate lesbian practice as normalised.

In order to understand some of the ways in which lesbian identity is portrayed as accepted and stable, and therefore privileged in the textual order of discourse, there needs to be a consideration of the textual construction of bisexuality in *The L Word*. It is argued in this section of the thesis that this aspect of identity is constructed as an initial ‘other’ to hetero

and homosexuality and that there was a continual reiteration of such identities as the series gained commercial ground and further commissioning. Throughout the first and second season of *The L Word* we see the development of a number of characters that could be considered to be bisexual. These characters include Jenny Schecter and Alice Piezecki. Their bisexuality is asserted through their sexual practice and on-going relationships with a variety of male and female partners. It is arguable that their journey through the early seasons was one that constructed though exclusionary discourses via their identification of their bisexuality. In order to fully understand the changing nature of the representation of bisexuality, it is necessary to briefly outline the initial discursive construction around this type of sexuality in the early seasons.

In season one the discursive practices related to bisexuality are problematic in the sense that it is neither clearly homosexual nor heterosexual in terms of the actual sexual practices displayed by the characters. There is significant judgement via the narrative and from the treatment of other characters that could be considered as reflective considerations of bisexuality in wider society, and for specific political reasons. This is constructed via the use of paradigmatically oppositional discursive practices of characters that display the seemingly opposing traits of homo/bisexuality. This results in bisexuality being alluded to as a transitory and transitional discourse into hetero/homosexuality in the early seasons of the show (Davies, 2007).

To exemplify this point, looking back at seasons one and two, bisexuality is portrayed as allowable in terms of practice in a contemporary culture, but not as an identity that is attractive as normalised. In terms of typification (Dyer, 2002) bisexuality seems to be problematic in this representation as the discursive sexual practices of homo/heterosexuality

cross over to some practice degree in bisexual identity. This undermines the ability to produce a positive, essentialised and stable discourse for either of these identities and bisexuality appears as unstable as it draws on the sexual practices of both. Rust (2000: 206-207) explains that this uncomfortable perspective of bisexuality finds its roots in the nineteenth century when it:

...produced the belief that sexual attraction must be directed toward either men or women. If men and women are 'opposite' genders then attractions toward women and men must also be opposite attractions that cannot coexist simultaneously within a single individual...One of the greatest challenges facing bisexual women in contemporary West culture is the belief that bisexuality does not exist. Women who are bisexual are often told they are 'denying' their true sexuality, which must be either lesbian or heterosexual.

To summarise briefly it seems that the portrayal of bisexuality in the early seasons reflected this type of perspective. Often bisexuality is posed as indecisive, with Alice being told from in the opening episode to literally make up her mind between the genitalia of men and women (S1: E1) and Dana Fairbanks insisting that she be spared the physical detail of any of Alice's interactions with a male. The linguistic communication with Alice in these early constructions represents her to be greedy (S1: E1) and not part of the lesbian team, with the claim that she barely makes this "team" through her sexual liaisons and interactions (S1: E1). This equates with bisexuality being asserted as alternative in nature as a distinct 'other' within the discourse of *The L Word* and as an identity it is excluded from being verbally related in a way that connects with support and identification. This reflects societal cultural antagonism (Esterberg, 1997) from both heterosexual and homosexual culture in wider society; what we see in the series is relatable to wider social discursive practices toward bisexuals.

As the show continues across seasons three and four Alice's sexual practice isn't overtly bisexual, in that she isn't having sexual relationships with both male and female partners but her previous sexual behaviour is discussed at pertinent and patterned points within the narrative. At the commencement of season three Alice's relationship with Dana Fairbanks has ended. She is shown as finding it difficult to cope and this is communicated via a radio show that she presents. She is not able to escape the focus on her relationship that has just ended, having an emotional breakdown in the midst of a yoga class and also virtually running her ex partner off the road whilst taking medication for anxiety (S3: E1).

Further development of the narrative highlights that Alice is not practicing sexually as a lesbian and clearly verbally re-identifies as a bisexual. An example of reiteration in the narrative is when she is seen having therapy at the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Centre (S3: E2), we see an initial static shot of the centre followed by a close up of the details of Alice's meeting: 'Bisexual Love and Sex Addicts 12 Step Meeting: Welcome Back!'. Interestingly the choice of the term 'Welcome Back' highlights that Alice is now returned to bisexuality from the security of her lesbian sexual practice and her solid and normative identity is again under question. The visual and verbal lexis used is clearly identifying her as a bisexual again in terms of labelling and social action. The meanings constructed in this scene are comedic in nature and the lexical choices pertinent in the labelling of Alice's general behaviour – this is inextricably linked to her prior identity as a bisexual as she outlines she was once in a relationship with "Lisa, the lesbian man". The group go on to talk about the differences in relationships with men and women,

Alice: ...Y'know, I knew I wouldn't get addicted to a guy. I actually remember having this conversation with my friend Tina, that y'know, I think guys are kinda easy...sorry (*to male participants*)...and I was

looking through this pamphlet here (*picks up pamphlet*), and...er...about all the different kind of love addicts and I'm pretty sure I'm a...er...OLA.

Male Participant: Oh, me too. Yeah, obsessive love, it's the best... (*smile drops from his face*)...oh, I mean worst...there's nothing worse than when you can't let go of someone who is completely over you and distant, abusive, controlling, dictatorial...

Female Participant: ...egocentric, unloving, selfish, unable to commit.

(S3: E2)

In this scene Alice's bisexuality is verbally and inextricably linked via tropes of the emotionally problematic. It is foregrounded that her decision to have sexual relationships with men has been one about managing her life in terms of making it much more 'simple' and possibly steering away from the complications of her a lesbian identity; to this end she finds it verbally difficult to get her point across and the representation of the self is via broken stuttering throughout this scene. Again, this underpins the sense that transitional stage between heterosexual identity and lesbian identity is problematic and unstable; Alice herself seems uncertain and unconfident. In the scene Alice even links her behaviour to a psychological medicalised construction of an obsessive condition; she picks up and reads a pamphlet produced for the means of therapy in order to persuade 'patients' to seek treatment and help. She even labels herself as having a condition. Her inability to fully embrace her lesbian identity or manage her relationships with women is shown as inducing mental health issues and to a self-diagnosis that she is obsessive. Seemingly this is a condition shared with the other members of the groups, who are clearly also labelled as bisexual in the opening shot of the scene and the meeting information.

The brief discussion by the male participant highlights that they are striving to find the "better person" within who will not enjoy obsessional or unwelcome behaviour in wider society. The shared labelling and perspectives that the group share on their situation and

labelling of ex partners seems to allude to their way of thinking about the world. More specifically their thinking about the world is divisive in nature. The highlighting of individual terms in the scene such as, “distant, abusive, controlling, dictatorial, egocentric, unloving, selfish, unable to commit” are a representation of their shared understanding of heterosexual or lesbian relationships. They are again portrayed as being unable to interact with others or manage to maintain their relationships due to their judgemental and obsessional nature and fluctuating patterns of desire. In order to fully understand the nature of the socially constructed bisexual that this mirrors it is worth turning to Connell (1995: 154), who claims that:

bisexuality is experienced as an alternation between heterosexual and homosexual connections, or as a standing arrangement that fits them together by subordinating one to the other. In other cultures there are better-defined intermediate positions. But it seems broadly true of contemporary European/American society that sexual preference is dichotomized and bisexuality is unstable.

The participants of the groups have literally and verbally isolated themselves from both the heterosexual and homosexual communities. In this sense the socially constructed nature of bisexuality appears to be discursively illegitimate and the participants in the therapy group are somewhat unhealthy in terms of their mental health, ultimately they are unstable.

Alice’s instability is further underlined as S3: E2 continues. We see her return to her apartment after her therapy session. The character of Helena has hired a cleaner as the apartment has been left filthy after Alice’s relationship breakdown. As the cleaner makes her way around the apartment the camera zooms into a cardboard cut out of Dana and pans across a variety of photographs of Dana arranged on Alice’s living room wall in a shrine effect.

Helena: (*sees the shrine*): Jesus bloody Christ! ALICE!
 Alice emerges from the bathroom smoking a joint, looking dishevelled.
 Alice: What...What the fuck Helena?
 Helena: Have you completely lost your mind?
 Alice pauses, looks down, looks at the shrine, exhales smoke
 Alice: ay...er...(points at shrine)...that's no biggy...
 Helena: It's a fucking shrine Alice, a bordering on psychotic, serial killer, obsessive type shrine (*turns to cleaner*), dismantle it!
 Alice: (*grabs cut out*) Okay, Oh God...no...please...let it live, no...
 (*pause while Alice and Helena look at each other, they then fight and wrestle over the cut out*)
 Alice: Okay, okay, OKAY! Just let me keep this, please? Just let me keep this. This was really hard to get. I had to get it in the middle of the night...you can take the shrine; you can take the shrine, just not this.

(S3: E2)

Although again this scene has a sense of comedy about it, again Alice is constructed as unstable and is verbally labelled as having the potential of a serial killer. As she is no longer in the security of a lesbian relationship and undertaking lesbian sexual practice we see her longing for the situation to return and her lesbian sexual practice as being a site of comfort, security, and cultural settlement. This is reflective of a hegemonic construction within the text that encourages sexual relationships and reiterates (from season to season) that the transitory state of bisexuality doesn't fit into the dichotomous societal models of sexuality (Herek, 2002). Arguably this discourse further encourages the audience to normalise the understanding of sexuality as either homo or heterosexual, with the alternative being possible psychological effects or distress.

In terms of Alice's recovery, the meaning constructed through the text is quite specific about what leads to her recovery from mental health issues and the regaining of her confidence. In S3: E5 we see Alice get involved in a new relationship with a woman by the name of Uta Refson, this involved an encounter that is heavily visually sexualised as Uta has a fetish for Vampirism and biting her partners. More importantly at the commencement of S3: E6, we

see Alice return to her apartment from the previous night. The constructed meaning of the scene is in complete contrast to those outlined above. Alice is now clearly linked to overt lesbian practices again and this is reflected in both her attitude and the trope displayed in terms of characterisation:

Alice enters her apartment confidently and struts into the hallway carrying her mail, dressed in a short outfit with tidy hair. Janice, her cleaner, is brushing the floor of her apartment; the cut out of Dana stands in the foreground of the shot.

Janice: Hi Alice

Alice: Helllloooooo Janice!

Alice throws down her keys on a table and looks in the mirror; pulling her hair back she admires the bite marks on her neck.

Janice: Oh my God, what happened to you?

Alice struts into the living room looking at her mail.

Alice: I don't know, but I think I may have just been released from my mortal coil. *(she struts over to the cut out of Dana)*. Hey Janice, would you mind disposing of this obsolete thing *(passes Janice Dana's cut out)*.

Janice: Trash or recycling?

Alice: I don't know...can you recycle foam core? *(she struts away into the hall)*. I don't fucking care, cos I am free at last! *(clicks her fingers above her head)*. WOO!

(S3: E6)

Although symbolically Alice's actions appear to be about a sexual encounter and her moving beyond the emotional ties of Dana, this scene can also be analysed quite differently in a discursive sense. What appears to be a key pattern throughout *The L Word* is that Alice is at her most unstable, quirky and unpredictable when she is single or celibate. It is at this time that her bisexuality is re-raised as a possible identity and sexual option. The difference in her mental stability is evident via this one single act and scene that is hardly indicative of mental health issues. Alice talks literally of being 'released' through the lesbian sexual practice she has encountered the previous evening before, and even through this is represented through elements of fetishism – her clothing, demeanour and confidence is transformed as she reiterates her lesbian identity through practice. She is reasserting her

dichotomous sexuality and moves again from transformational discursive phase to ideological security.

As *The L Word* appears to be focused on maintaining the highest audience share in a narrowcasting environment, this portrayal of Alice does make some financial sense. In order to appeal to a heterosexual male, straight female, and a lesbian audience it is necessary to have clearly delineated boundaries around sexuality. The discourses produced via *The L Word* are contextualised by what Fairclough refers to as “discourse processes” (1995: 59). The institution of US commercial television draws on a very distinct context for its textual social construction of meaning and this can be highlighted as central to the resulting order of discourse that is resultant in texts such as *The L Word*. Thus, commercial networks prioritise meanings that will satisfy the ideological and pleasurable needs of a specific audience with a high level of disposable income so that consumers can be delivered to advertisers or encouraged to pay for exclusive cable channels based on their content (Blumenthal, 1997). In essence the commercial discursive context for such show restricts the possibilities of having a socially and sexually successful bisexual character, as this may possibly be displeasing to the aforementioned audiences. The pleasure of having characters that are exclusively lesbian or heterosexual can be explained when considering the notion of bisexuality from a social perspective, Barbara Ponse (1998: 254) outlines that:

...the status of a woman who identifies herself as bisexual is somewhat paradoxical. Bisexuality as an ‘ideal state’, one of which all humans are capable ‘by nature’, is an ideologically legitimate position among activist lesbians. Calling oneself a bisexual, however, is considered to be an evasion of stigma and a denial of one’s real self by the same movement-allied, lesbian-identified women...This contradiction has its apologists, who maintain that emphasising the differences between heterosexual and homosexuals makes it possible to build a sense of collective consciousness among gays. The practical rejection of bisexuality is clearly acknowledged to be a political tactic, one

seen as necessary because of the present opposition of gays. According to the logic, separatism is a necessary step in building a strong sense of gay pride.

Such views are also evidence of a clear undercurrent in *The L Word* relating to seasons three and four when dealing with bisexual characters. Even minor characters such as Dylan Moreland (Alexandra Hedison) who, along with her husband, blackmails Helena Peabody (Rachel Shelley) for sexual harassment after filming them having sex, as she quotes, “What starts in chaos, ends in chaos” (S3: E7). The verbal construction is that an affair will be chaotic as she is a married woman, and likely bisexual. Once the affair ends and Helena discovers her betrayal, Dylan leaves Los Angeles in shame, leaving a video to be delivered to Helena. Helena doesn’t even attempt to watch the video and instead mutes the sounds and covers her eyes as Dylan’s image continues to show her speaking (S3: E11). In this instance the feelings and excuses of the bisexual are not even worth listening to from the point of view of the lesbian community. Dylan is without both her husband and Helena and is effectively in symbolic exile. The inferred decision by Dylan to apologise and try and make amends with Helena has arrived too late and is far too indecisive in the narrative process. In this instance the bisexual infidelity isn’t forgivable and only further underlines the normative and hegemonic portrayal of bisexual behaviour; even in spite of the fact that Dylan now appears to have realised some kind of lesbian identity.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, this continues a theme from the early seasons of the show and mirrors some long held beliefs in society that bisexuality is transitional in nature. Underpinning this is research that shows that negative attitudes to bisexual people are far more pervasive and negative than almost any group in society. Herek’s study (2002) cites that in the United States bisexuality is judged more negatively than people with AIDS, homosexuals and a wide variety of ethnic groups.

Similarly, Jenny Schecter is portrayed as being in a state of sexuality limbo between homosexuality and heterosexuality in seasons one and two. Through her introduction we are led to believe that she is in a relationship with male character Tim. As she begins to explore her sexuality through the first two seasons Schecter is sexually involved with both male and female characters. The construction of her indecisiveness is portrayed through infidelity and an inability to commit to any of her sexual partners. She is portrayed as vulnerable through camera shots from above which reiterate her as childlike as she asks in S1: E7 if she is, "...just a coward...and a liar...and a cheater?" The lexical choices that are linked to the practice of bisexuality in this instance are focused around personal weakness and instability. She also doesn't receive a response to her questions from Marina, offering a clear condemnation from a lesbian character. Jenny is then transformed in season two as we see her acknowledge her lesbianism after a symbolic haircut (S2: E4) where we see her crying as she is visually shown to be letting go of her previous identity. This is posited again in a following episode where we see pan shots of Jenny smiling in celebration as she is 'checked out' by another woman and embraces Shane in a visual celebration (S2: E5).

At the commencement of season two we see that Jenny has been dating a man, Gene Feinberg (Tygh Runyan), a minor character. We are also reminded of this factor at the commencement of season three (S3: E1) as we see a flashback clip of Gene shouting to Jenny that she is a, "full on lesbian", intercut with various quick flashbacks of Jenny's self harming and difficulty coming to terms with her sexuality throughout seasons two and three with her proclaiming that she "needs help". Again this reiterates the bisexual as unstable construction in the text. This is a continual theme and yet continues to increase throughout

the following seasons, especially with regard to Jenny Schecter. This in turn reiterates the bisexual as other.

Accepting homosexuality

In S3: E10 we see Jenny and the transgender Max Sweeney meet with Jenny's ex partner Tim and his new wife, Becky (Georgia Craig). The character of Tim (Eric Mabius) was central to season one of *The L Word* that saw Jenny having a continual lesbian affair whilst living with Tim, unbeknownst to him. In season three Tim and his pregnant wife visit Los Angeles to meet Jenny for lunch and revisit old times, although this commences with pleasantries and embraces this mood is clearly short-lived with Tim's former work colleague also briefly involved in the conversation and stating that Tim, "Should be happy you got out when you did" in reference to his relationship with Jenny. We then see Jenny embarrass Max by outlining that he is a pre-op transsexual in front of both Tim and his wife, she seems to wait for Tim to be shocked as he walks to his vehicle shaking his head. When scolded by his wife for laughing he retorts:

Becky, next time we see Jenny she might be with a German Shepherd, just brace yourself...Jenny...it's classic Jenny bullshit, it's not enough for her to be gay, she's got to have a girlfriend who's a boyfriend, it's just too fucking much.

(S3: E10)

The lexis used highlights that as a heterosexual Tim can understand and accept homosexuality, but feels that the bisexuality of Jenny and further relationship with a female to male pre-op transsexual is merely for attention, greed, or shock value. He even compares Jenny's sexual habits with bestiality and this conflates that he doesn't believe her discursive sexual practice to be either genuine or in any sense essential. In essence Jenny's queerness is a site of ideological discomfort and Tim's character is possibly a solid representation of the mainstream audiences understanding of fluid sexual identities.

Furthermore, the subject of Jenny's successful writing venture arises, but this is a clear and overt discussion about Jenny's bisexuality and lack of commitment, and dominates the scenes between the parties further underlining the uncomfortable discourse of bisexuality for both heterosexual and homosexual audiences. This further reiterates the conflating notions around lack of trust or commitment to any particular gender group.

Tim: Oh what Jenny, what private thoughts are you having?

Becky: Tim?!

Tim: No maybe you're right, maybe I didn't think you could do it, maybe I didn't think you could commit to anything long enough to see it through.

Jenny: (*calmly*) Oh, I committed, I became a self-mutilator, and I went on medication, and er...did a short stint in a psychiatric hospital and spent six months with my parents in Skokie. Everything that I know you would want to happen to me.

(*Jenny leisurely sips the straw of her soda*)

Tim: I never wanted any of that for you Jenny.

Max: Does anyone want anything else?

Jenny: I don't really believe you.

Tim: Well, sorry for you.

Max: Are you guys driving or are you flying back?

(*Awkward pauses and glances between Tim and his fiancée*)

Becky: Flying...

Tim: (*ignoring the awkwardness*) You know what pisses me off? You acting like such a victim. And no, I'm not going to forgive you. I'm not going to wish you well, I'm sorry. You should have let me go, that would have been the honourable thing to do.

Jenny: Don't talk to me about honourable Tim. (*turning to Becky*) Hey Becky, do you know the night Tim came to say goodbye to me, he gave me a little revenge fuck.

(*Becky laughs nervously, and picks up her bag*)

Becky: It's time to go.

Jenny: Is that honourable Tim?

Tim and Becky get up and walk away

Becky: Come on...

(S3: E10)

Whilst the character of Jenny Schecter allows for the introduction and maintenance of a queer notion of sexuality and also the introduction of transgender and transsexual issues through Max Sweeney, traditional constraints around the consideration of bisexuality remain through the constructed meaning in the show. Hilton-Morrow and Battles (2015) outline that

typical televisual bisexuality is usually female in nature, akin to *The L Word*, and is often resolved by the bisexual female returning to sex with a man. *The L Word* breaks this stereotype and explores the notion of bisexuality, but the order of discourse of bisexuality as “deceitful and duplicitous” (2015: 233) is clearly upheld. Jenny is portrayed as a character that uses her sexuality for shock value and in order to manipulate those around her. During later seasons we see her use her sexuality to get funding for a film (S5) and also to seduce and gain control of her leading Hollywood starlet (S5). Overall, the bisexual Jenny can only be portrayed as actively bisexual through her being shown with multiple men and women, and also as a manipulative character that seems unable to form any long lasting and well-founded platonic or sexual relationship. The burden of representing bisexuality perhaps invites this oversexualisation of the character between genders (something which is less evident with the character of Alice). Discursively Schecter appears to be the antithesis of hetero and homo-normative culture, whilst discursively performing both of these identities at different times, in order to serve a purpose, she still seems unable to settle for one normative identity.

Overall, the representation of bisexuals in *The L Word* has opened up a sense of challenge as bisexuality as an identity has become more active and prevalent in the series than may have been seen before on mainstream United States television. But, the social construction of meaning in this area is one, which whilst positive through merely being shown, is also constricted by the targeting of mainstream heterosexual audiences and also lesbian audiences. In order to fulfil the political potential of the burden of representation it has been important not to undermine the sexual and discursive practices of these two very distinct identities so as not to undermine the normative assumptions of the audience. The complications of representing bisexuality are clearly related to both social expectations and

the process of representing such an identity; it appears very difficult to do so whilst also maintaining a sense of monogamy and stability.

There are a variety of identities that are constructed in *The L Word* and it appears that the notion of bisexuality as unstable is political in nature. With the othering of bisexuality the notion of lesbian identity becomes a solid, stable political discourse and institution. The identity of lesbianism in this particular show is there to provide a place where independent women who refute heterosexuality can find common ground. The queerness of bisexual identity only serves to undermine this sense of definitive social and political identity as it calls into question the very notion of any essential sexuality. The enacting and negotiation of very specific discourses define identities and sexuality in *The L Word*.

Transgenderism: humiliation, confusion and the construction of the 'strange'.

Alongside the construction of bisexuality as transitory and unstable in terms of psychological state, seasons three and four of *The L Word* also introduce us to transgender identities. It is arguable that these are also constructed to reiterate heteronormativity and the gender boundaries that are prioritised in the order of discourse produced by the show. In season three we are introduced to the character of Moira Sweeney (Daniela Sea). She is introduced via Jenny Schechter whose instability has led her to return to her hometown, Skokie (S3: E1). Skokie is a town in the mid-west of the United States and appears to be a far more conservative area than Los Angeles. In the first two episodes of this season we see Jenny and Moira travelling across the United States back to Los Angeles where Jenny introduces Moira to *The L Word's* circle of lesbian friends. As these two seasons continue

we see Moira's transformation into Max Sweeney via a female to male transgender transition.

Moira/Max is an interesting characterisation in terms of the construction of both lesbian and transgender discourses. The character allows us to see how this construction is problematic in a number of senses and whilst the representation of queerness should be celebrated in *The L Word* for being challenging and dealing with an unrepresented issue, the meanings that are then constructed from the characters inclusion really only serve to reiterate ideological gender expectations for this particular lesbian community.

Moira's butchness and gender identity is clearly set up as a problem for both heterosexual and homosexual communities and characters in *The L Word*. We see this in (S3: E2) when Moira and Jenny are travelling across the United States and they make a rest stop. We see Moira in a toilet exiting the cubical and walking towards the sinks and mirrors as she pulls up her trousers and runs her hands through her hair, when an unknown young woman is applying make-up:

Woman: What the hell are you doing in here boy? Can't you read this is the ladies room? Get the fuck out!

Moira: I'm a girl (*walks out*)

Woman looks shocked as Moira walks away. Fast beating music plays with a swift drumbeat. Max is shown walking to the truck from the point of view of the cab. She gets in, as the young woman is shown exiting the toilets. The young woman sits with her friends.

Jenny: I got you some lunch.

Moira: Let's take off

Woman: (*from a distance*): You see that freak there? It was just in the girls' bathroom.

Close up shots of young men staring at Moira and chewing gum. They start laughing.

Man: Must be a faggot! (*shouting*)

Woman: Yeah. FAGGOT! (*shouting*)

Men: FAGGOT! (*shouting*)

Jenny: What did you say?
 Moira: Just let it go Jenny.
Man walks to truck
 Man: I called you a faggot.
 Moira: Look man, we don't want any trouble okay?
He leans on car window
 Man: I don't want any trouble either. I just want to get on top and we'll have a little talk.
 Moira: We're out of here alright.
 Jenny: Dude, leave us alone.
 Man: Fuck you faggot! (*He opens the car door and drags Moira from her seat holding her in a head lock*) I'll show you a real man!
 Jenny: (*exits the truck*) Let her go (*calmly*)
 Man: This is your boyfriend huh, does she fuck you like a man? Get back in the truck and I'll show you how a real man can fuck.
 Jenny: What did you just say?
 Man: I said get back in the truck and I'll show you how a real man can fuck (*others shout and cheer*)
Jenny raises a taser and points it at the man; the shouting stops and the man is silent.
 Woman: Jesus Christ.
Man lets Moira go
 Man: Well there's your faggot back. Why don't you give me a call when you are ready for a real man and we can have some fun then.
 Jenny: Sure dude, no problem (*fires taser and shocks man*)
Man falls to the floor and friends run to his aid.
 Jenny: We're not faggots, we're dykes you asshole (*Jenny returns to the car and they speak away with the group shouting after them*)

(S3: E2)

After this scene we see Jenny sitting in the truck as it travels, she looks depressed about the situation they have just encountered, while Moira hopes that the young man, “is going to be okay”. This scene offers an early insight into the otherness that is constructed about Moira; initially this otherness is based on the confusion around gender binaries for the overtly heterosexual and young group of anonymous participants. The make up that the young woman is applying heightens the notion of her clear femininity in opposition to the sight of Moira who is dressed in what can ideologically be considered as male clothing, the body language is paradigmatically oppositional too as Moira hitches up her jeans in a masculine fashion. Not only is Moira mistaken due to her gender performance, she is also mistaken for a ‘faggot’ (slang for a male homosexual). The representatives of the heterosexual world in

this scene believe that accessing female bathrooms is something that ‘faggots’ do and such actions and sexuality are deserving of violence, humiliation, and sexual correction. In this instance the heterosexual world takes action when the politics of ideological normality are disrupted. Their disciplinary and normalizing ideological powers appear to have failed and so they resort to fully othering both Jenny and Moira. In essence their trip across conservative America has a clear end, Los Angeles, which is posed as a safe space for expressing such queer identities to not be met with violence and abuse.

Ultimately the representation of Moira in this scene is reflective of the consequences of challenging heteronormativity. It is important at this point to consider Chambers (2009: 122-123) who asserts:

‘heteronormativity’ tells us that heterosexual desire and identity are not merely assumed, they are expected. They are demanded...Heteronormativity is written into law, encoding in the very structures of institutions (this bathrooms, think locker room), and built into an enormous variety of common practices...Put it another way, most people (75 per cent) have attached earlobes, but that does not (necessarily) mean that attached earlobes are normative. It would mean *that*, only if those with attached earlobes were subject to different laws, if their sexuality was criminalized, if they were excluded from social or cultural practices and if their behaviour was considered deviant or abject.

Moira’s demeanor and the visual codes communicated by her male style of dress, hair and body language step outside of the heteronormative convention for a woman, or “girl” as she refers to herself. This very allusion to youth and childhood also relates to the notion of immaturity and lack of development in some senses. Moira’s voice is soft and her intelligence and social experience (at this point in the series) are shown as limited and under-developed in comparison to Jenny whose own development and embracing of lesbian identity has been fuelled by her experiences in cosmopolitan Los Angeles.

This means that ‘othering’ occurs on two levels in this scene. Jenny and Moira are both posed as vastly different from the young group that they encounter. This is not only in terms of sexuality and gender identity, but they are also ‘the other’ in a geographic and political sense. They are unwelcome in the area they are travelling through (which we are told is on a journey from the Mid-West), this is a place where attitudes are unlike those in cosmopolitan L.A. and the identity embracing experience that Jenny has encountered in the first two seasons of the show. Whilst Los Angeles is posed as a positive location in this instance, it is still seen as a small, compact community, and not representative of a wider society that (in this instance) literally imposes panoptic power with regard to gender identity. Although those imposing the violence in this instance are punished through the use of a Taser, Jenny and Moira still have to leave and head for the safe haven of Los Angeles, nothing is resolved in an ideological sense and heteronormativity is restored; Moira’s difference is further emphasized to the audience as problematic, curious, and strange.

Moira is also othered when she does arrive in Los Angeles and seems to find it difficult to be welcomed and accepted in the lesbian community. This is strongly constructed from her arrival. We see Moira arrive in Los Angeles and she is swiftly introduced to Shane McCutcheon and Shane’s latest girlfriend Carmen de la Pica Morales (Sarah Shahi) (S3: E3) on her arrival with Jenny.

Shane and Carmen pull into driveway

Carmen: Who’s that?

Shane: Jenny’s new girlfriend.

Carmen: Girlfriend?

Shane: (*exiting car and to Jenny*): You fucking lunatic!

Jenny screams and embraces Shane

Already in this scene the character of Moira is constructed as ‘other’. Carmen’s confusion about the gender identity of Moira is pointed and invites the audience to also question the

notion of gender binaries through societal expectations. The scene continues to construct the sense of otherness and Moira as different and separate from the group of lesbians in Los

Angeles:

Jenny: Oh, this is Moira.

Moira: You must be Shane

Moira shakes Shane's hand with vigour, Shane holds and rubs her hand after the strength of the handshake

...

Moira: Yeah, we just rocked up, we barely had time to take a piss

Shane: *(looking disturbed by Moira's body and verbal language)* Oh...

Moira: Yeah, we've been driving for like 15 hours.

...

Carmen: You know what, why don't we help you with your bags?

Moira: You girls just relax and let us butches unload the truck *(taps Shane on the shoulder and walks away)*, come on Shane.

Shane looks shocked and disturbed, at this point holding a tiny dog her and Carmen are caring for.

Carmen: *(slaps Shane on the arm laughing)* Go on you big butch, go unload the truck.

Shane: What? Ow!

Moira then throws a bag to Shane who almost drops it, as it is too heavy for her.

Although Shane is considered the butchest character we have seen until this point in *The L Word* she also still fits within an acceptable gender identity for both lesbian and mainstream audiences. The discursive acts in this scene set Shane apart from Moira, whose butchness is a site for humour. The characters also seem visually uncomfortable with the expression of Moira's butchness through both the language and physical expression of her gender identity. This continues the process of othering Moira, not only in wider society but also within the lesbian and gay community. She is posited as different and uncool. Although the actions of Shane and Carmen don't involve the violence encountered from those symbolic of heterosexual culture, Moira is still considered as an outsider, different in a cultural sense with her heightened display of butch identity. Shane's gender is softened in a symbolic sense, she is seen holding a small puppy, is shocked by the strength and vigour of Moira's physicality, and seems disturbed by the masculine expression of identity that is encountered.

This reiterates heteronormative expectations of male and female gender in *The L Word*. The audience and characters see Moira as odd and not belonging in a cultural sense, and the show makes any challenge to gender binaries symbolically unpalatable.

This sense of otherness within the lesbian community continues to develop in the early part of the third season and is made far more pointed when Moira joins Jenny and the rest of the characters for a welcome home meal at a restaurant. The cast in this scene is symbolic of the variety of types of lesbian that may be found as part of the acceptable lesbian community in terms of mainstream audiences. As outlined in the first part of this chapter – the cast of the show is heteronormative in a visual sense; there is no confusion about their gender. During the scenes that portray the restaurant meal we see Moira getting worried about the price, ordering a small portion of food, looking around and feeling left out of the conversation. She sits at the head of a table while the established characters ask her questions about if she wants to try the lobster that they are eating. Although this is trivial in nature it enhances the awkwardness that both they and Moira feel about being in such a social situation together. Moira is excluded in a visual sense in that all the other characters are wearing full make up and clothing that clearly highlights their gender and foregrounds their feminine attributes. In this scene Moira makes a relevant and pointed speech that symbolically defines her place in the world due to her gender being visually confusing.

Moira is shown sitting at the head of the table with the characters assembled looking towards her. All eyes are on Moira and symbolically this asserts her as a watched curiosity.

Moira: I know something interesting about lobsters.

All: *(at different junctures)* What?

Moira: You don't have to put a lid on the pot when you cook female lobsters, does anybody know why?

All: No

Moira: when you cook a pot of male lobsters, they realize they are in this pot of boiling water, they all start totally freaking out. They're like, 'fuck we gotta

get out of here', and they start making these little ladders and helping each other get out of the pot. So you have to keep a lid on the pot to keep them inside. But female lobsters, you don't have to put a lid on the pot because once they realize they are in a pot of boiling water, they all start grabbing each other and holding each other down. They're like, 'if I'm gonna die, everyone's gonna die'. None of them wants to let any of the others get out of the pot. *(Moira's face looks disappointed and she pauses)*. It's a real shame isn't it? *There is a pointed and awkward silence as the camera offers close ups of each characters looking uncomfortable with the story.*

Carmen: *(breaking the silence)* Wow...those crazy female lobsters just gonna get you sometimes! *(laughter)*

The conversation continues, we see a close up of Moira looking disappointed and she looks down and the shot reverts to the long shot showing her isolated at the head of the table. The others talk and the show slowly zooms into Moira as she watched all the others eat.

Moira: Jenny, I'm just gonna go. You get a ride home from Carmen and Shane
(S3: E3)

Moira then leaves, telling Jenny they are 'your friends, not mine'. Ultimately this scene enhances a discourse of isolation that Moira feels, even within the lesbian community. She doesn't fit their idea of the heteronormative woman, whether lesbian or not. This scene encapsulates the social consequences of not realising the expected gender boundaries of contemporary lesbian society and offers an active rejection of the strictly butch lesbian that was encouraged as a political identity by lesbian separatists. As the conversation continues after Moira's exit her gender is referred to as 'role playing' enhancing the sense that heteronormative gender is not role-playing and a naturalised state of being. Again this underpins the notion of both a lesbian and mainstream audience. Barbara Ponse's (1998: 252-253) research into the experience of lesbians and their subculture can offer some insight into why less overt butch lesbian identities are increasingly less acceptable, and feminine heteronormative identities the opposite:

Role playing is clearly on the wane in today's lesbian community and was characteristic in past of a minority of lesbians as a continuing pattern of behavior...role playing was a temporary pattern of behavior, engaged in either playfully or seriously, in light of expectations they encountered in particular groups or relationships. Thus, it was a passing phase of becoming socialized into the life of the lesbian world.

In the past, more than is true today, the novice lesbian's avenue of access to the lesbian community was through lesbian bars, where role-playing expectations frequently prevailed. The greater access to the community provided by political groups... have served as forces toward diminishing and even proscribing role-playing expectations.

Moira's characterization is explicitly and symbolically portrayed as a 'role' throughout her introduction into the lesbian community of *The L Word*. Other strongly asserted characters judge her butchness as being unrealistic or surprising. Ponse points out that as lesbian sexuality has become more politically grounded and socially acceptable in the Western world, there is less of a need to assert the role of the 'butch' in order to highlight sexuality and make visible the invisible (Dyer, 2002). In essence Moira is currently too butch to join this lesbian community and so she finds herself symbolically and physically outside of it. The discussion of female lobsters is also symbolic, in that a behaviour is being attributed to the female sex as naturally occurring, even in marine life, and this behaviour is related to selfishness, and the destruction of fellow women if they do not fit with heteronormative ideas of being of the feminine gender if they belong to the biological female sex.

There appears to be no room for Moira as a butch lesbian, or indeed other gender identities that may fall between the distinct categories of male and female in this public social instance of lesbian culture. The feminine gender identities in *The L Word* are organised into a very distinct category through the use of symbolic tropes specifically related to naturalised ideological expectations of gender groups. This means that some considerations of gender identity are avoided by the show. Some gender theorists have begun to consider and theorise specific gender identities that are related to lesbians. In her work on gender identity Judith Halberstam outlined that such butch identities were separate from male and female identities and were the "mutual construction of both biology and social role" (1998: 119). This approach to gender from the producers of *The L Word* may allow for a greater exploration of

gender issues and encourage some political awareness of such identities and their place and impact on wider lesbian culture. It seems that rather than embracing this sense of queerness and development of alternative gender identities *The L Word* has instead avoided exploration of the post-feminist sense of greater gender flexibility and awareness that developed in the 1980s (Levitt and Hiestand, 2004) and was subject to the attentions of New Queer Cinema. Arguably the direction of this narrative is a political step back for fully exploring lesbian representation and is assimilatory in nature; in seasons three and four the gender dichotomy that dominates society is ultimately maintained.

Moira's gender identity is ultimately ostracized while she is still also defined as a lesbian; she is unable to be butch and yet still accepted as female by the other characters in the show and the narratives of season three and four emphasise this. The shame of who Moira is does not come, surprisingly, from heterosexual culture in the instances above, but instead the heteronormative development of this televisual lesbian culture that needs to be as appealing to mainstream straight audiences as it does to lesbian audiences.

Gendered identity

This perspective is further underlined by the development of Moira's character over seasons three and four, and the narrative based on Moira's transformation into Max Sweeney via a female to male transition. This commences in S3: E4 as Moira goes to a gathering at Billie Blaikie's (Alan Cumming) home; the individuals at the gathering are all transgender. At this point Moira decides to become Max. Moira therefore begins the slow transformation into Max from this point forwards.

This transformation creates a different expectation to the character and fully encapsulates how gender identity that seems to fall between the male/female dichotomies is socially unacceptable; but with the butch now fully performing a male gender role, this is seen as an aspect of identity that is increasingly accepted by characters in *The L Word*. An example of the difference in reaction to Moira/Max's discourse of masculinity is encapsulated during scenes that are related to Moira/Max attempting to gain a job. Moira/Max goes to an interview for a job at 'IntechMode', an LA based IT company, at this point still using the birth name of Moira. The man interviewing at this stage asks about experience and a conversation ensues about the technical knowledge that Moira has is detailed and developed, initially it seems that the interview is going well:

The camera pans over Moira/Max's body as he sits on a couch, his suit is foregrounded and men's shoes. The camera lingers on his hands, which are masculine in nature. This camera panning maps the viewpoint of the man interviewing and he remains standing and dominant in the scene.

Man: Great letter of recommendation...how did you get on with the folks there?

Moira/Max: Really well!

Man: So no problem with you being...y'know...hard to peg?

Moira/Max: Hard to peg?

Man sits on a desk and pauses

Man: You're kind of neither fish nor fowl Moira. If you know what I mean, and I'm not saying we would discriminate against you because that is one thing that we don't do here at IntechMode. But, we're looking for someone who is a team player. We're team players here.

Close up shot of Moira/Max's face

Moira/Max: Yeah, I'm a team player (*smiles*)

Man: What side do you bat for Moira? (*camera remains on Moira and the smile drops from her face, man laughs*). I'm kidding. I'm sorry, it was just too good to resist.

(S3: E4)

Again, Moira/Max is a source of humour for the heterosexual male interviewer. This is similar to previous humour at his expense via Carmen and comments about his masculinity and perspective on life. This incident leads Jenny to dress Max fully as a man. Max binds his

body to hide his breasts, wears a prosthetic penis and from this point forward starts to grow facial hair (S3: E5). Billie also then begins providing Max with illegal testosterone so he can commence the full transition into a male. The driving action behind this alteration in discourse practice is the job interview at IntechMode and the highlighting that Moira/Max doesn't fit into a specific gender role. The judgment this time is from heterosexual culture and Moria feels that the change to Max has to happen in order to perform for a normative society and be accepted as only performing one gender role.

Further judgment of Max's gender from the heterosexual perspective occurs in season four. At this point Max has gained employment at 'Intechmode'. The man who interviewed him for the company doesn't recognize Max as a man and so Max's gender identity is secure and fully complete. Max is also introduced to his boss's daughter Brooke (S4: E2) and begins a relationship with her, although this is never consummated sexually. Brooke is unaware of Max's transgender status and over the course of a number of episodes they date. Even though these two characters are clearly in their twenties the dating that they undertake is extremely platonic and non sexual apart from some illicit kissing on the doorstep of Brooke's father. Max is seen performing to ideological and traditional heteronormative standards for the male gender, making dinner reservations, paying for meals, taste testing the wine at dinner (S4: E2). This reiterates traditional narratives about male and female interactions and minimizes the sense of Max's queerness in *The L Word*. But this does not continue when Max opens up about his previous gender identity to Brooke:

Max: Brooke, I really like you a lot

Brooke takes Max's hand across the table

Brooke: I really like you too Max. I mean, no guy has ever wanted to get to know me better before having sex.

Max: I have something I have to tell you about myself. I want to explain it to you 'cos I feel like you are really special you know. And I don't want there to be any secrets between us.

Brooke: Don't tell me, let me guess, you are an escaped convict on the run from the law.

Max: (*long pause and sighs*) I...I really trust you, you know, it's just all new to me this whole thing, and I just want you to know that.

Brooke: What do you have to tell me?

Max: I've always felt like a man, inside, for my whole life, and now I know what that feeling is, I'm physically becoming one.

Brooke: I'm not sure what it is that you are trying to tell me?

Max: Um, I'm going through a transition. I've been taking testosterone for the last year, and I'm under the care of this doctor. And, I've been living as a man, and soon I'm physically going to be one as well. I was born a girl, and I still kinda have a woman's body although I am a man.

Brooke: Oh my God.

Max: Brooke...Brooke...I know this is a lot to take in...

Brooke: You're a freak. I don't date freaks. How dare you? Liar. Jesus fuck. You fucking freak

Brooke leaves the restaurant

(S4: E4)

The symbolic meaning of this scene encapsulates Max's conflict with both heterosexual and homosexual culture. He slips into an identity between male and female because his discursive actions and physicality are male, but his intended sexual acts cannot currently be. Although he manages to suppress the information that his body is still female at a pool party by making medical excuses for it not to be uncovered (S4: E3) this cannot be maintained. Therefore he has aspects of both performed discursive tropes of gender and the physical aspect of his performance cannot be fully completed. He is labeled as dishonest because he isn't displaying or adhering to the norms which heterosexual culture claims as essential and conventional in wider culture. Although *The L Word* is developing a narrative that could be termed as educational with regard to gender transition (Reed, 2009), there is a distinct attempt to de-queer the Max character and ensure that a gender role is maintained in seasons three and four. To do anything else is constructed as dishonest and emotionally problematic for Max's current and future partners. Whilst Los Angeles provides a safe space for Max to explore his gender and sexuality, ultimately he needs to fit into a binary of gender to exist

and function in wider social spaces. In essence in the wider world; the reaction to Max's transgender identity is reflective of, and reiterates, the violent reaction to Moira's butchness on the initial trip from the Mid-West.

In order to understand this treatment of Max and other queer identities in the narrative, it is useful to turn to Judith Butler. Butler outlined in her early work *Gender Trouble* (1990) that the notions of gender we take to be naturalized and which seem essential to society are in fact performed, but these performances are so persuasive in society that they are considered to be the essential truth about ourselves. She also states that those who do not adhere to these performances of "gender as cultural fictions" are subject to, "the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them" (1990: 179). In her further work she then focuses on *Undoing Gender* (2004) which attempts to strike a balance between her work on autonomous and possible freedom of performing an alternative gender with a consideration of the ideologies and institutions which connect people together in terms of gender but may also deny particular people of a status of being human through a judgment of them based on their ability to correctly perform ideologically normalized gender practices.

Brooke, and the interviewer at 'Intechmode', and the members of the lesbian community discussed above in this subsection are solid examples of seemingly 'gender sound' individuals who are part of the heteronormative institutions which may impede Max's ability to be seen as complete in terms of his humanity. They belong to families and workplaces, and although these may be non-normative families in terms of same sex parents and such like, they are still enacting heteronormative identities that connects them with others in society and clearly labels their status as "human" (Butler, 2004: 37).

Until Max gains a stable identity it appears that he cannot be part of these institutions in the world. This development of Butler's early and celebratory theory around the possibility of gender performance as subversive via the exemplification of drag (1990) helps to locate Max's predicament in society. Butler's work around drag has been previously critiqued for the focus of her studies of subversion being focused on drag and gender parody (an event which is typically 'performed' on stage or outside of wider society). In essence Max's transformation and queerness as he goes through transformation isn't enough to challenge the political structures of those around him. The panoptic control of power surrounding him is too strong due to societal institutions.

In *Undoing Gender* Butler acknowledges that her account of performance as subversive needs a social context which extends beyond the realms of drag and into theory around transgender and transsexual identities as part of 'The New Gender Politics' (2004: 4). She claims that an individual can be 'undone' by the performance of genders and excluded from parts of society we really need to fully function and exist; thus in this sense the subversive impact of queer theory isn't realized and is often actively rejected by those dominant in society (as seen above). The use of this approach for understanding the issues encountered by those with a trans identity is critiqued by Talia Bettcher (2009: [online]) who outlines that:

Effectively, then, Butler recognizes that insofar as queer theory aims to undermine the 'illusion' of stable identities while arguing against the viability of a politics based upon identity categories, it is in opposition to intersex and transsexual activism both of which are centered upon identities (i.e., intersex identity and transsexual identity)...Her earlier work found subversion only in the *disruption* of stable identity. She recognizes here, however, that without some stability, life is not livable.

So, whilst Butler saw the potential for drag and the performance of gender to highlight the cultural nature of gender and further outlined that gender identity could be fluid through the use of imitated conventions, she only later realised that particular labels and identities are needed for people to feel that they have a stable sense of self. In essence it is the societal norms that both constrict and define Max, it is these norms that fuel the lesbian group's expectations and judgments of him. It is also such norms which see him excluded from work events and branded a "freak" by heterosexual culture.

In relation to this Butler's emphasis is no longer on subverting gender norms to expose their ideological and hegemonic power, but instead to explore the different norms present in society and their relation to how people can manage their gender in order to make their lives livable, a state which relies on 'various degrees of stability' (2004: 9). In her reconsidered approach Butler now considers the context within which society functions, and her discussion of norms reflects the experience of Max, who finds life difficult to live when institutions and norms lack the stability of a clearly asserted gender identity.

In *The L Word* there are only very limited spaces which allow for the expression of queerness and to completely diversify from social norms and expectations around gender. Max's behavior when he encounters one of these limited spaces is interesting in light of the theory discussed above. During his interactions at 'The Planet' (the coffee shop where the main characters congregate each day) in season three we see a different and more confident side to Max. During this season 'The Planet' is managed by Billie Blaikie who is a drag artist continually playing with the boundaries of gender in his performative life. As an example of the general ethos encouraged by Blaikie during his first evening at 'The Planet', we see him organize an event called 'Vulva Las Vegas', a casino themed event that sees him

as host, heavily made up and wearing a head dress. He is also dressed in a tight corset and his demeanor and outfit straddle the visual codes belonging to both male and female gender performance. In the opening scene of the event, he introduces the evening with a focus on a clearly diverse queered audience (S3: E2),

Billie: Girls, boys, punks, freaks, butches, femme, kings, queens, trannies, ladies and gentlemen!

The discursive cues used in this scene operate to construct Billie's space as a queered space. Like Butler's theory around the performance of drag, he is embracing and celebrating the lack of social norms attributed to the social groups that he mentions. 'The Planet' is thus constructed as a small space, which isn't subject to the same social norms that restrict those at the margins of gender identity. During Billie's time at 'The Planet' we see him interact with Moira/Max, he compares them as being similar in the way that people, "like us, who've chosen to change their bodies to match up with their brains, and a few who've changed their brains to match up with their bodies" (S3: E4). Billie also has gay male sex with Max in season three with Billie in his identity of gay man, this takes place at 'The Planet' and Max also claims that Billie makes him, "feel like a man".

Overall, and rather ironically, the aptly named 'The Planet' is really the only space that Max can feel safe to display the transitory process of a female to male transgender. The public space of mainstream restaurants or the workplace are not safe places for Max to do this, and the reactions he receives from people with strict and settled binary gender identities are judgmental. They also nullify any notion of gender subversion and make it virtually impossible for the transitory Moira/Max to exist in a socially effective way. In wider social spaces where heteronormativity is so well structured the politically tense nature of

interaction highlights the difficulties society has with those who subvert ideology. The drag space is indicative of Butler's early work, it is really only in the performative space that Moira/Max can truly be Moira/Max; there are no restrictions on gender or sexuality with Billie and new meanings around gender can be contested and assigned new meanings. But, ultimately Max does have to face the outside world and social issues that impact on transgender lives. 'The Planet' is conducive to different kinds of social norms, and it is one of the few spaces where marginalized Max can experience a livable life where autonomy is no longer culturally denied by either heterosexual culture or heteronormative lesbian culture. This is really where autonomous expression and the freedom of potentially liberatory performance ends in *The L Word*.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Mainstreaming, Commercialism and 'The End' – seasons five and six.

This final chapter in my detailed analysis of *The L Word* focuses on the end of the lifecycle of the series, concentrating on seasons five and six and the online comment of some viewers about the changing discursive constructions within the programme. During this phase of the programme the narrative direction of the show changed significantly. Through the analysis that follows I make the case that the discourses produced from the final narrative thrust of the show organised significantly different meanings that fragmented the solid and inclusive sense of lesbian identity that had been established in the first episodes, and increasing utilised more traditional meanings about lesbian culture that were apparent in the sorts of programming I examined in chapter four.

This chapter, therefore, further explores *The L Word* using a number of examples from seasons five and six that exemplify this fragmentation. I then repeat the approach I established in chapter six, relating my textual analysis of the televisual text to a discussion of audience's responses to the final narrative phase and to Ilene Chaiken's public and promotional justification of her creative decisions during the later seasons of the show. I argue that Chaiken constructs a very different sense of lesbian subjectivity within, both *The L Word* narrative and characterisation, and her own recorded justifications for these decisions, than those created in the earlier seasons of the show. While, as I showed in chapter six, these earlier seasons produced an inclusive and supportive sense of lesbian culture, and placed these high within the constructed order of discourse both in and around the show, as I now demonstrate the final two seasons were characterised by a different narrative sensibility and a very different treatment of lesbian identity.

The initial focus of my discussion focuses on the increasingly dystopic nature of *The L Word* across these final two seasons, and the representation of lesbians within a lesbian

community which is increasingly fragmented and individualised, so that characters become increasingly unstable, potentially criminal and morally questionable. In the second part of the chapter I look in particular at the ‘whodunnit’ regarding the death of the Jenny Schecter character; a narrative, which is never fully resolved, as the murderer, is never uncovered. At the same time, though, the notions of stable characters discussed in earlier chapters are undermined and there is a return to discourses around deviancy and immorality for the final narrative closure of the show, which interestingly also extend beyond the broadcast of the show into ‘webisodes’ hosted on Showtime’s online site. These ‘webisodes’ were so called online ‘interrogation tapes’ relating to the central characters being questioned about the death of Schecter and is, as such, applicable during a discursive analysis of the text. These episodes will be approached as a seminal aspect of the final seasons in terms of narrative fragmentation and the construction of meaning related to lesbian subjectivity.

Narrative fragmentation, identity and community

A consistent focus of *The L Word* has been ‘The Chart’. As discussed in earlier chapters, ‘The Chart’ clearly represents the collective nature of a lesbian community which is interlinked by sexual and relationship interactions. This alongside other meaning constructions in early seasons enhanced a sense of a lesbian ‘team’ with shared experiences, relationships and understanding, and even manifested into an online space named *OurChart* where lesbian audiences could build profiles, write blog posts and share information about lesbian culture. However this website was relatively short-lived once the programme ended. What is apparent, though, is that the continuation of the show focuses more on a different type of representation of community and togetherness, and explores the nuances to a greater degree than those asserted in season one (this has previously been discussed in chapter six).

In seasons five and six we begin to see both the narrative and characters critique the nature of the lesbian community and even attempt to escape it partially or wholly. This critique results in a change in the order of discourse in relation to ‘The Chart’ and lesbian community – it moves from being an overt representation of communal interest and support to being a centralised focus of problems that arise for characters with an impending construction of claustrophobia and expectation rather than communal interest. As the narrative develops the modern lesbian community and culture appears to be more of a problem than an aid to the characters’ enjoyment of life both inside and outside of lesbian culture.

This is perhaps best considered through a differentiation of community ‘lesbian identity’ and ‘individual identity’. The identity-community dichotomy in the latter seasons of *The L Word* seems to be the most problematic for both viewers, characters, and in terms of traditionally rounded narratives. Evidently in early seasons the community within the narrative tended to support the development of individual identities as being transitional into a lesbian, ideally also into a professional, and possibly a parent. As an example of this we saw support for Jenny Schecter’s transition into lesbian culture via her coming out (S2: E4). Dana’s escape from her closeted identity (S1: E8) and the lesbian groups support for Bette and Tina’s attempts at IVF (S1). It appears that in the latter seasons the characters are unable to disentangle particular aspects of their discursive behaviour as individuals from the problematic aspects of being and acting as part of a lesbian community.

Infidelity, relationship breakdown and celibacy

Season five contains a wide variety of storylines but for the purposes of exemplifying the growing discursive issues with the security of lesbian identity and practice in the show; I have selected some pertinent aspects from the final seasons. As an initial example, during season five the sexually prolific lesbian and centre of 'The Chart' Shane attempts celibacy after committing infidelity and splitting with her partner. Shane is also portrayed as causing chaos at a wedding by having sex with two bridesmaids (S5: E2); her sexual actions are shown as having distinct social consequences during the latter seasons. During the narrative Shane is shown as breaking up a family unit which also consists of two children, an ideologically normative situation which the character of Shane seems unable to accept or live within the confines of. In S5: E1 we see Shane being confronted by partner Paige (Kristanna Loken) about the promise of family life Shane may offer to her, her son, and Shane's brother Shay. The verbal confrontation they have takes place at a 'coming out' party at 'The Planet'. Visually in this scene Shane is shown as integrated to the lesbian team and culture. She is shown in tight close up shots talking and drinking with Tina and Alice. This is intercut with shots of other key characters from *The L Word* community celebrating the coming out of '50 something' Phyllis (Cybil Shepherd) and is openly flirting with a stranger in order to procure her for friend Tina. This is a scene representative of the interactions of lesbian community in reality as the visual parallels with the pre-existing notion of 'The Chart' are clear. Shane is visually shown as the focus of lesbian culture as the woman she attempts to procure is only interested in Shane. Paige then interrupts the visual representation of Shane as the hub of lesbian sexual activity to discuss what can be construed as an ideological situation more distinct to heterosexuality,

Paige: I just want to know one thing. Why did you ask me and Jared to move in with you?

Shane: Alright, let's talk about this outside, come on.

Paige: No...no.

Alice raises her eyebrows and sighs behind Paige

Paige: I just want you to answer me.

Shane: Alright, I asked you and Jared to move in with me because I thought it would be good for us.

Paige: Good for us? You mean like eating all your green vegetables? Why did you tell Jared that Shay was coming back?

Shane: Paige, I never wa...I never said Shay was coming back. I said that I wanted him to and that that was my plan, but I never ever promised Jared that.

Paige: That we would all be one big, happy family, huh? Is that what you told him?

Shane puts head in hand

Paige turns to Alice and Tina

Paige: Is that what she told you?

Alice: Errrr...me...we didn't talk a lot

Shane furiously gestures behind Paige's back for Alice to say something

Tina: We're gonna go...

Alice: yep...

Tina and Alice walk away

Paige: You know what, it doesn't matter...I know you have a problem. I know it's who you are...and I can't expect you to change overnight...I can actually live with it.

Shane: You shouldn't have to live with it.

Paige: It's just sex...

Shane looks shocked

Shane: B...B...Paige, I know it's sex, but you deserve someone who wants to be with you and only loves you...and you alone.

Paige:...and you don't love me?

Shane: No, I do love you...

Paige:...but you're not in love with me?

Paige walks away leaving Shane and the party behind.

This particular narrative raises issues with the notion of lesbians as a coherent community and group and this also resonates in other narratives across the final two seasons, as I will discuss later in this chapter. It is pertinent that this scene takes place at a lesbian event symbolic of 'The Chart'. This constructs a place where lesbians gather and discuss their interactions and relationships with each other. We literally see Shane attempting to make new physical connections with other characters and although this is for the purposes of making a connection for Tina, Shane maintains her role as central to the Los Angeles hub of lesbian sexual and social activity. She is unable to escape this role even though symbolically her actions are focused on trying to help a friend.

Shane's interaction with soon to be ex-partner Paige is typified through a discourse often seen in television and film. This 'break-up' discourse is also heavily linked to Shane being unable to conform to heterosexual constructions of love. Paul Johnson (2005) argues that in a heterosexual ideological culture the idea of love is constructed around marriage, family and procreation. Shane appears unable to adhere to this expectation and so feels unable to fulfil any promises, even when offered an open relationship. This results in Shane being isolated from the possibilities of assimilation into heterosexual normalisation and also means that she is partially excluded from a lesbian culture that can embrace a feminine lesbian identity, and heterosexual expectations of monogamy and commitment. Both the characters of Alice and Tina, who strive for lasting relationships, encapsulate these ideals and visually walk away from the defence of Shane in this overt symbolism of 'The Chart'. The character of Paige also literally leaves her behind in an environment that is symbolically that of a lesbian and sexualised culture.

The oppositional discourses of love and romance in the narrative foreground a particular ideology as desirable. Modleski (2008) argues that this is ideologically traditional in TV drama and soap opera. There is little positive in terms of the construction of the non-monogamy that Shane increasingly encapsulates due to the lack of traditional narrative closure expected with regard to a relationship. This encourages a clear relation between the acceptable construction of love and sex that is so often seen in televisual narratives. If the discourse had been constructed differently it could have opened up the possibilities beyond a discursive judgement that encourages gay assimilation and adherence to a particular binary which links love and sex to what Queer Politics may consider are restrictive associations related to marriage, family and the ideological concept of love and relationships serving

nature (Bell and Binnie, 2000). In essence Shane is representative of the outcome of wider social isolation seemingly involved with a queered sense of relationships in this particular lesbian community and also in traditional forms of relationships that have established rules within them. According to Rapping (1992: xvii) the reason that the discursive outcome of this narrative matters is because television shows:

matter because they operate in a unique way as discursive sites upon which representations and ideologies of ‘the family’ are struggled over first in the text itself and then in the larger public sphere of social and political relations, by virtue of the form’s special position among popular narrative texts and its intertextual relations to other discursive structures – news broadcasts, media critique and debate, formal and informal gatherings in which...their topics are discussed.

In S5: E3 we see a continuation of lesbian culture causing issues with Shane and her assimilation into wider normative culture. We see Shane in the gym, after a number of close shots of Shane undertaking press ups foregrounding the construction of butchness, there is a panning shot that follows Tina and Alice into the gym. At this point they question Shane on an apparent decision to be celibate in the light of her business recently being subject to an arsonist they suspect to be her ex girlfriend Paige. This was shortly after Paige discovered Shane having sex with a realtor, who was at the time trying to sell the couple a family home. Shane’s response uses a lexis which connotes that this decision is meaningful in nature and a serious undertaking; it is a significant break from the sexualised and ‘butch’ construction of Shane and is another attempt to escape her queerness,

Shane: ...I have declared a moratorium on sex...a moratorium on drama and a moratorium on jealousy.

Alice: ...and a moratorium on girls throwing rocks through your windows and burning your shit down.

Shane continues whilst we see a medium close up of Alice and Tina shaking their heads,

Shane: No, no! I’m telling you I’m fucking done. A few days ago I decided to take a major break from sex, thereby eliminating the main cause of insanity in my life...and I gotta tell you girls, I have never, ever felt so freakishly clear headed, or highly energised.

Shane makes a clear verbal conflation of “sex, drama and jealousy”. For her these are central aspects of her life and link to the community around her. This links to a constructed meaning that her particular expression of her lesbian sexual self is uncontrollable and socially problematic, it is ultimately queer in terms of the assimilatory expectations being performed by many other participants in *The L Word*’s lesbian culture seen in early and mid seasons of the show where characters settle into relationships and form family style bonds. This is also reflective of the changing social context surrounding the show where moves towards gay marriage (and the monogamous definition of gay and lesbian relationships) have dominated gay politics and are becoming increasingly foregrounded as normalised and acceptable in wider culture:

Nationwide, a slim but growing majority of Americans favours marriage equality. Democrats seeking election now do better when gay marriage is also on the ballot. That is a striking reversal from 2004, when proposed bans in 11 states inspired George Bush-backing social conservatives to turn out in droves.
Anon, 2014: [online]

Dystopia

This is a major character narrative change for *The L Word* and is just one aspect of a sense of dystopia developing in seasons five and six. During these seasons the notion of the lesbian community, previously represented as team-like and supportive through the image of ‘The Chart’ and social interaction is shown to be destructive in the lives of a variety of characters. Shane’s description of her sexual involvement in lesbian culture constructs the idea that it is claustrophobic and destructive in nature. Shane’s centrality to ‘The Chart’ has been discursively constructed through the portrayal of her sexual practice and so her verbalisation and actions early in season five define a clear parallel between her intended actions and pulling away from the lesbian community through not undertaking sexual practices. The clear change here is that the current sense of community is seen as a significant problem in Shane’s life. She clearly labels the community as “insanity”,

potentially as it is a community that now has increasing expectations on her in terms of responsibility and behaviour. Her reaction of celibacy is one attempt to conform to the governmentality of her cultural situation through self-surveillance. In terms of sexual practice the discursive actions of Shane are about altering the Foucauldian, “techniques of the self” and those “reflective and voluntary practices by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being” (1985: 10).

Later in S5: E3 we see Shane, closely framed with a concentrated expression as she stares intently at a fellow female gym member. Although we cannot see Shane’s feet we can see from the movement within the frame that she is peddling frantically on an exercise bike, this is representative of her sexual frustration and increasing inability to escape from her role at the centre of ‘The Chart’ and what is portrayed as her essential lesbian self. Here she is metaphorically trying to escape her central role in the Los Angeles lesbian scene and community. But, the constructed meaning is focused on Shane’s concentrated sexual focus on another woman and this contradicts her verbalisation about an enforced celibacy that she has undertaken. By the end of S5: E3 it is apparent that Shane is unable to escape the confines of ‘The Chart’ or her sexuality, as she unexpectedly makes a sexual pass at close friend Helena. Shane’s reaction to this is one of shock, and this exemplifies her inability to control her sexual feelings and also to escape her role as central to the lesbian community through her innate and uncontrollable sexual practice.

Escape from ‘The Chart’ is impossible in the instance of Shane, and this seems to be a unique aspect to her character in *The L Word*. Whilst other characters have issues within the constructed lesbian culture, Shane is the only character who seems unable to exist

successfully completely outside of its expectations. The interactions of discourses that are representatively placed as ‘outside lesbian culture’ cause significant problems for her as a character and it is arguable this is due to her masculinised portrayal as butch lesbian in a contemporary and changing lesbian culture. For Shane her continuing attempt at celibacy is visualised as literally causing her mental health issues as she begins presses buttons frantically on a GameBoy as she begins to hallucinate that all the waitresses at ‘The Planet’ are naked. She then asks to get her food ‘to go’, both literally and figuratively, again, looking to escape from the confines of a lesbian space and her own inability to cope around women without seeing them all as sexual objects and potential conquests.

To this end it appears that the only comfortable identity for Shane is one where she embraces not only her role as ‘butch’ (although in a lesbian chic focused text such as *The L Word* this is more of a subtextually coded butch, one relatively palatable to a mainstream audience) but also as sexual and masculinised lesbian. She is unable to deny her sexual self and needs to partake in a lesbian sexual practice; this is often emotionless and purely focused on sexual gratification. Another example of this is seen in season five where Shane ends her celibacy by having an on-going threesome arrangement with Dawn Denbo (Elizabeth Keener) and her ‘lover Cindy’ (Alicia Leigh Willis) Again, this narrative also ends as problematic as Shane again queers the expectations of her by seducing Cindy when Cindy is alone, again undermining the sense that she is able to have any relationship, even one which has rules agreed outside the confines of traditional ideology.

As the most strongly asserted lesbian identity she is shown as unable to blend into the normative practices of heterosexualised culture; unable to have a formed relationship, to maintain a responsibility to a family unit or commit to marriage. In this instance *The L Word*

creates an issue for the identity of butch lesbians; they are diversely represented through the archetypal nature of Shane throughout *The L Word*. The meaning constructed in the latter seasons is a butch that cannot escape the world of lesbian culture, sexual practice, or access ideologies that have traditionally been associated with heterosexualised society. Whilst the more feminine lesbian representations seem to be able to cross over into the normalised discourses of heterosexuality it appears that Shane can only exist within the confines of the lesbian world and embrace her isolated role within it no matter how unhappy the narrative then appears to make her character. To this end lesbian masculinity is displayed as authentic, essential, and ingrained but incompatible with the changing cultural expectations of wider society that further restrict the sense of who lesbians are, what they do and how they can behave.

Thus, in *The L Word* Shane's only affirmation as a stable lesbian identity is via her interaction with 'The Chart' and the discourse created hints at her inability to escape an essentialist self that is problematic, destructive, and ultimately leads to her own unhappiness and isolation. During Shane's interrogation tape we also learn she committed arson against her own business. In S6: E1 we see the consequences of Shane having sex with her best friend's girlfriend. She breaks societies rules in a number of ways and her increasing centrality to sexual practice is problematic. This seems to further underline the instability of her identity and her queerness is constructed as non-committal, dangerous, subversive, and non-traditional. This construction is one that equates with a crucial identity problem where Shane cannot foster individuality outside of her place in the lesbian community due to the problematic nature of her behaviour for mainstream culture. The character of Tina even points out that her sexual actions have consequences (S6: E1) and that Shane should give more thought to her actions. Shane agrees but also accepts she deserves punishment. This is

an interesting ideological factor that appears to dominate her character in the final two seasons of the show. The concepts of 'identity' and 'community' are of pertinent value when exploring this clearly disruptive discourse in the show. Susan Krieger (1982:92) defines a distinct difference between lesbian as 'community' and lesbian as 'individual':

Identity is...to refer to feelings and ideas an individual has about herself. These feelings and ideas change over time but at any point they have a rough coherence. They are the means by which a person distinguishes the 'me' from the 'not me,' the self from the other of from the web of others who constitute a social world...The idea of community...refers to a range of social groups in which the lesbian individual may feel a sense of camaraderie with other lesbians, a sense of support, shared understanding, shared vision, shared sense of self 'as a lesbian,' vis-à-vis the outside world.

In these terms Shane appears to be looking to explore her own singular (queer) identity outside of her lesbian sexual behaviour which gives an inextricable link to the lesbian community; that of sexual practice and interactions with virtually every other woman on 'The Chart'. This is what has defined her role in the Los Angeles community until this point. Her actions within the community have shifted from being a centralised sexual hub to that which has led to an, "internal complaint of exclusion, alienation, extreme disappointment, and loss of sense of self", that Krieger says is not "ideologically popular" (1982: 92) in lesbian communities. This altering in the order of discourse from earlier seasons disrupts the claim of a show that claims in its opening score to show and celebrate the, "Way that we live".

The lesbian community as problematic

The above is not the only example of a narrative in seasons five and six that challenges the cohesive nature of lesbian culture and identity in *The L Word*. The character of Tasha Williams (Rose Rollins) is introduced as a major character in season four. The narrative development of the character is further reflective of the impact of the lesbian community as

problematic and dystopic in terms of marrying a sense of individual identity and lesbian community. Tasha is a Captain in the US National Guard and serves as a Military Police Officer. In season five the narrative explores the impact of joining *The L Word's* lesbian community on her prevalent singular identity as military personnel. This identity is highlighted as central to Tasha's life as she claims that:

I've dedicated my life to the military...I'm not fighting to allow gays to serve openly in the military. I'm not even trying to overturn 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell', that's not going to happen right now...I'm fighting to stay in the military, I've worked my whole life for this.

S5:E2

Tasha's identity is clearly constructed throughout S4 as focused on her vocation, verbally she clearly highlights in season five that she is not willing to put this profession aside for political reasons. She has spent time in a warzone and been party to the death of a close friend. However in S5 Tasha becomes subject to investigation under the US Army rule that homosexuality is only allowable under the 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' policy which ran until well after the broadcasting period of S5 until 2011. This policy stated that:

A person's sexual orientation is considered a personal and private matter, and is not a bar to service entry or continued service unless manifested by homosexual conduct unless manifested by...a homosexual act, a statement by the applicant that demonstrates a propensity or intent to engage in homosexual acts, or a homosexual marriage or attempted marriage. Propensity to engage in homosexual acts means more than an abstract preference or desire to engage in homosexual acts; it indicates a likelihood that a person engages in or will engage in homosexual acts.

Anon, 1993: [online]

It is portrayed in S5: E4 that Tasha's identity, as a lesbian is not compatible with the wider mainstream world and her vocation. The military makes a visit to Tasha's partner Alice during this episode and again 'The Chart' is literally and visually displayed as an issue with regard to acceptance in mainstream culture. As two military men are let into Alice's apartment they look at her books, magazines, flyers and most importantly her version of

'The Chart' displayed on her whiteboard. The visual discourses in this scene are clear. Alice places a picture of Tasha face down on the desk, she appears very nervous in the face of questioning. Later in the same episode we see Alice scrubbing frantically to clear her whiteboard and Tasha enters the apartment:

Alice: Are you alone, did anyone follow you?

Tasha: What?! What are you talking about? Are you okay?

Alice: No, I'm not okay!

Tasha: What the fuck are you doing?

Alice: I'm degayifying, they could come in and take a picture. They didn't even have a warrant. If they come here again there'll be no evidence of gay. You know what...

Alice picks up a picture of her and Tasha from the rubbish bin and hands it to Tasha

Alice: ...you'd better keep this somewhere safe.

The visual discourses here again reiterate that being part of 'The Chart' and lesbian community can be a negative experience. Alice speaks with a fearful tone and Tasha seems both confused and upset that military officers have infiltrated her partner's private life. Alice verbally states that the male officers scared her and she was determined not to 'out' Tasha. In this instance their lesbian sexuality is divisive in terms of societal acceptance and the community of lesbians is something to be hidden from mainstream views as it undermines vocational inclusion. Sexuality in this instance is constructed as something that can be used against the characters and is certainly not as celebratory as the discourses present in earlier seasons.

Not only is lesbian sexuality shown as socially problematic and worthy of an investigation. It is also portrayed as something that has consequences on mental health and causes possible suicidal feelings. At one point Alice (S6: E3) is asked to talk a suicidal teenager from the ledge of a building, the teenager has written to her after seeing her as a presenter on a television talk show. We are told that the police have returned the teenager to her parents on

previous occasions and they “beat the shit out of her”. So not only is lesbian sexuality shown as something to hide if you want to take part in the wider world but also as something that can lead to people feeling suicidal. Alice is fired from her job as a presenter for reading the teenager’s letter out on air. Further to this strand of discourse, Bette and Tina meet with a young woman with a view to adopting her unborn child. The woman’s parents arrive home to question the women and ask them to leave upon learning that they are lesbians (S6: E4). In all these instances there is a discourse created that sees lesbian identity as problematic in nature, divisive if separated out as a cultural identity. In this instance assimilation in terms of lesbians acting straight, limiting their overt sexual practice, or hiding their sexuality is posited as a possible solution in being quietly accepted into a dominant heterosexual ideology. Ultimately the lesbians in seasons five and six are portrayed as ‘others’ to the heterosexual community and are increasingly shown as lacking acceptance. Their sexuality is less celebrated and seen more as a distinct problem.

In terms of understanding the possible consequences of such discourses John Hartley has a useful point of view. For Hartley television teaches people in an anthropological sense and can explore, ‘...the ways in which different populations with no necessary mutual affinity do produce and maintain knowledge about each other, communicate with each other’ (1999: 32). This mass mediation of lesbianism is still focused on the hegemonic social structures still strongly in place about alternative sexualities. So whilst *The L Word* offers some representational discourse for LGBT viewers in a positive sense. It appears that the latter two seasons of the show somewhat reined in the potential meanings around the freedom to express and embrace lesbian culture. It seems that although this position may now be allowable it is still located in a place of otherness, difference, and sometimes this leads to a sense of social isolation. Although lesbians are represented as part of an existing sense of

what Hartley terms, “cultural citizenship” (1999: 155) a discourse is constructed which is restrictive in nature and this doesn’t fulfil the full potential role of television as the promoter of cultural awareness or difference. In this case the early potential of the show appears to have become nullified and the potential of liberal outcomes from the discourses of the show appears to be overly optimistic. Dominant ideology appears to be at work in the meanings of the show and there is some assimilation of lesbian culture that is heteronormative and can be hidden (relationships and family) and the reiteration of overt lesbian sexual behaviour and clearly asserted lesbian identities as socially problematic and rejected by those linked to the dominant ideology (heterosexuals).

The End of The L Word: Fan Pleasure or Fan Pain?

As with any successful TV series, when *The L Word* ended on March 8th 2009 fans reacted in a variety of ways. For many lesbians *The L Word* was *the* seminal lesbian drama series of the early noughties. From its first broadcast many lesbian fans considered the show as primarily about, and more importantly, *for* them in terms of representation and narrative. What is of particular interest is the reaction of fans to the end of *The L Word* (which was broadcast with ongoing further narrative disclosures of a purely online nature via short ‘internet only’ interrogation scenes).

Here I want to fully explore the opinions present about the show on Showtime’s fan discussion forum (<http://www.sho.com/site/lword/interrogation.do>). This aspect of the work will analyse audience reactions to the end of *The L Word* and their considered reasoning and questioning of narrative choices in a commercial context. My reasoning for the choice of this particular forum was that it was consistently used by fans and was focused solely on the show. In terms of placement, it was alongside the weekly appearances of the ‘interrogation

tapes' and there had been 11,980 posts up to March 1st, 2010. This is arguably one of the most focused and detailed fan discussion areas in relation to the end of *The L Word*.

Narrative closure and lesbian screen death

Audience responses evidenced that the fan relationship with the show had soured somewhat in the light of narrative choices during the final season. Notably, many lesbian fans were disappointed with the lack of narrative closure and return to the traditional lesbian screen death (Russo, 1981) and characterisation of lesbians as untrustworthy at best and murderous at worst. This is of particular interest as such a focus emphasises how the cultural framework of lesbian viewers can impact on both their reading of a text and their political expectations of what is a commercially based and driven text. This discursive study will aim to uncover fans' understanding and awareness of the 'commercial imperative' within US television and interrogate how this understanding may impact upon their viewing pleasures. By foregrounding and analysing these audience responses I hope to further understand the barriers to lesbian audience pleasure in relation to serial drama, and discuss the possible link to production decisions and practice. After all, lesbian viewers being considered as a distinct group is a relatively new phenomenon for commercial television.

My aim is to uncover the key discourses present in online fan spaces which may evidence the emergence of the active and savvy lesbian viewer, who both understands commercial imperatives and decisions but also expects some political and positive representation through narrative. The notion of the active viewer is one long held in the cultural studies tradition with Stuart Hall (1997) introducing the consideration that the very cultural background of each individual media consumer may impact upon readings and, in this case, narrative acceptance of the varying lesbian identities in both the broadcast version of *The L Word* and the continuation of the narrative via Showtime's official website. This is further

underlined in terms of fandom by Matt Hills (2002) whose work on fan cultures outlines that ‘Cult’ fans often critique and display annoyance with producers via online spaces. This makes the focus of online discussion area ideal – in that it is detailed and also relatively easily available.

The dominant feeling on the discussion forum was one of negativity, but to offer some balance to this study it is necessary to outline some of the key pleasures that fans of the show enjoyed. Postings to the site that linked the show to pleasurable experiences seemed to be focused on quite generalised factors, rather than distinct plotlines in season six of the show. Although there were a few postings which alluded to the finale of the show being a pleasurable event:

I thought it was an excellent finale. I think it was true to life- you can't have things neatly wrapped up- that is why I like the L Word so much because it seems real to me... The relationships aren't perfect, the friendships are up and down and each character you like and dislike...

BBNash, March 11th 2009.

I think we all feel this a great series and we all would love more... but why does a series have to answer questions for you. Leave it to your imagination. Great job by the writers!!

Jeremy, March 12th 2009.

Postings similar to these support the point that some fans seemed to enjoy the non-traditional narrative finale of the show, where the narrative around the death of Jenny Schecter was left in a state of disequilibrium. Television is often considered as having eventual narrative closure, especially in the serial drama genre at the closure of a season; especially a final season. The pleasure for these viewers was the sense of ‘realism’ that was constructed through an open narrative. They define this as a kind of ‘realism’ as reflective of their own lives and experiences but more importantly this ‘realism’ lacks resolution and is vastly different from the classic realist narrative which has solid closure and equilibrium at the conclusion. It is also vastly different from the theoretical understanding of the

construction of realism that imposes coherence and resolution on a world that has neither (Fiske, 1987). For these particular members of the audience the final season's pleasures are related to *The L Word* being a writerly text (Fiske, 1987) rather than a closed readerly text which doesn't allow for resistive or open readings.

This pleasure is perhaps explained as an active and alternative reading of the text in comparison to the weight of negative commentary that dominates the forum (which will be further discussed later in this chapter). The lack of narrative closure at the *end* of a television serial as enjoyable is a theoretically uncommon position for television viewers to take. It is arguably a postmodern position, as this particular season of *The L Word* seems to, "eschew to codes and conventions of realism and narrative", and has a, "significant tendency to tinker with television's earlier and more sacred realist traditions" (Calvert, 2008:172). Although rare, this pleasure is perhaps a growing aspect of postmodern television and mirrors approaches to narrative seen in *Twin Peaks* (Lavery, 1995) and *The Sopranos* (Miklitsch, 2006), but pleasures taken from this postmodern approach appear to be limited to small numbers of the audience analysed in the case of *The L Word*.

Another reason for the enjoyment and pleasure of the series was its ability to create discussion and debate. Some forum contributors believed this made both the series and executive producer Ilene Chaiken an artistic success:

You really need to respect the artist's concept for the L Word. Like it or not, and obviously we loved the series!! And whether you approved of the ending, it has gotten more comments and attention which is what any artist wants
Aimee Gaston-voss, May 5th 2009.

Ileen Chaiken says to form you own opinion about the end. I think the last season was a creative jump that stands alone. It was intriguing, earth-shattering but what can I say, it mirrored life and sometimes there are no happy endings
Lucas DeLeon, May 14th 2009.

These audience members again celebrate the narrative openness of the show and seem to take pleasure in Ilene Chaiken's online interview (Showtime, 2009c) where she encourages viewers to make their own decisions about the end of the show and the limited closure presented. This is discussed by the posters using a discourse of artistic creativity; these postings construct Chaiken as not only a television creator and producer but as being creatively unique in maintaining the audience focus. Jonathan Bignall (2004: 170) offers some reasoning as to why audiences refer to television in this critically aware way and links this to the postmodern condition where television is discussed so widely and heavily it becomes part of an artistic discourse,

Baudrillard would argue that the whole issue of value has been made redundant by the postmodern mixing of elite and popular cultural forms. Art has become a commodity...while commodities are discussed as if they were art. For Baudrillard the question of value is an amusing and irrelevant hangover from an earlier age.

These audience members present a discourse which links artistic and creative success with discussion and attention to subject matter, rather than depth or communication of meaning in the actual textual artefact itself. Again, this could be considered part of the postmodern experience of television consumption; where narrative and closure is inconsequential and experience, enjoyment and attention to aesthetics is prioritised.

The audience responses analysed also highlighted that lesbian viewers of *The L Word* gained distinct pleasures. Interestingly some of these pleasures were not focused around the narrative, an aspect which actually gained the most negative focus from the discussion forum. The pleasures of lesbian viewers were about lesbian visibility, support and encouragement, and a sense of community:

LEAVE ILENE ALONE!!! yall should be happy we even had a series devoted to us...just thank ilene and all the beautiful people for making this happen...
kms, March 12th2009.

...Who cares "who killed Jenny"? Get on with real life and be grateful we had 6 years of "our moment in the sun".

Barb, March 11th 2009.

Comments such as these were quite typical on the discussion site and seemed to represent that whilst it was understandable for both lesbian and straight viewers to be disappointed and angered with the lack of narrative resolution, for lesbian viewers there was a factor that should never be forgotten – that *The L Word* centred on lesbian characters and lesbian life as its main focus. The defence of any production decisions was dominated by the fact that Chaiken had brought a lesbian ensemble drama to mainstream television screens. Although it can be argued that gay and lesbian audiences have had a number of overtly gay characters to identify with since the early 1990s and many of these representations dealt with gay topics and gay problems (Becker, 2004) *The L Word* differs from this representational path in that it focuses on ‘lesbian life’ and everyday culture; gay characters are not just an ‘add on’ to the show. This particular show extends beyond gayness as a problem, issue or deviation from the ideological norm and for some parts of the audience this is something to be ultimately celebrated regardless of their other critical issues with the show. Arguably, this perspective evidences the show was both a (sub) cultural success and, for Showtime, a successful commercial entity representing lesbians in a prime time narrowcasting environment.

'Meaningful discourse' and the 'frameworks of knowledge'

What is of further interest is the root of the pleasure that lesbian viewers have gained from *The L Word*. This certainly seemed to be at the heart of the posting from a lesbian viewer who responded with vitriol to a fellow poster's claims that the representation of lesbians in *The L Word* lacked diversity:

...There is no way to depict every "kind of lesbian relationship and every lifestyle" and to believe so is extremely closed minded. What this show succeeded in doing is presenting lesbians to people who had no access to them. And shame on you for thinking to deny them. This show has been a life line to many people. People like me, who grew up in the bible belt, who were taught that homosexuality would damn us. In short go fix your screwed up relationship and stop hating

J.R. March 16th 2009.

The principle of pleasure here was based on a solid understanding of the limits and potential problems of any kind of representation on television. Clearly this poster understands that representations are framed, selected and constructed by television producers. But the pleasure taken in the show is again related to support and acceptance in the form of a cultural and political challenge to the discourses of religion that this viewer had been subject to in her own life. Arguably the pleasure here was one that was formed from the ability of television to produce what could be considered in a Foucauldian sense as an alternative discourse and a challenge to force relations (Hekman, 1996). For this viewer *The L Word* encapsulated a challenge to the normalising and restrictive discourse she had been subject to during her formative years; for her this is an important change in the discourse of lesbian sexuality.

This aspect of this chapter has briefly discussed the feelings of pleasure audience members have experienced in relation to *The L Word*. This next section of this research is a reflection of the balance of the postings to the discussion at *The L Word's* official Showtime website.

Therefore there will a greater concentration on the negative readings of the text by audience members. The purpose of this focus is not to argue whether or not *The L Word* is a 'good' or 'bad' televisual text; that would be a futile exercise. Instead the purpose of this section of the work is to understand the reasons for negative audience readings in a textual sense and socio-political and commercial context.

What is evident when initially considering the postings to the site is that the negative commentary is focused distinctly on the narrative and character development of season six. This is a different focus from the previously discussed posters who focused less on specific textual elements and more on the 'bigger picture' of *The L Word* and its meanings when referring to the pleasure they gained from the show. Much of the anger about the show was anchored in the lack of narrative closure around the death of Jenny Schecter. It seems that there was an overriding justification for this as the basis of the expectation of narrative closure found root in the promotional material which promised, "This season one of our favourites will take her last breath...and one of her friends will take the fall..."(Showtime, 2009b).

The angry response about narrative openness was shared by both straight and lesbian viewers alike, comments which typify the point of view in relation to narrative were:

although only a recent (straight) fan (have only seen 2 seasons, all in 2 months!), i am tremendously disappointed in this lazy, imitation sopranos ending. i don't need everything wrapped up tidily, but when your tagline for the season is "who killed jenny schecter?" i expect and await the answer with glee. this was the complete opposite of glee, i feel totally ripped off and i've never seen a worse series finale (sic).

spitfire, March 12th 2009.

How could such a "break through" show that helped so many people be shown in this world. Have a place, come out, and be even more proud than we were before end like this? There are soooo many more questions than answers. I've never felt more betrayed as an L word fan...

Yoziie March 16th 2009.

Perhaps these angry responses can be explained through narrative theory, and to this end ideas focused on serial drama and deferred narratives are relevant. Although serial drama has generic qualities which mean that complete narrative closure is usually resisted and there is no 'happy ever after', this is usually considered as being a key part of keeping the audience interest. It appears that *The L Word* managed to maintain the audience interest but only through the expectation that questions would be answered, rather than merely posed by the end of the final season; there was a sense that the audience would know who would "take the fall" for Jenny's death. The episode one introduction of Jenny's death and continual suspension of the narrative encouraged viewers to stay watching the season, thus fulfilling the generic quality of serial drama. The subsequent lack of closure to that particular narrative strand caused the audience to feel cheated and led astray by the show's promotional material and genre. Serial drama maintains viewers and gives them viewing pleasure as it has the ongoing multiple narrative strands which find some individual closure at different temporal points. The issue with *The L Word* was that the main and well advertised narrative strand was left open, along with the majority of other narrative strands introduced late into the season. This is further evidenced by the audience expectation that until there is some reward of resolution to at least *some* of the narrative strands the text should continue in one form or another:

...Can't you just have like a miny series to rap it up?...

Let Down, March 12th 2009.

There were many posts asking for an *L Word* movie or for the series to continue, and much of this was fuelled by the lack of closure. Clearly this particular audience find comfort and clarity in the generic normalcy of serial drama and reacted angrily to the textual challenge to their expectations – especially as they were often told in promotional material that this was the ‘final season’ of *The L Word*. In some senses the producers had fulfilled the generic quality of narrative deferment and had left their audiences wanting more, just seemingly at the wrong time in the lifespan the show; the end.

Some potential reasoning for the narrative decisions can be found with Mary Ellen Brown who states that, “Resistance to narrative closure provides an opening for speculation by auditors as well as creators as to how the case itself may be reopened” (1990:56).

Interestingly in relation to this point many audience members showed an awareness of why such a narrative decision had been made and also why they had been subject to such a mass narrative deferral to leave them wanting *The L Word* to continue in some form. This for me highlights the notion of the ‘savvy’ television viewer who isn’t only concerned with the broadcast of their favourite television show, but also has a sense of the commercial imperative in relation to broadcasting, and in particular, cable television where viewers must pay for access. A number of fans outlined that this experience would stop them from consuming any further productions related to *The L Word*:

As you sit back, calculate residuals, begin scripting the now inevitable film and spin-off series, and gloat over what a fantastic money-maker your little 'stunt' has proved, I hope you're well satisfied with yourselves. Who cares if loyal fans have been sorely disappointed, who cares about artistic integrity, heck, who cares about the communities you were supposedly meant to represent--all have been sold out in favor of the Almighty Dollar. Now, the "L" word is, apparently, "lemmings," as we are supposed to continue blindly following you (while you swoon over the incredible number of website hits) in desperate hopes that we just *might* get the answers we crave. Thanks for playing us for suckers--makes me feel oh so warm and fuzzy for

having dedicated six seasons-worth of my time to you.
Anyone else thinking that a boycott might be in order?

S, March 15th 2009

This posting was one of many similar postings which further encapsulate the anger of the audience in relation to both the narrative issues, and also the possible reasoning for Ilene Chaiken's decision to provide an open ending. But what is interesting about this particular strand of audience reaction is the clear critical discourse which relates to commercialism. The poster highlights some general knowledge of the production context of television industry. Many fans and audience members understand the nature of the commercially driven television industry and this is seemingly acceptable to most fans for much of the time. But what makes this particular viewer angry is that they feel the decision to *not* reward fans with the typical generic outcome for serial drama is purely commercial. The discourse of a number of postings talked about Chaiken being 'calculating' and driven by the need for the prison based spin-off pilot *The Farm* to be picked up by Showtime (it subsequently not being put into full production by the cable broadcaster). The overall reason here for the sense of dissatisfaction is that fans feel used and that both their viewer loyalty *and* subscription fees to Showtime have been fruitless in terms of their own satisfaction:

...Then after all of the money we as people have spent on buying these seasons, you would screw with it so badly that you go away from the original backbone of what the series portrayed. I am completely writing off anything else that comes out from these people.

Karen Rogers, December 29th 2009.

The reaction of some members of the audience seems to be that they will no longer participate in the commercial aspect of *The L Word* in terms of buying DVDs, merchandise or subscribing to Showtime. It seems that in this particular producer-viewer relationship there were some unfulfilled expectations which have now caused the relationship to fail.

This posits some interesting considerations of audiences in a narrowcasting and commercial

‘pay for access’ environment. It now seems that fans, in particular, feel that they have some sense of power as they can withdraw their subscription, interest and participation in merchandise if they feel they are not considered, or that their investment in the television product is not rewarded in a timely fashion with well rounded narratives and what they would consider to be a quality television product:

Yes, I agree. No Movie. I would have loved to have an L-Word movie before I saw the ending. But seeing the ending and seeing this last season would lead me to have serious reservations about the quality of the movie (sic).

Lynn, March 16th 2009.

This is perhaps one distinct example of the problem of studying fans and represents a fandom where there is the feeling of betrayal after heavy investment in the text. This is something that Matt Hills (2002) refers to as giving rise to the rather traditional academic notion of the ‘resistive’ fan or cultist. *The L Word* audience represented in these excerpts are devoted to the text and have high expectations of how the series should end. Hills outlines that fans have distinct expectations of their text of choice and any deviation from that expectation is at the peril of producers as they will disrupt the very trust, “...placed in the continuity of a detailed narrative world” (28). Still, as Hills further explains, such a position doesn’t allow for the consideration of a fan culture which appears to be commercially averse and yet still continues to participate in commercial activity in relation to the chosen text. What is most interesting about the discussion board is that for as many fans who expressed that they wouldn’t continue to consume or be involved in *The L Word* in an economic sense, there were as many who outlined their unhappiness but also admitted they would participate in the continued merchandising and any further productions, even if the position was a little contradictory:

Ilene seems to know that most people will take anything at this point, Jessica, and that’s the problem... I refuse to pay for a movie when I was led all season to believe that there would be a resolution during the last show. I will also be getting rid of SHO if they are not going to air The Farm.

Facebook User, May 4th 2009.

This was further reasoned as being related to the situation where there is so little lesbian focused television material available. It was also justified as being due to the significant amount of time (six years) that these fans had invested in the show. However it is certainly arguable that such fan responses should be a consideration for commercial producers in a continually fragmented media market where there are more products competing for audiences in terms of viewing figures, subscription and merchandising.

No longer one of us

What further compounds the sense of betrayal for many fans of the show was the fact it was about lesbians, and they considered it to be ‘for’ lesbians:

Is that really what you all want, for the show to go on? We all know now that season six is a segue to the farm, which is why it doesnt make any fucking sense. Ilene Chaiken doenst give a shit about you, dont give her any more money to make any more ridiculous drivel. I realise we will all miss the characters but i think that credit is more due the actors, not the 'Masterbatory opus' that the L word eventually became. Ilene Chaiken has shown that she doesnt need us, we have to realise that and move on. something else will come along, and we will now be ready for it, but thats all the credit she deserves (sic).

adele, March 13th 2009.

The excerpt above evidences a discourse which suggests that although Chaiken is ‘one of us’ now she has been successful, she no longer needs ‘us’. There is a critique of the sexualisation of the show as it continued and a sense that lesbians now need to actively look elsewhere for their community to be represented in what constitutes a more satisfactory fashion for this lesbian audience. Chaiken is constructed in many of these vitriolic postings as being individualistic and commercially driven, using the final season of *The L Word* to advertise and lead into her hew pilot. But what is clear is that in the majority of these negative postings is a discourse of betrayal relating to Chaiken’s place in the lesbian

community, and this further reiterates and compounds the fans sense of losing their community connection to *The L Word*. There seems to be the rather unique expectation that as Chaiken is a lesbian that her focus on the community and lesbian representation should have been at the forefront of her mind. For some it seems that her ‘betrayal’ means that discursively she is being placed outside the lesbian community on a number of levels:

Way to piss off every lesbian on Planet Earth. Good job, Chaiken. I'm sure you'll EASILY be able to find more work again in this community. *eyeroll*
Krystina Kraus, May 20th 2009.

Ilene Chaiken responded to this perspective during *The Final Word: The End of The L Word* hosted by Showtime’s website (Showtime, 2009c), stating that she didn’t intend for the show to be purely aimed at a lesbian audience as this would marginalise its appeal and, one would assume, its potential for pulling in a wider audience. So to audiences it seemed to reflect that the lesbian community was not at the top of Chaiken’s priority list; something which many posters to the board seemed shocked about and potentially led to Chaiken being further cast out in a discursive sense.

The postings analysed evidenced a detailed understanding of wider narratives and more traditional and accepted ideological representations of lesbians in both cinema and film. The history of homosexuality in film is well summarised in Vito’s Russo’s *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (Russo, 1981). What is pertinent about Russo’s notations on Hollywood representation is that lesbianism was often constructed as perverse, murderous and often the cause of suicide until the early 1990s. In relation to these representations many audience members of *The L Word* signalled dismay at similar negative characterisations within the broadcast version of season six and also in the follow up ‘interrogation tapes’ which appeared on the Showtime official website for a few weeks

following the end of the season (Showtime, 2009a). This is something which is rather surprising given the ongoing success of the show and previous warm reception by lesbian audiences.

One particular issue that related to the end of *The L Word* was about the characterisation of lead characters as potential murderers. For some this was a clear move backwards in terms of lesbian representation, constructing lesbians as unbalanced, vengeful and angry:

Thank you Ilene Chaiken, for turning the women we could relate to into murderers. By leaving your little "whodunnit" question unanswered, that's what you essentially did.

Facebook User, May 9th 2009.

It seems that for these viewers even the potential that one of the characters had been murdered by a lesbian character was unacceptable. The excerpt selected reflected the nature of a high number of postings which clearly outlined that the meaning Chaiken had constructed was one which represented lesbianism as unbalanced at best and lesbians as potential thieves, cheats and killers of their friends at worst. For the lesbian audience the fact that there was no narrative resolution to the actions of the characters and no possible viable explanation for their immoral actions only caused further concern and upset.

The biggest issue for the audience is there is a clear burden of representation on Ilene Chaiken, and it's a burden that means that she cannot possibly please all of the audience. As discussed earlier some elements of the audience enjoy the openness of the narrative and also the 'realism' in the sense that little is resolved, they explain people in real life experience problems and television also has a level of glamour and drama to fulfil. But for this audience, the biggest issue is that *The L Word* is their only mainstream lesbian outlet and for them this misrepresents what is still a marginalised and ideologically misunderstood socio-cultural group.

These issues and worries were further underlined by the creation of the ‘interrogation tapes’ which appeared on Showtime’s official website for four weeks after the end of the televised show (Showtime, 2009a). Again, with regard to characterisation the key issue for audience posters was the tape relating to the character of Tina Kennard who when asked if Bette Porter was her first lesbian lover responds with the revelation that her sister (who has become a born again Christian) was the person with which she had her first lesbian sexual experience. The response of the audience was mainly negative throughout the postings to the discussion board:

...why are you violating us with these tapes?

Silver Main, April 6th 2009.

Murders and committers of incest. The writers have completely gone to pot. I am deeply offended and they have lost their vision completely (sic).

Facebook User, March 12th 2009

...with Tina's footage I'm reminded why I loathed the show on-and-off. What would be the point to introducing her relationship with her sister??? I have my opinions but would hope that they just made a mistake and wasn't trying to explain why she is a lesbian (sic).

Nicole, March 11th 2009

These examples seem to evidence a distinct worry from these lesbian viewers, about what wider audiences will construct from both the broadcast show and also the additional ‘interrogation tapes’. Again there is a questioning of why generic narrative inclusions were not present in the televised version of the show, and why producers would want to introduce further narrative information that seems inconsequential or offers nothing in terms of answers to the death of Jenny. There is also a distinct sense of viewers being uncomfortable with the revelation that Tina had an incestuous lesbian affair with her own sister. There is a clear awareness here that representations tend to construct wider social meaning about particular sub-cultural groups, and this interrupts any form of escapism or enjoyment for

lesbian audiences. Generally, the lesbian audience seem unable to step back from this cultural artefact in order to enjoy through escapism as it concerns the very notion of what the wider viewing public may consider lesbians to be and the reasons why they may be so. It seems clear that there is certainly an implicit understanding of constructivist theory (Hall, 1997) for these viewers. They are certainly aware of the potential implications of how ‘the lesbian’ may be constructed as ‘other’ through attributes which are seen as immoral, perverse and socially problematic.

To conclude then, there were a number of positions taken up by fans of *The L Word* in relation to both the finale of the show and its general direction over the last six years. Pleasures related to the finale of the show seemed to focus on the openness of the narrative. It seems that audiences enjoyed the ‘creative difference’ of the show and they felt that this was a unique artistic quality in American television. Arguably this postmodern way of reading the show put the power to create meaning and their ending in the hands of the viewers.

For lesbian viewers enjoyment and pleasure was not specific in terms of the narrative of the show. Instead lesbian viewers talked more generally, they had a sense of overview of all seasons of *The L Word*. A key defence of executive producer Ilene Chaiken was that she had been responsible for bringing the first lesbian focused drama to television screens, for many lesbian viewers that nullified their disappointment over anything else to do with the show. This is further compounded by the integration of *The L Word* into their social experiences – using it as encouragement to come out, and as a basis for a more positive representation of the self. Thus, *The L Word* was not just a television show to be ‘watched’ but also was something these viewers experienced in other areas of their lives.

Negative audience responses seemed to dominate the analysis material and were mainly focused on the lack of narrative closure. Viewers felt they had been promised answers to ‘Who Killed Jenny Schecter?’ during promotional material (Showtime, 2009b) and this deferred narrative was the factor which kept them watching; a key generic aspect of serial drama. It appears that there was a distinct misjudgement of how viewers would react to the outcome of the show, whether or not the reasoning for that was an attempt to create a spin-off to ensure the show continued in one form or another. Instead of seeing this as a positive possibility lesbian viewers saw it as a betrayal fuelled by economy and greed with a number of posters stating their refusal to take part in any further economic consumption of *The L Word*.

These responses were only further compounded by audience issues with the characterisation of characters as immoral, perverse and potentially murderous in this final season. The introduction of various narrative factors which seemed inconsequential and for the purpose of further narrative deferral were most unpopular. Not only could the audience see no end in sight, and no narrative resolution, they were disturbed by the characterisation of lesbians as a dangerous ‘other’.

What is evident from this analysis is that creating television which represents lesbians to lesbian audiences has a weight of political expectation that many representations don’t seem to have. For *The L Word* audience loyalty and consideration of the lesbian community was a key factor in the reading of the text. When the meanings encoded didn’t portray lesbians in a positive light there was a distinct sense of betrayal, as evidenced on the discussion board. This work highlights that there is certainly further research and questioning to be completed

about the commercial nature of lesbian centred television and also the dramatic expectations of the serial drama genre as these appear to be the factors which have impacted on the potential audience enjoyment of the show in its final season. It will be interesting to see how long it takes to see another show of *The L Word*'s ilk in order to pose those key questions.

Changing lesbian subjectivity: Mainstreaming and commercialism – Producer and Industry discourses

As the producer of *The L Word* Ilene Chaiken took part in numerous interviews before, during and after the final season of the show. It is worth looking at some of these interviews in detail as it allows us to explore the key meanings that she and the Showtime network constructed about the nature and purpose of the final seasons of the show and the potential implications on the discursive construction of the latter seasons. Within these interviews there is a distinct change from her season one interview interactions in terms of the discourse that Chaiken produces about the show. Where she was positive, primarily political, and celebratory of the unique nature of the lesbian representations inherent in the early broadcasts, her focus in the latter interviews is much more general in nature about the focus of the show and also uncovers some of her production priorities for the future. I will argue that Chaiken appears more driven by the potential resultant productions and maximising all types of audiences, than the political potential of *The L Word*.

The final seasons of *The L Word* were accompanied by interviews produced and hosted on the Showtime series webpage. These included two hosted interviews entitled 'The L Word – Ilene Chaiken, The Final Word' (Showtime, 2009c). These interviews offer an insight into the narrative and creative decisions. Their titles suggest that Chaiken expects fans to have

issues with the broadcast and so offers the ‘final word’ and definitive response to decisions related to producer decisions. This is particularly noteworthy as the appearance of the interviews came after many of the fan interactions on Showtime forums where dissatisfaction was displayed.

In response to being asked about her initial goal for the show, Chaiken responds,

I wanted it to get on the air. I wanted people to come and watch it. I wanted to reach a mainstream audience. I wanted to break through the niche that LGBT programming has always been relegated to.

Showtime, 2009c: [online]

When interviewed by US gay lifestyle magazine *The Advocate*, Chaiken reiterates a similar point,

...I never saw *The L Word* as purely lesbian themed...I saw it as a show about lesbians for everyone. Personally, I’m interested in telling stories. Telling lesbian themed stories, yes, but not exclusively. I’m interested in making mainstream entertainment...I never had any qualms about the way we were representing the culture.

Ryder, 2009: [online]

The orders of discourse in these production interviews are quite different in nature to those discussed in chapter five of this thesis. There is a distinctly different foregrounding of meaning and prioritisation of the role of Chaiken. No longer is her career prior to *The L Word* discussed. What is prioritised is her role in the current climate of TV production in the US, she even attempts to distance herself from niche gay programming by alluding that her work on *The L Word* was focused on a different audience and outcome. Instead there is a clear reiteration that she was undertaking a creative role that is clearly and succinctly linked to commercialism and consumable popular culture. The discursive authenticity of Chaiken shifts from a creative who has been involved (although this isn’t discussed in any of the later material analysed in this chapter) in lesbian focused productions for niche channels and outlets and moves to be focused much more clearly in being a general creative with a solid

and foundational role in generalised 'US television industry'. There is no reference to the 'proclamation' of lesbian culture seen at the launch of *The L Word* and clearly posited in previously discussed gay press. Instead there is a sense of Chaiken - again as professional, but in this instance she is not focused on bringing us a proclaimed message – instead she reflects this was really about audience numbers and every day narratives experienced by both straight and gay audiences. This justification for the content of the show and a new focus on the 'everyday' incidents that both gay and straight cultures can experience can be linked to Judith Butler's discussion of 'norms' in *Undoing Gender* (2004: 41).

A norm operates within social practices as the implicit standard of *normalization*. Although a norm may be analytically separable from the practices in which it is embedded, it may also prove to be recalcitrant to any effort to decontextualize its operation. Norms may or may not be explicit, and when they operate as the normalizing principle in social practice they usually remain implicit, difficult to read, discernible most clearly and dramatically in the effects they produce.

Essentially, the focus on the representations of 'norms' is a consideration of those aspects of our culture that are asserted through the continual existence of behaviour in social practice. Television is a key part of the reiteration of social practices. So, while *The L Word* is positive in that lesbians get to exist on the small screen, as its theme song suggests, in that it portrays lesbians as "talking, laughing, loving, breathing, fighting, fucking, crying, drinking, writing, winning, losing, cheating, kissing, thinking, dreaming", it is also problematic. The creative focus on 'norms' rather than distinct and individual and culturally specific aspects of lesbian identity means that those aspects of culture are not part of the social construction of reality of which Hall claimed the media is part (1973). Therefore, Chaiken's altered focus on the reasons for the production of the show clearly alludes to creative choices that have excluded material that may potentially be unpalatable and ideologically challenging for mainstream audiences. To merely be a show about lesbians encountering 'everyday' events

does not equate with a representational challenge, and the issues chosen on the basis of adhering to the needs of the mainstream audience appear to maintain heteronormativity to a degree (Chambers, 2009).

Chaiken's response in these interviews seems a little like a constructed alternative from the promise of overt proclamations in the promotional material analysed from seasons one and two. This seems magnified further by her notations that parallel this comment with her consideration that there was no production of other mainstream shows focused on lesbian culture at the time of production, or even after six seasons of *The L Word* (Ryder, 2009: [online]). It is mentioned that she would have an interest in an *The L Word* movie, could it find commission, and that she has also recently returned from filming *L Word* follow up *The Farm* as a pilot (a show that was subsequently not picked up by Showtime). She does briefly allude to a 'mission' and perhaps the politics of challenging the lesbian representations seen on mainstream TV, this isn't something which is fully explored in the interviews – it is only very briefly alluded to, in distinct contrast from the material discussed in chapter six,

I really, really imagined that when this show went off the air after a good run that there would be other shows. Not just one but several that would be taking up the mission of representing LGBT lives in popular entertainment and it's just not the case.

Ryder, 2009: [online]

This allusion is not as vehement as her previous proclamations that alluded to highlighting lesbian stories strongly and seeing their focus as important. Instead Chaiken's lexical choice becomes much more generalised. The only political terms she could be using is that of "mission" but this is nullified by the surrounding context of comments that she makes. What the emphasis is focused upon in these interviews is the context of "everyone", and the "mainstream". The lesbian identity Chaiken now offers justifications for are palatable rather than challenging in ideological nature. She hopes that the free market of the media will

provide some diversity and so the discourse around the burden of representation she appears to communicate is far more stifled than the celebratory nature of interviews surrounding seasons one and two:

We still think that we're telling stories about a bunch of characters who are living their lives, having their romances, nurturing and blowing up and managing and mangling friendships. That's what 'The L Word' is primarily about and we wanted it to always be about that while at the same time we put forward this larger than life story that posits a murder mystery.

Showtime, 2009c: [online]

It is interesting that during her opening description of the later stages of the show Chaiken doesn't identify *The L Word* as being about lesbians or lesbian culture, instead it is about a "bunch of characters". Her discussion is focused on a much more generalist assimilationist position where she prioritises the aspects of life that are shared across all sexualities and posits these as the most important and an integral part of contemporary gay culture; rather than alluding to the differences that could be assimilated – in terms of sexual practice or relationship status. Here the focus is on a generic trait in the narrative, which is posed as an audience pull factor for the show. The constructed meanings she offers in her interviews focus on the experiences of life that are framed as "ordinary" and "everyday" and she verbalises this clearly when she parallels those experiences against a narrative that may be constructed around events considered as extraordinary in a storytelling sense, rather than via a sense of sexual politics. Chaiken appears to communicate a sense of contradiction about *The L Word* in comparison with her early season interviews, and whilst she claims that it is still important to get "gay stories being told", these stories can only be justified if they are ideologically similar to the rest of the mainstream audience's experience.

When being interviewed by Jim Halterman for his Comcast blog Chaiken outlines *The L Word* was an important exception to the difficulties of what could be argued to be political

representation (to be, what she terms as, “represented as whole and complete human beings”) and she also clearly outlines that as producer and part of a writing team there was a distinct decision made to have a lack of focus on political issues in the later seasons of the show:

While gay issues such as the passing of Proposition 8 made waves in the mainstream press, Chaiken said the writers usually steered clear of the headlines. ‘With the exception of the don’t ask/don’t tell story – and I believe even that story grew organically out of character – we haven’t pulled from the headlines. In fact, we didn’t even touch Prop 8 this year because it was so in flux and we knew that when we were shooting we wouldn’t know the outcome and I certainly didn’t want to guess...but we haven’t looked to do headline stories. We’ve looked to tell stories about the issues that effect the lives of gay people.

Halterman, 2009: [online]

Arguably Chaiken doesn’t wish to cause some kind of cultural consternation for mainstream straight audiences by offering a challenge to heteronormative ideals of traditional marriage, especially in the context of strong US conservatism. This would be considered considerably controversial in the US and the show was broadcast at a point when legislative changes were only in early debate stages and dominating news networks. Although she is overt about highlighting the lack of gay narratives in television and also the importance of having gay and lesbian writers actively writing about their culture, she is ultimately selective about what that culture entails. Whilst she is happy to voice the importance of politics generally in lesbian culture, this isn’t something that is transferred to her approach to the latter seasons of the show. On the one hand she highlights that the show is all about what effects lesbian and gay culture, but she then actively highlights that she avoided the inclusion of one of the greatest political issues to impact lesbian culture in recent years. Perhaps some reasoning for this can be found in the work of Michael Warner who outlines that the televisual representation of gay and lesbian life is problematic in a representational sense because:

gay social life is not as ritualized and institutionalized as straight life, each relation is an adventure in nearly uncharted territory – whether it is between

two gay men, or two lesbians, or a gay man and a lesbian, or among three or more queers, or between gay men and the straight woman whose commitment to queer culture brings them the punishment of the ‘fag hag’ label.

Warner, 2000: 115

The discursive decision made by Chaiken to not cover political issues that are in ‘flux’ potentially relates to the trajectory and ‘in-between’ nature of gay and lesbian culture in the contemporary age. The arguments that dominate cultural and political theory around notions of assimilation, or conversely political challenge to hetero-normalised identities seem to be further internalised by the creative choices made in the production of *The L Word* and as discussed below there may be distinct commercial reasoning for this. It seems there is a sense that only issues about what Kelly Kessler (2011) terms “good gays” in her analysis of *The L Word*’s online interactive sites. These are both characters and users of social media who check the boxes of being typically attractive without challenging the boundaries of sexuality have been foregrounded in the latter seasons. These constructions are what have found some ideological grounding in terms of being about lesbian culture for all kinds of audiences; a distinct foothold in the wider public consciousness have found their way into distinctly crafted and selected storylines.

Appealing to both straight mainstream, and gay and lesbian audiences

In essence then Chaiken’s reasoning for providing a narrative which steers away from such matters as Proposition 8 and the question around the allowance of gay marriage can be linked to the potential audience appeal and her outline of “issues that effect gay people’s lives” is an important link to intent in understanding this approach. By focusing on issues that gay and lesbian lives are experiencing and fully encountering at a particular moment (rather than engaging with a political discourse which has not found any legal or cultural stability as yet) Chaiken ensures a distinct appeal to straight mainstream audiences, and gay, and lesbian audiences. This is critical at a time when she intended to film a pilot and

hopefully commission a series that would follow on from the conclusion of *The L Word*.

Pertinently John Fiske (1987, 84-88) outlines that for television shows to be popular they must appeal to more than one kind of audience and thus be polysemic and flexible in nature whilst not being too challenging to the ideological status quo, he states that television is:

...in a state of tension between forces of closure, which attempt to close down its potential meanings in favour of its preferred ones, and forces of openness, which enable its variety of viewers to negotiate an appropriate variety of meanings...

and that by,

...constructing a 'consensus' around its point of view which represses the contradictions in a text and thus militates against social change.

The identity constructed then is one that appears to be committed to the portrayal of gay and lesbian issues that have become normalised in the public consciousness through their typification as 'gay', whilst avoiding some of the most politically important factors in recent years for Western gay communities. The potential audience interaction with the avoidance of a narrative of Proposition 8 is one that maintains a range of discursive tropes that deal with the singularly gay everyday encounters (such as distinctly lesbian sexual practices or very particular discrimination such as 'Don't Ask Don't Tell') but avoid conflict in order to maintain a consensus for straight identifying audiences. Arguably they may reflect social interactions and some level of acceptance for the lesbian community but still these narratives stand up as suitably queered, and different from the heterosexual norm. Contextually this can be argued to be due to Chaiken's consideration of the wider audience and also her link to how audience numbers are vital to deeming the show and potential future commissions by Showtime as a success. Essentially the show offers gay audiences pleasure through seeing particular aspects of their lives, meanwhile heterosexual audiences can enjoy queer moments, particularly as their expectations of society and the fantasy of marriage as heterosexually maintained will not be questioned or challenged.

This is certainly reflective of Showtime as a network and their approach to *The L Word*.

Showtime's President of Entertainment Robert Greenblatt explained that,

It must be liberating for Ilene to do a series about her own experiences, but ultimately, we want people everywhere to buy it. So yes, the women are all attractive and we make no apologies about that. It's television. Who wants to watch unattractive people, gay, straight or whatever?

Greenblatt cited in Pratt, 2008: 142

Although Greenblatt identifies as gay, his comment can be considered rather patronising in relation to a creative who is carrying the representational burden of lesbian culture. What this perspective underlines is the commercialised nature of the production of *The L Word*. His lexical choice around "what is acceptable" to audiences evidences the ideological assumptions that underpin the context of industrial production, although there is some labelling of an authentic lesbian culture as experienced by producer. So, in some senses his notation of what audiences what is slightly nullified. His comment is flippant in nature and highlights attractiveness as the most meaningful aspect of visual culture. There is also no distinction between heterosexual and homosexual culture in his commentary. This highlights a key context for the production of the show. Audience figures are far more important to the network than a diversity of representation. This is interesting when compared with Chaiken's early political pronouncements and the decreasing nature of challenge to a traditional order of discourse as the show's seasons continued.

Seemingly mainstream popularity, audience share and the continuation of a Chaiken 'lesbian' branded product was far more influential on the construction of the show's narrative in the latter seasons. It appears that there is a justification for restricting diversity in the approach of Chaiken and Greenblatt. This reiterates the position of Alexandra Chasin (2000) who outlined that it is merely gay and lesbian imagery that is acceptable and

reiterative of heteronormative lifestyles (particularly related to conceptions of attractiveness) have consistently courted both GLBT and straight identified finances in the US market system.

In essence within the economic context of television production it appears that the burden of lesbian representation was too great for *Chaiken*. The overt difference from heteronormative culture early in the production has evolved into narratives and representations that are more traditional in terms of their constructed meanings. If *Chaiken* continues to exist within this culture and its requirement she must adhere to the creative control that is exerted through the political economy of US television production cultures. While *The L Word* has been positive in that it has offered any sort of representation of lesbian culture, as it ends and exists alongside proliferating similar representations, the context of its meaning has altered.

The pressure on *Chaiken* to provide quality audience numbers has meant that the show eventually offered a somewhat closeted sense of what it means to be a lesbian, mainly through the desire to engage generally wider audiences. Whilst it would be impossible to show a truly authentic lesbian culture, as such a singular identity does not exist, that which is represented is arguably borrowed from mainstream discursive tropes; whether they be related to traditional aesthetic beauty, melodramatic narratives, or related to mainstream expectations fed by gendered ideas of sexuality. This makes the show specifically problematic for lesbian communities in terms of visibility.

As Sedgwick argues, representation is far more resonant and important for lesbian communities as it has specific issues with visibility when she claims, “racism, for instance, is a stigma that is visible in all but exceptional cases...so are the oppressions based on

gender, age, size, physical handicap” (2008: 75). The economic context both allowed, and somewhat stifled these representations, and this can only aid in the discursive internalisation of representations in popular culture by gay, lesbian and straight audiences. This underlines the continuing investigation of such emerging representations and their impact on how gay identities are both formulated and performed in wider social culture, and how they are subject to a weight of control (Dyer, 2002) from traditional dominant groups in society. Whilst *The L Word* allowed the representation of lesbians to ‘come out of the closet’ in a televisual sense and carve a clear space for drama which has lesbian characters at its centre, there is no doubt that the long term place of queer women on television needs to continue to develop in a way which is less binary enforcing. The closet is considered by Eva Sedgwick (2008) to be the most salient aspect of gay social life (in terms of whether you identify as in or out of it) and it can be argued that *The L Word*’s initial promise as political and offering proclamations about the specificities of lesbian life didn’t quite meet the expectations of a television show that offered a celebratory coming out part with both feet out of the closet. As Samuel Chambers (2009: 34) argues, “Heteronormativity produces the closet, for without the presumption of heterosexuality there would be no closet. And heteronormativity constitutes the closet as a liminal realm – one...that is impossible to fully inhabit or escape”.

In essence, *The L Word* seems unable to escape from the ideological negotiation and industrial context that binds it and initially allowed for its creation and subsequent existence. Potentially Chaiken’s intended discursive actions didn’t find space within a commercial environment; regardless of any potential political honesty behind them. This is evident in the discursive alterations that those involved in the production of the show elicit in their interactions via promotional material. Whilst the analysis of these interactions shows some link to political and subcultural interests of gay and lesbian communities, these become less

prevalent and vocalised as the seasons of the show continue. In previous chapters it is pertinent to see that this correlates with both that textual meanings in the show that increasingly borrow from popular cultural heteronormative tropes and an increasing audience dissatisfaction with narratives and representation.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to explore and contribute to the development of critiques of lesbian representation in television. The originality of this thesis stems from the wider focus of the study that uncovers key discourses both within and surrounding *The L Word*. The focus of my analysis has been on the promotional material and interviews from both cast and those involved with the production of the text (primarily creator of *The L Word*, Ilene Chaiken), the televisual text *The L Word* and also online forums which contain audiences responses to both the first and latter two seasons of the show. My intention behind this thesis was to uncover the varying lesbian subjectivities present in *The L Word* and explore the creative reasons for constructing and including such subjectivities. Secondly, the purpose of the textual focus of the study was applied in order to uncover the hierarchies of discourse related to a number of alterative constructions related to sexual identity and sexual practice. The focus on reception related to such constructions was in order to enable the assessment of whether such emerging representations can be considered as ideologically assimilatory or politically resistive or challenging, and whether such types of subjectivity were pleasurable for lesbian audiences and offered a new experience in relation to televisual representations of lesbian identity. This study adds to the fields, and explores the intersections of Television Studies, Sexuality Studies and discourse theory and offers some insight into television industries and their commercial priorities. The originality of this study is in its pan-textual focus and it offers a wide discussion of not only what is constructed onscreen, but also why it appears and the affective and political implications such developments for minority audiences. However, the diverse disciplinary nature of the study meant that there was a real difficulty in maintaining depth across the three focal areas of study (text, industry and audience) – and this meant that sacrifices had to be made in terms of the information that could be included in the study and explored in greater depth.

By examining the promotional discourses surrounding the text, I have offered an insight into the way creative reasoning behind *The L Word* is articulated and communicated. These promotional discourses have to be considered as an intricate part of the branding of this television show and I am more than aware that the insights offered by such interviews and artefacts will be tempered by the needs of promotion. They remain though fascinating aspects of discursive justification and explanation. However, what is most pertinent is the analysis of the promotional discourses encapsulated by Ilene Chaiken, Showtime executives and the cast of *The L Word* in the early two seasons of the show is constructed as in distinct opposition to the promotion discourses of the latter two seasons of the show.

Context is all-important in understanding the nature of this change. What became evident in the analysis of the early promotional material was the foregrounding of political discussion around lesbian identity and culture. Early promotional material was celebratory in nature and the visual discourses presented of Chaiken in particular posed her as a television professional that had persuaded a cable network to produce a lesbian ensemble drama, and this being against the run of institutional ideology. Promotional material at the time of launch was intrinsically focused on the lesbian audience and branded both Showtime and Chaiken as central to developing the representation of queer and diverse cultures. This is actively posited against material from cast members who claim they have had no previous representations of lesbian culture to link to. This further highlights the sense of the new and ground-breaking discourses inherent in the launch of the show. The commissioning of *The L Word* is presented as a professional battle for Chaiken and ultimately the burden of representation is encapsulated in her as an individual. She clearly links to the lesbian audiences using a lexis that connects and adheres to discourses of shared identity:

‘ourselves’ have a shared problem of representation that the commencement of *The L Word*

will go some way to solving. In essence this is a form of branding which utilises discursive tropes to attach an intangible quality to *The L Word* (Jarmillo, 2012). This is something that audiences can relate to and the construction that is the primary focus of early branding is one of community, shared experience and politically challenging representations on mainstream US television.

It is arguable, when considering the wider culture of cable networking, that the meanings that were encapsulated in the promotional material developed for a lesbian audience were founded in the continual industrial development of cable networks. *The L Word's* appearance in the cable market came at a time where networks were trying to assert distinct brands in order to maximise sections of the narrowcasting market (Caldwell, 2006) and one way to assert this is to meet the emotional needs of the audience to identify with particular groups or minorities (Temporal, 2008). This certainly seems to be the case in the early promotional discourses involved with *The L Word*. This emotional empathy and identification has been lacking for lesbian television audiences in any explicit or overt sense, with the majority of audiences only finding lesbian identification through re-appropriation of televisual texts. In this instance Chaiken offers something overt and personalised to this fragmented aspect of the audience. This clearly fits in with the late nineties and early 2000s Showtime brand of 'No Limits'.

Using openly lesbian cast members to also share their experiences of lesbian culture and their celebratory excitement of *The L Word* also enhances this lesbian focused personalised discourse. This again highlights the representational 'lack' that *The L Word* addresses. Pertinently, the representational focus in these early promotions is exclusively focused on

lesbian culture and not bisexual and transgendered identities, which becomes interesting as I consider hierarchies and orders of discourse later in this conclusive chapter.

Overall, early promotional discourses are focused on the show having distinct cultural worth. Its focus appears to be visibility above all else and this speaks to the ideas of politically liberative identities where visibility is a key target for lesbian and gay cultures striving to be recognised and in gaining equality. Chaiken is a clear figurehead in this construction, taking command and responsibility for such a message; even at her own expense as she attempts to persuade a mainstream cultural institution of the worth of her mission. The use of writers who have been involved with New Queer Cinema, also adds a key elements to the early branding of the show. Writers such as Rose Troche and Guinevere Turner are well known in lesbian and queer art culture for their work in what Buck (2004) outlines as offering challenging representations of lesbian and queer culture.

These early discourses combine to formulate a sense of a shared and authentic lesbian production. This is before any broadcast has taken place. It is both representationally and politically 'lesbian' and has grounded credentials that make a clear industrial link to New Queer Cinema. All the linguistic traits and tropes used in this material are focused on being seen and heard, and is focused towards a lesbian audience. This is reflective of the position of Koller (2008: 2) who states that, "research will uncover the discursive and cognitive repertoires down upon by self-identified lesbian writers at various points in history to construct and negotiate an image of lesbian community".

However, when comparing these early promotional interactions with the promotional material focused around season five and the final season six of the show, there is a distinct

step change to the meanings inherent. There is a distinct difference in the focus on Chaiken's lesbian subjectivity, and indeed it seems that the way she now brands herself and *The L Word* alters significantly. Rather than producing meanings that are supporting and community focused in terms of lesbian identity. The language that Chaiken uses to describe the show is far more general in focus. Her priority moves from shared lesbian experience to commercialism and potential resultant productions from *The L Word*. Her justification for developing the show and its intended impact on lesbian and mainstream audiences is diverse from six seasons prior.

Contextually, this is again related to the branding of the production and network. Rather than drawing in viewers, particularly lesbian ones, to this text. Chaiken's focus is on the next project and also maintaining the maximum amount of viewers, regardless of sexuality for the final seasons of *The L Word*. Chaiken's initial target has now changed in focus and she overtly maintains that she always wanted to reach a mainstream audience with the text. This is also reflective of the textual orders of discourse produced as seasons continue, as I shall discuss shortly. She reiterates this point through both television interviews and in the gay press. Her choice of lexis means that she distances herself from lesbian culture, representations, and political considerations as she generally says she is interested in telling 'stories' and refers to lesbians as a group, not 'ourselves' or with any sense of belonging. There is a clear reiteration and prioritisation of her creative role in later interviews and a distinct lack of proclamation of lesbian culture. She therefore normalises and neutralises the representational difference of the show and instead prioritises that it is about the representation of norms (Butler, 2004) that affect all people, not just lesbian cultures. Chaiken's altered focus is reflective of her creative and textual choices (see below) that may be socially unpalatable for mainstream audiences ideologically accepting of heteronormative

events (Chambers, 2009) and ‘every day’ experiences. Chaiken actively detracts attention away from political issues which she claims are ‘in flux’ during the final seasons (when aren’t political issues in flux?). There is a distinct branding change based on her production intention and need to maintain a narrowcasting audience.

The analysis of the textual aspects of *The L Word* are probably the most traditional aspect of this research in terms of methodological techniques and approach to Television Studies, but I hope what is provided here marries into the information above to give some insights in the development of discourses that are celebratory and focused on pleasures for the lesbian community to distinct hierarchies of sexual preference and identity that is somewhat dismissive of gender roles and sexual practices which straddle traditional notions of male and female.

The initial textual discourses involved in the first two seasons of *The L Word* are asserted in this research as somewhat celebratory and community focused. The initial two seasons of the show are focused on a matrix of Los Angeles’ lesbian community known as ‘The Chart’ this becomes a virtual tool for lesbians to add themselves to when they have relationship or sexual encounter with each other. This constructs a lesbian subjectivity that reflects a sense of community; all the main characters in the show are somehow anchored together (as are the community that surrounds them). And so the lesbians of season one and two are not isolated characters. This visual trope is utilised to enhance a sense of kinship, community and support. This is reflective of the early promotional discourses outlined earlier. This arguably challenges the notion of lesbian invisibility on screen (Wilton, 1995) and is a form of discursive encouragement to be ‘out’. What is communicated is a sense of ‘us’ or ‘ourselves’ (as Chaiken would state) yet again and a visual authentic lesbian culture is

constructed for viewers of the show. This is a distinct representation of lesbian interactions that is different from heteronormativity; these women are bound by their sexual preference and practice, and not necessarily monogamous relationships.

This textual lesbian world is also enhanced by the use of particular locations during the opening seasons of the show. The characters consistently meet at the ironically named café, 'The Planet'. Again, in early seasons this is a site for sharing stories about sexual conquests and lesbian experiences. This is the primary early season focus rather than 'every day' experiences that viewers of all sexualities can identify with, what is key in terms of this aspect of the narrative is that such televisual spaces all for:

Trading intimate information satisfies community need and indicates intimate relations among lesbian women. In addition, gossip reaffirms community norms by bringing social pressure to bear on their enforcement... This use of gossip functions to demonstrate lesbian unity, and it works to sustain community norms.

Haggerty, 2000: 338-339

As the development of the show continues into seasons three and four the diversity and sophistication of characterisation becomes more developed. In my purely textual focus on these mid seasons a distinct order of discourse related to sexual identity and lesbian subjectivity is uncovered. By this point in the production of the series characters have become well developed in terms of storylines and this allows for distinct meanings to be allocated to their clearly defined sexual identity and notion of subjectivity.

The characters of Bette and Tina are in a relationship at the commencement of season three, although this is after some infidelity and time apart towards the end of season two. However, what is pertinent about this developing relationship is that, firstly, these characters are

especially feminised in nature. Arguably this is certainly more palatable for mainstream audiences, especially in terms of portraying sexual interactions. Audiences are clearly used to generic conventions that allow them to look at attractive and feminised characters on screen. It is also pertinent that these characters have a child. This intrinsically links the notion of the 'femme' or feminised lesbian to the notion of the maternal and emotional woman often seen in the genre of US drama or soap opera. In my findings I relate to a number of examples when Bette and Tina's relationship is portrayed using tropes that are borrowed from mainstream drama – and these are related to family issues, emotional interactions and the ambition to maintain a monogamous relationship fulfilled with emotional sexual interactions. This is heteronormative in nature and would likely be attractive for a mainstream heterosexual audience in expectation of these generic aspects.

This heteronormativity is further enhanced by the portrayal of Shane as a 'soft' butch character in the series. Again, my analysis offers a number of examples where Shane attempts to lead a heteronormative life, to act as mother to her half brother and build a family life and home, even get married. But, Shane's butchness is seen as an innate quality that is an impediment to such ideological normalisation. This still positions heteronormative ideology as an ambition and Shane's inadequacy poses her as isolated in both lesbian and wider society. Shane does have a useful and fulfilling role in *The L Word*, for the lesbian audience she is a clear symbol of overt lesbian sexuality and sexual practice – but heteronormativity is still privileged in all narrative situations. Arguably this is indicative of the change and flux in lesbian subjectivity in recent times and also the developing social expectations in lesbian culture to embrace civil rights from a heterosexual perspective in terms of adoption issues and partnership rights. This enhances a sense of an increasingly hegemonic lesbian identity in *The L Word*, where family, feminine and emotional discourses

and rewarded and privileged as they have resonance with a mainstream audience and increasing recognition as lesbian identity becomes further assimilated into society through legal and civil changes.

However, *The L Word* does continue to privilege lesbian subjectivity whilst maintaining heterosexuality within an order of discourse throughout the third and fourth seasons. My analysis of both bisexual and transgender identities in the show uncovered a distinct order of discourse which poses both of these latter identities as transitory in nature. Bisexuality is posed as unstable and undecided, as it takes and uses discursive repertoires from both heterosexual and lesbian culture. The performance of these sexual repertoires in particular is seen as the root of mental and emotional instability for the characters involved. These characters only retain any sense of stability when they perform lesbian behaviour and do not discuss or deal with their issues as bisexuals. This is reflective of both heteronormative and lesbian culture in a political sense. Rust (2000) clearly outlines that bisexuality has been an on-going issue for the political and stable visibility of lesbian communities as for many it undermines the sense of a realised and essentialist identity, which is at the heart of the politicisation and visible lesbian subjectivity. In terms of typification (Dyer, 2002) both bisexuality and the transitional stage of transgenderism are ideologically problematic.

Alongside the notion of bisexuality as transitory through the performance of shared tropes of sexual practice, transgender characters introduced in the third season of *The L Word* find themselves discursively deprioritised due to the multitude of gender tropes that they may perform or display. Although Reed (2009) has argued in her work that the character of Moira/Max is an example of liberal education, I argue that by considering the full context of *The L Word*, with both heteronormative characters and the notion of transitional sexuality as

a problem in term of community and support, rather than the Moira/Max narrative being liberatory and enlightening, this also is arguably constructed as isolating.

The queerness of Moira/Max sets the character apart from both lesbian and heterosexual culture. This is further compounded by the exclusion from asserted gendered cultures.

Whilst Butler maintains that performing alternative forms of gender may be a type of liberation (1990), the Moira/Max situation is a narrative example of the discursive problem of gender play in the wider social world. Moira/Max is an excellent example of the Foucauldian sense of the self and panoptic societal surveillance (1977) that occurs when gender doesn't seem to fit clearly into male/female roles. The narrative is only a successful one for the character when performing as either Moira OR Max. Essentially while this subversion of gender is represented, and rightfully so, *The L Word* still discursively ticks the gender boxes as it continues through the third and fourth seasons. If Moira/Max steps outside or blurs the boundaries of gender there are accusations of being a 'freak' or inauthentic in the mainstream culture portrayed. The only safe space is again 'The Planet', with its 'punks, freaks, kings, queens and trannies' and sense of the carnivalesque as expressed through the one season arc of the character of Billie Blaikie.

The narrative fragmentation that is seen in the text development of seasons five and six is related to the notion that 'The Chart' and the lesbian community becomes a site of dystopia for many of the characters. Their interactions with the lesbian community and embracement of their lesbian subjectivity becomes more complex and this is reflective of the show's turn to "issues that don't just affect lesbians" (Showtime, 2009c) and perhaps a more mainstream focus, as reflective of Chaiken's alteration in the branding of promotional discourses.

In seasons five and six the community of lesbians that has been strongly formed through the characters start to become fragmented. Many try to move away from the lesbian community partially or wholly and the analysis provided in this thesis outlines a clear and distinct move from communal support via 'The Chart' and lesbian interaction to an impending sense of claustrophobia and the community as a problem, rather than mutually supportive. Indeed what binds the lesbian community of *The L Word* together by the end of the series is their involvement in a murder case; quite a shocking return to the portrayal of lesbian as a possibly dangerous deviant and threat to the order of society.

This fragmentation of the community is played out through the development of a dichotomy that appears to separate lesbian identity from individual identity. The problems encountered by the lesbian characters in 'every day' life with regard to family, professions and relationships are only compounded by their lesbian status, rather than finding support as in previous seasons. The focus on the potential issues that all people encounter regardless of sexuality actually undermines the sense of lesbian community in this instance.

Shane's uncontrollable female masculinity and sexual needs finally reach a crescendo when she causes chaos at a wedding where she is a hairdresser. This undermines her professional role and she is literally chased away from this strong symbolic code of heterosexualised culture by two bridesmaids. She cannot escape her attraction to women or the hold that her sexuality has over her. Rather than this being assertive and celebratory as in earlier seasons, this is now a problem that isolates Shane both mentally and socially. Shane blames this on the "sex, drama and jealousy" which define lesbian culture for her and perhaps also the mainstream viewer. This is a clear representation of what an overt butch lesbian identity,

which is heavily sexualised, may lead to. The more settled narratives are those that again belong to heteronormative culture.

Similarly, the character of Tasha finds her vocation under threat if her sexual preference is discovered. Again, the ‘problem’ in these final seasons is not that of wider society, instead Tasha’s problem is trying to find a way to live in a heteronormative society; she disagrees with Alice’s outing of a famous American football player. Again, lesbian identity and subjectivity starts to become problematic and divisive, and drama is focused on other elements of the women’s lives that are just further complicated by their sexual orientation. In its move to embrace the heteronormative world in order to appeal to Chaiken’s mainstream audience of seasons five and six, it seems that the lesbian community aspect of *The L Word* becomes fragmented and this further undermines the political resonance of the show. It has arguably become a vehicle for assimilation and this undermines some of the strength of discursive power seen in early seasons. Generic and commercialised needs based on audiences somewhat nullified the ensemble nature of the show.

The audience responses to the initial two seasons of the show and final two seasons of the show somewhat reflect the fragmentation of the lesbian community and varying notions of subjectivity as outlined above. The early audience pleasures taken from the show were fixed on very particular issues and decoding made by lesbian audiences. Initially these were celebratory and reflected the promotional discourses constructed by Chaiken through the promotional material analysed in chapter five and summarised at the commencement of this chapter. The gratification of the audience found foundation in the promise of lesbian focused narratives and the show was experienced as a community event. This is demonstrated by the wealth of posts online and shared experiences critiqued in chapter six.

Even after the end of *The L Word*, such was the impact of the show some viewers echoed the earlier considerations of the series as ground-breaking and reflective of many of their experiences of asserting and maintaining a lesbian identity; this related to their own personal liberation and reflects Hall's (1997) assertion that cultural background has an intrinsic impact on the way media audiences engage and decode meanings from texts. In these early seasons it seems that the decoding reflected the preferred meaning of Chaiken's production choices to be assertive in terms of sexual identity. However, in the latter seasons (the analysis contained in chapter eight) some lesbian viewers had to reconsider their decoded meanings, often forming a negotiated reading based on their initial pleasurable experiences of the text to try and nullify the impact of the narrative fragmentation and unfulfilled conclusion to the series.

This negotiated pleasure was often in deference to the production team for just making *The L Word* and providing a mainstream representation of lesbian culture. It seems that some lesbian viewers could still accept the unfulfilling end season narrative by accepting that this had been their moment of representation or that this was some expression of artistic integrity by Ilene Chaiken. This position is arguably a side effect of her continual self-construction as professional creative or auteur responsible for all aspects of *The L Word*; another interesting and developing aspect of cable network branding. This means that the pleasures for viewers shift from a liberationist tone to one that begrudgingly accepts and understands the level of assimilation for the characters. This is accepted as *The L Word* did move beyond lesbian sexuality as a mere problem or affliction and so cultural capital encourages viewers to try and ignore some of the aspects that are unpalatable from their point of view. Because this show offered them an identification point or points, even though they became less positive

over time, this was enough to satisfy most of the audience. Thus, pleasure for this group of viewers was not focused on narrative, but the overall topic, and lesbian characterisation on the show.

The main vehemence in opposition to the readings offered to lesbian viewers came when discursive tropes were utilised which harked back to the murdering, dangerous lesbian of film noir, or the characterisation of lesbians as so predatory they were likely to be literally incestuous with family members. There was also anger and awareness from viewers that Chaiken was planning a spin off and my analysis highlights that some aspects of the community felt used in a commercial sense. The feeling of a shared group identity that Chaiken constructs in her early promotional discourse was now far less pertinent, although most lesbian viewers could again negotiate their way past these textual and commercial aspects to enable participation in the text.

This thesis outlines that *The L Word's* narrative, characterisation, promotional branding and audience response altered significantly over six seasons of the show. During this time the priorities of the producer seemingly swayed from political and visible representation, which encapsulated a communal sense of lesbian identities, to maintaining narratives and storylines that would appeal to a mainstream audience. This change in focus led to the fragmenting of lesbian subjectivities and increasingly characterised stable characters in such a way as to construct an ideologically hegemonic lesbian culture. This was maintained through the othering of lesbian subjectivities that may be considered overtly sexualised, and also identities of gender and sexuality that blurred the queer boundaries.

The discursive result of this is a heteronormalised and hierarchical portrayal of lesbian, bisexual, and transgender subjectivities. This incorporates a diversity of lesbian subjectivities and this thesis has focused on a number of them – notably the butch/femme dichotomy, the paradigmatically oppositional portrayal of gender roles through sexual practice, and transgenderism. The decoding and reactions of the lesbian audience underpin these hierarchies of discourse. The pleasures of the lesbian audience became more problematic and their readings had to become increasingly negotiated for them to find enjoyment in the narratives and outcomes of *The L Word*.

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APPENDICES

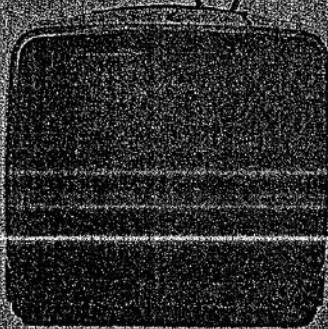
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TELEVISION QUEER WOMEN

A Reader

Edited by
Rebecca Belirge



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TELEVISION QUEER WOMEN

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CHAPTER 12

Paradigmatically Oppositional
Representations: Gender and
Sexual Identity in *The L Word*

Faye Davies

Lesbian representation appears to have become more prevalent in U.S. mainstream media outlets as we have moved through the 1990s and into the new millennium. Such representations have moved out of the queer film arena and, in particular, onto TV screens. *The L Word*, Showtime's lesbian drama series can be considered as typical of this movement. The show represents and constructs various "types" of sexual identity, which I believe can be both liberating and restrictive in terms of meaning related to both sexuality and gender. In terms of sexuality this analysis focuses upon lesbian identity and bisexual identity, rather than exploring the traditional hetero/homo opposition; the lesbian/bi debate being as valid for considering power relations with regard to this particular cultural group. Lesbian sexual identity is represented as settled and stable in *The L Word* and this representation runs through both domestic and professional identities in relation to the characters. None of the asserted lesbian characters appear to struggle with their identity; only those who are bisexual appear to encounter any identity issue. The intention of this analysis is to uncover and explain the order of discourse¹ in *The L Word*, which prioritizes one form of sexual identity and gender over another, thus reflecting wider ideological power relations and normalized practices in both straight and lesbian cultures.

The notion of lesbian identity is clearly represented within the first few scenes of *The L Word* (1.1), and is both verbally and visually presented as a solid and accepted identity by the lesbian characters. The viewer is initially presented with two key characters, Berre Porter (Jennifer Beals) and Tina Kennard (Laurie Holloman). In the opening scenes, the viewer is offered panning shots of Los Angeles and then a suburban area, which has industrial and symbolic connotations of the middle class and is often seen in other visual productions as a typical "family" area. The visual language borrows from previous discourses of American life to construct meaning, and is using a "grammatical" structure to reference such a meaning against images of the city. Later in the episode this is referred to verbally as a "traditional" area in a conversation between Jenny (Mia Kirshner) and Tim (Eric Mabius). The visual representation is reasserted as traditional as Tim claims that the area may not be as traditional as it "seems."

The pair are swiftly followed by an overhead shot of Berre and Tina asleep in bed, Berre's arm draped across her partner in the symbolic casualness of a long-term relationship and in vast opposition to historical media representations of lesbians as overly sexual. This is not portrayed as a relationship that is secure or deviant during the opening scenes. There are distinct connotations of a comfortable relationship for the two characters in the placement of this scene next to the panning shots of suburban Los Angeles. As the narrative unfolds between the two characters we see that any problems they have are based on commitment issues, rather than any underlying issue with sexual identity.

Although one character, Jenny Schecter (Mia Kirshner), arguably does struggle with her lesbian identity this is mainly within the context of her bisexual relationships and developing lesbianism, which will be discussed in further detail later. The only issue with lesbian sexual identity clearly asserted at the beginning of the season one narrative is for the character of Dana Furlbanks (Erin Daniels); a closeted international tennis player, Dana's fear of being outed is explained by her need for corporate sponsorship in tennis, not by shame of her sexuality. Her lesbian identity as acceptable and affirmed is still reinforced by the order of scenes.

An example of such a scene comes after a discussion of Dana's fear of being publicly outed. In a scene set in "The Planet" (1.1) Dana spots new and attractive character, Jenny, as she passes by. She registers her interest with a comic British upper-class accent, "Hello . . .". The other characters Tina, Maria (Karin Lombard), and Alice (Leslisa Hailley) all then assert that Dana is, ". . . so gay . . . so, so gay". This selection and combination of descriptive practice diffuses any tension from the discussion of the problems of lesbian identity in an economic context (sponsorship) and the verbal reiterations

reassert Dana's personal acceptance and comfort with who she is. Dana later also affirms herself as an "out" lesbian icon through a Subaru advertising campaign, entitled "Get Out and Stay Out" (1.8), casting aside her previous doubts about coming out. Linguistically this asserts a strong lesbian identity; as the phrase that guides the campaign is arranged quite forcefully and appears commanding, offering support for being both lesbian and publicly identifiable as such.

When there are such public assertions of lesbian identity in *The L Word*, there is also positivity symbolized for the characters. Lesbian identity is shown as a status that can be liberating and positive. As discussed earlier this is constructed from both visual and verbal information, which places lesbianism highly in what could be termed a hierarchy of ideological discourses related to sexuality. This produces an ideologically preferential identity that moves away from the commented and age-stigmatized habits of previous televisual and filmic discourses. When we further consider the representation of bisexuality in *The L Word*, this hierarchy can be said to be further strengthened.

The show's main bisexual character, Alice Pieszecki (Leslisa Hailley), has her sexual identity constructed as unstable. Early in season one there is the following exchange between Dana and Alice:

Dana: Christ Alice, when will you make up your mind between dick and pussy? And spare us the gory bisexual details?

Alice: Well, for your information Dana, I'm looking for the same qualities in a man as I am in a woman.

Dana: (to Tina, making hand gestures and smiling) Big tits.

Through the use of both verbal and visual language we can see that Dana is disgusted (she recoils at Alice's discussion of a sexual encounter with a man before this conversation commenced) at the thought that Alice has not "made up her mind" about her sexual identity. This infers that there is a distinct choice to be made; that bisexuality is, in itself, "gory". The sexual language used is also connotative of a purely sexual attraction or impulse on Alice's part and infers that Alice is being somewhat greedy in her sexual liaisons. When Alice tries to justify her identity, this action is treated with contempt and humor by Dana in an exchange with lesbian-identified character Tina, symbolizing a lack of acceptance of bisexual identity.

Another example that reinforces this ideology is a scene where the characters are at a party comparing the length of their index fingers in relation to their sexual identity (in response to a press article). Alice is told that she makes "the team . . . but just barely" (1.1). We see a medium close-up on Alice's face that connotes disappointment at such a comment. She does not respond verbally,

and this makes for an awkward silence, allowing a reflection on this matter for the audience. Alice's reaction is then the main focus during the silence. Her bisexuality is reasserted as alternative in this situation and this places her outside the stable lesbian or heterosexual identity being reinforced by all those around her. Indeed, in this scene lesbians are referred to as a "team," borrowing from previous verbal discourses that relate to support and identification.

Furthermore, Jenny Schecter's character is initially portrayed as heterosexual, then exploring bisexuality before embracing a lesbian identity in season two. Initially unable to decide upon a distinct lesbian identity, she is shown as isolated and undecided. This character moves between relationships with Tim (her fiancé) and Marina, characters with clearly asserted heterosexual and lesbian identities, respectively. When her infidelity, and arguably her potential bisexuality, is discovered she is portrayed as unstable. As Jenny discusses the discovery of her and Marina's affair by Tim, we see Marina standing above the Jenny character looking down, symbolizing the domination of Marina's position in terms of identity awareness and stability. Jenny has a tear-streaked face and her quiet wavering voice connotes a distinct childlikeness and unawareness of her situation, asking "Am I just a coward . . . And a liar . . . And a cheater?" (1.7). Linguistically, these are all terms that have a distinct relation to weakness and instability.

In these questions Marina gives no response, which offers a condemning judgment. It seems, Jenny is not part of the "team" that Alice was also marginalized from earlier in season one. In season two we see a turning point upon Jenny's request, lesbian-identified Shame (Katherine Moenig) cuts her hair short (2.4). Jenny sheds a symbolic tear as her "transformation" through bisexuality is complete. She then becomes an integral part of the "team" and for the remainder of season two she is involved only in lesbian relationships. We see no more of Jenny's last boyfriend Gene Frenberg (Tygh Runyan); instead, Jenny dates Shame's ex-girlfriend.

Jenny's transformation is also clearly exemplified when we see her acknowledge her lesbianism explicitly the day after her symbolic haircut (2.5), something also clearly asserted by boyfriend Gene Frenberg in a previous episode (2.1). In total opposition to the crying (symbolic of both relief and sadness) we see as her hair falls to the floor, she is walking along the street, verbally acknowledging being "checked out" by another woman and embracing Shame in symbolic celebration. Here we see a move up the hierarchical discourse of sexuality to a more settled identity than that of the bisexual through the use of oppositional paradigms of visual language.

The L Word can be considered as alternative and challenging to previous television representations of lesbians as it not only focuses on the sexual but

also the everyday. As previously discussed, various characters' actions symbolically link to an acceptance of their identity in lesbian culture. However, the placement of bisexuality as an undecided and unstable sexual identity seems problematic. It appears that the paradigmatically oppositional representations and action of such characters as Dana and Alice, and Shame and Jenny lead to an order of discourse that places bisexuality as a transitional stage into/from homosexuality or heterosexuality. This stage is constructed as a space where bisexuals are in denial about their stable identity. The symbolic actions we see carried out by bisexual characters are ideologically important as "language connects with the social through being the primary domain of ideology, and through being both a site of, and a stake in, struggles for power" (Patricia Leigh, *Language and Power* 15). These actions are representative of wider power struggles in society and they give a useful insight into contemporary lesbian culture.

Within this textual lesbian culture bisexuality is allowable but not totally accepted as a distinct sexual identity that allows full participation within lesbian culture, a culture that is expressed distinctly as a "team" or community. Here, by utilizing Richard Dyer's ideas on typification (*The Matter of Images* 30), it seems that the discourses of heterosexuality and homosexuality cross over to such a degree in bisexual identity that no positive assertive discourse can be produced from a bisexual position within lesbian or even heterosexual culture. This identity cannot be typified as stable as bisexuality draws on both orders of discourse. Such an identity has political and cultural implications that are uncomfortable for both sexualities as it questions the ideological foundations of their stable identities. This is due to the paradoxical nature of bisexuality as an identity in the contemporary age. As Paula C. Rust explains, this is rooted in the development of a distinct lesbian identity as far back as the nineteenth century when she claimed that such an identity,

produced the belief that sexual attraction must be directed toward either men or women. If men and women are "opposite" genders then attractions toward women and men must also be opposite attractions that cannot coexist simultaneously within a single individual. . . . One of the greatest challenges facing bisexual women in contemporary Western culture is the belief that bisexuality does not exist. Women who are bisexual are often told they are "denying" their true sexuality, which must be either lesbian or heterosexual. (Rust 206–207)

The hierarchy of discourse produced within *The L Word* reflects this type of position; for instance, when Alice is told to "make up [her] mind" (1.1), this demand reflecting a notion that only one identity is acceptable. Such cultural

antagonism toward bisexuals from the lesbian community has been outlined by such theorists as Kristin G. Esterberg (*Lesbian and Bisexual Identities*). It appears that due to the discursive construction of lesbian identity as the "other" to heterosexual identity and vice versa, bisexual identity has nowhere to go. Characters such as Alice and Jenny cannot join either given "team" until they alter their practices and actions to that encapsulated by lesbian or heterosexual outline. Here bisexuality is the ultimate "other," impossible to achieve at any given moment due to the construction of society's current understanding of sexual identity and attraction.

Overall, this ultimate discursive "otherness" in such a media text gives credence and stability to asserted lesbian identities that are no longer anger ridden, but instead are comfortable and further reinforced by positive lesbian characters. This reiterates the problem that the lesbian culture represented here has with the notion of a fluid sexual identity. This notion of bisexuality encapsulates the postmodern position that identity is not fixed, but is fluid and interchangeable; a position that could be seen as invalidating the identity of lesbians and leaving them no degree of subjectivity from which to overcome their social and political oppression.

Lesbian identity in *The L Word* is shown as an identity that is stable once achieved and accepted, a discursive practice that many lesbians and gay men find themselves practicing and, eventually, being congruent with (Cass 219–235; Coleman 31–43). For instance, Dana's worry about being outed is not about shame but her economic concerns (which take ideological priority in today's society). She agrees and acknowledges that she is, "... so gay," and otherwise happy with such an identity (1.11).

Bisexuality is certainly in a less powerful position as an asserted identity. In this sense the order of discourse could be suggested to be working as a form of lesbian culture "governmentality" (Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* 57), where power (through self-governance) is dependent on the social relations and the social acceptability of specific discourses at a specific historical moment. Here lesbian discursive practice is asserted as more powerful, dominant, and socially acceptable than bisexual practice through its stability. This could possibly be seen as offering ideological encouragement to achieve a more settled and stable social identity for participants within a lesbian culture, potentially represented by the audience. This positive identification achieves some sense of social and political identity.

Another paradigmatically oppositional discursive practice is set up in terms of gender, and is constructed through sexual practice. The various representations of sexual acts in *The L Word* can be considered as part of lesbian culture. An analysis of these actions can be used to locate these practices in relation to various orders of discourse from mainstream society that are

utilized in the creation of meaning. This is especially pertinent as (lesbian) sexual practice in the context of everyday life has been underrepresented until recently. The representation within the show offers an institutionalized form of gender representation, and this is prevalent throughout both seasons. Again, an order of discourse is constructed, which is developed hierarchically to foreground a particular position on gender, but rather than only being based upon aesthetic or career expectations as in previous orders of discourse around gender (Wodak 1–20), this particular discourse is constructed mainly through the sexual practices and emotional involvement in relationships in which the characters partake.

These sexual acts are linked to the notions of "butch/femme" discussed by Sally R. Munt (*Butch/Femme* 1), among others, or, alternatively, this could be considered as "borrowing" dominant understandings of masculinity and femininity. These representations provide ideological guidelines for emotional and sexual behavior based on a butch or femme subjectivity for lesbian culture. There is also an interlinked hierarchy of ideology produced about sexual activity and "lesbian spaces," dependent on them being public (in the lesbian community, on the lesbian scene) or private (the home).

The majority of lesbian characters within *The L Word* are symbolically feminine and stereotypically attractive. In terms of an acceptable dominant ideology of gender, what is presented to the viewer is the traditionally constructed idea of femininity. The main characters in the first season have long hair and all wear makeup to accentuate their feminine features (cheekbones, lips) and the majority wear clothing that also accentuates the hips and breasts, highlighting their femininity.

The shooting of sex scenes involving "feminine" characters from season one of *The L Word* appears to embrace an ideologically traditional expectation of female sexual and emotional behavior within the context of a relationship. The emotional investment that women are traditionally expected to make with regard to commitment and sexual practices are clearly displayed with regard to "committed" couples in the show. All sexual practices, apart from those of the character Shane (who will be analyzed later) occur as part of a relationship, or developing relationship, between two women. Bette and Tina's sexual relationship is portrayed on few occasions in the first season of *The L Word* on the occasion that it is, sex takes place in their home and bed (symbolic of commitment) and in the context of a relationship that is set up throughout the first episode (1.1/1.2). Within the opening season sexual practice is framed as an integral part of their commitment to have a baby (eventually through a "feminine" evening that enacts Bette's insemination of Tina with donor sperm). The representations of Bette and Tina's relationship offer the construction of a comfortable and emotional discourse in relation to

sexual practice that takes place in the confines of a relationship. This draws upon previously existing Westernized dominant discourses of family and responsibility (Bradbury 362–383), where relationships, and the traditional female role, are seen as ideologically central to socialization and the foundations of a stable society.

These ideological actions are also repeated for characters Jenny and Martina: their sexual encounters are placed within the development of an emotional relationship. Shots during sex scenes between Jenny and Martina are close-ups that show emotion and intimacy. This reinforces a discourse of femininity that is emotional in terms of sexual practices; sexual acts within a relationship are intricately connected to those characters that have clear feminine attributes through their own displays of gender. This in turn connects sexual commitment and emotion to femininity within lesbian culture.

Oppositional paradigms are used for the series' only butch lesbian (note here that the butch-ness is only asserted in comparison with the feminized characters and is still removed from the traditional butch masculinized lesbian). Only one of the characters in the first two seasons, Shane McCutcheon, can be considered as having both visual attributes and also emotional and sexual practices that challenge a traditional feminine discourse. This is a matter that becomes more pronounced as the character continues from season one into season two.

Shane's unkempt hair, thin androgynous body, and clothing make her symbolically masculinized in opposition to the other characters. Shane wears more masculine clothes such as shirts and school ties and her feminine attributes are not foregrounded by costume. She is symbolically and physically "boyish" in nature, the visual meaning constructed further supported by the fact that actress Katherine Moening portrayed a male-identified female, Jake Pratt, in the television series *Young Americans* (2000). Shane is also the most sexually active character, promiscuous in her behavior throughout the show. She even claims that this need for sex and her lack of ability to commit is so ingrained in her nature she finds it difficult to escape and remain faithful to a partner (3.6). Whilst this draws on a preexisting discourse of gender to assert a kind of masculinity or "butch-ness," it also draws on discourses of sexual practice to assert a distinct butch sexual identity for Shane. The actions of Shane equate with promiscuity and emotional detachment. In season two she states she does not like "sleepovers" (2.1), and, therefore, avoids the actions which may be symbolic of the emotional and feminine.

She is also graphically represented as a hub of all sexual activity in Alice's chart of lesbian sexual patterns. In season one the character of Shane is introduced and asserted quickly. She is briefly shown in "The Planet," and is asserted as an attractive character drawing flirtatious attention from another female customer (1.1). Here Shane seems to appreciate the sexual advances; she is

even referred to by Martina as, "Don Juan," drawing on a preexisting discourse of masculinity and sexual prowess. The next scene Shane appears in shows her taking an unidentified woman to Bette and Tina's swimming pool during the day; there follows a brief, narratively inconsequential discussion between the two (which is barely audible) before they have sex in the pool. This is viewed through a long shot that minimizes any considerations of closeness, intimacy, or emotions on the part of the characters. They both face away from the camera so that their facial expressions are not seen; this again is in opposition to how the feminized sexual acts are traditionally constructed. The woman is never identified. This discourse of promiscuity as sexual practice is also constructed for us in the first meaningful exchange between Shane and a previous one-night stand (1.1):

Bette (to Alice) Have you noticed that every time Shane walks into a room, someone leaves crying?

Bette and Alice *They watch as a young woman approaches Shane.*

Lacey Hey, how come you didn't call me the other night? I left five messages.
Shane Oh . . . well . . . I haven't had my cell phone, so . . . when I go get my cell phone and check my messages, I will call you . . . It was good to see you though, take care.

Shane turns away.

Lacey runs to front door and opens it to find Tim and Jenny.

Lacey (almost in tears) It's just wrong; you can't treat people like that. You have to tell Shane that that's just not right (leaves).

Shane is symbolically detached from any notion of a relationship; the verbal choices here outline she causes upset to others by her approach, which stands out for the other characters (and, therefore, the audience) as distinct behavior. Her actions in the swimming pool are purely sexual in nature, not expressive of any commitment or emotion. Shane is then, purely friendly toward her admirer at the party, utilizing verbal language that is vague and conversational rather than expressive and emotional. The description of her by Bette connotes that Shane cares little for the emotions of the other participants in her (many) sexual liaisons, and that this is not anything new for the character.

These qualities could be considered as discretely gendered as male or butch lesbian. Shane is successfully and aggressively pursuing sex, not emotional commitment, within the lesbian community and this is in distinct opposition to the "feminine" lesbian outlined earlier. This tends to isolate her from the dominant discourse within this particular textual instance of lesbian culture, with the majority of characters taking part in representational

practices that are portrayed as more fulfilling in terms of developing relationships. This particular sexual practice can be seen as a reassertion of the ideological framing of the idealized heterosexual relationship, whose practices reiterate commitment and responsibility; here we see a hierarchical order of discourse reappropriated to lesbian culture. Committed sexual relationships are foregrounded over and above pure lesbian desire.

Much of Shane's sexual practice is connected distinctly to the lesbian "scene" and she is the "hub" of sexual practice. For Shane, sex is enjoyable and her burch practice within lesbian culture is distinctly connected to an overt representation of her sexuality, which is unshamed, purely sexual, and public in nature (taking place on the lesbian scene). This draws on a previous order of discourse within lesbian culture that encouraged the explicit identification of oneself as lesbian to achieve identity, visibility, and political status, rightfully portrayed as an important element of lesbian culture.

Whilst the sexual, burch side of lesbian culture is acknowledged in *The L Word*, it is discursively confined by the representation of the committed long-term lesbian relationships and "femme-mas" discussed earlier. The oppositional practices appear to reinforce social roles along the lines of gender, although in the current sociocultural context of lesbian culture this discursive practice may not be for the purposes of maintaining the institutionalization of gender, but instead intended to represent a lesbian culture that appears to be ideologically "normal" in terms of relationships. There is no doubt that this borrows from a previously existing order of discourse about the family, social roles and social responsibility that belong to mainstream culture. This creates an ideology that lesbian culture can exist within the normalizing confines of the mainstream but only if partially adhering to preexisting gendered power relations and ideologies. This is also backed by "evidence" of gendered relationship practices and ideologies of the family being at the heart of contemporary debates surrounding gay rights, civil partnerships, and gay adoption issues (McKee), furthering the ideological normality of lesbian relationships.

In *The L Word* there is a subjective supremacy of gender created through sexual practice. Shane reinforces this as she has a distinct sexual subjectivity that places her as the opposite to what could be considered the dominant and prevalent discourse in a developing contemporary lesbian culture which is seemingly hegemonically integrating, in some part, with mainstream society and its orders of discourse. This does not discount Shane's way of life and still places it securely within lesbian culture and the lesbian scene in particular but this burch discourse is now lower in the hierarchy of lesbian cultural discourse and she is constructed as a rather isolated subject. This is reflective of the small amount of acceptance (through integration rather than visual and

political difference) of lesbians in society but reflects that social acceptance is still subject to some sort of adherence to dominant ideology.

This analysis of Shane allows us to explore a distinct cultural problem within lesbian culture. Kristina Jals claims that the problem of the burch within lesbian culture is that burchness is seen as a "failure of masculinity" (52) and this appears to be true in the discourses produced in *The L Word*. Shane's lesbian identity is solid, but her isolation stems from an inability to open up to feminine emotions and social responsibilities and she is anchored by her ideologically masculinized sexual desire. Even when on the verge of the show's only potential gay marriage, Shane cannot commit herself; she first cheats on (3.5) then leaves Carmen de la Roca Morales (Sarah Shahi) waiting for her at the altar on their wedding day (3.12). Shane's masculine practices are shown as failing her and are portrayed as problematic; she visually and verbally does not take part in the practice of relationships that are borrowed from other preexisting (normalized) repertoires. Overall, this behavior isolates Shane's discursive position and perhaps the political potential of identifying distinctly as a "dyke," burch or overt lesbian. But, again, this is reflective of a contemporary dichotomy in lesbian culture that wishes to be perceived as "normal" and able to participate in the preexisting structures of dominant discourse in heteronormative society, but still due to political and social inequality has a requirement to be politically assertive.

Shane then, serves a dual role in constructing a discourse about the burch, and, in this case, sexually active lesbian. She reiterates a dominant ideology, and operation of power, which sees this position as threatening to the order of social and gender roles and perhaps lesbian "integration." A more challenging representation may have been ideologically unpalatable for mainstream audiences as it could be perceived as a direct to heteronormative gender binaries. To the detriment of lesbian culture (in the eyes of a mainstream culture) it would also have produced a discourse that lesbian culture is deviant and overly sexual in nature, unable to partake in the ideologies of mainstream society.

It is most interesting and perhaps ideologically unsurprising that the "player" of this lesbian culture is masculinized, as the burch identity has been attacked from both inside and outside the lesbian community as problematic (Halberstam, "F2M" 210-228). On another level the burch is perhaps the most useful example of the primary, explicitly secure lesbian identity. Her discursive practice is sexually autonomous; she is an active lesbian who is depicted as participating in the lesbian "scene" and has no subjective problems with her identity.

Shane's distinct identity is both celebratory and restrictive. She discursively portrays a proud lesbian identity yet serves an ideological and hegemonic

purpose in terms of mainstream cultural integration through her reiteration of norms of gendered power relations based on both her appearance and her sexual practice. Her sexual acts, behavior in relationships, and way of dressing encapsulate the tensions of power in a lesbian culture attempting to integrate as "normal" into mainstream society.

In terms of contextualizing the aforementioned representations and finding reasoning for their appearance, we can turn to the production context of *The L Word*. Particular discourses are produced by the "discourse processes" (Fairclough, *Media Discourse* 59) of the institutions in which they find their foundation. The institution of commercial television production in the United States is influenced greatly by the commercial market. This prioritizes representations in media texts that fulfill and satisfy the requirements of such a market. It is, therefore, pertinent to explore how the pressures of economy that frame the production of *The L Word* influence representations of lesbian culture.

Drama production in the U.S. mass media is governed by a need for the attraction/maintenance of a proportion of the audience, so that consumers can be delivered to potential advertisers. The result of this is that social categories within the genre of drama must appeal to as wide a market as possible. The consequence of this imperative has a profound effect upon any production. This means that the representations subsequently produced must appeal to, essentially, the widest market possible in a market dominated by narrowcasting.

Firstly, it is evident that overt and significant gay representations were only likely once series that focused on homosexual characters, such as *Will and Grace* (1998–2006), showed a potential for success. Michelle Korr outlines Lane Chalkin's experience of pitching the original idea in U.S. gay/lesbian magazine *The Advocate*:

"It was a radical idea, it was absurd," she admits. But after penning a 5,000-word piece for *Los Angeles* magazine in 1999 on the gay baby boom, she put together a treatment for a lesbian ensemble drama. Shortly thereafter, she says, "I put it aside because it was clear there was no receptivity whatsoever." Then *Will & Grace* took off. *Queer as Folk* became a big hit for Showtime. Chalkin reworked her pitch and presented it to a high-ranking Showtime exec, and he said, "We've got to do this." (Korr, "Welcome Back to L World" 43)

These progressive shows and representations of homosexuality have had to develop in the market-oriented framework of the U.S. television market. It was only when the commercialized "water had been tested" that such shows

found commissions. This appears to adhere to the viewpoint of the free-market conservatives or pluralists who claim a U.S. commercial system provides whatever a market requires or demands. The appearance of such shows could be framed in a social context of gay rights and further legislative integration, but it has been argued that the main reasoning for inclusion in U.S. network schedules is the need to respond to an economic context, that of narrowcasting. This has meant a focus upon drawing distinct "quality" audiences. Ron Becker states that

recent programming trends could be particularly effective at appealing to a highly lucrative segment of the quality audience, specifically, upscale gay and lesbian viewers. . . . Narrowcasting often encourages a network to discover markets currently being underserved by other outlets. . . . the dissolution of television so called mass audience and the segmentation of viewership have reduced the risk networks face by airing gay material. (Becker 393)

This raises a distinct area for concern that should be considered when analyzing representations in context. If commissions and subsequent program content are more concerned with providing audiences (and thus capital) rather than politically useful representations, commerciality must be a key impact on the development of such representations. Thus a key area for exploration of any relevant lesbian representation is whether the lesbian cultural discourses produced are founded in commerciality rather than in political citizenship or discourses of equality.

What we can assert, is that although lesbian and gay audiences have become an economic consideration, the widest possible audience is still one that embraces mainstream culture and ideologies. A fulfillment of elements of both social discourses can mean that *The L Word* has the potential to succeed with both gay (alternative) and straight (ideologically mainstream) audiences, and, therefore, the producers and backers have a better chance of fulfilling the commercial imperative, although this may minimize the politically and ideologically challenging potential of the text.

We see this exemplified when we consider the feminized lesbian in *The L Word*, which was discussed earlier; here we see no distinct challenge to the heterosexualized notion of femininity as something to be subject to the male gaze (Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* 27). From an aesthetic point of view, it can perhaps be argued that the privileging of femininity (again aesthetically through "emotionalized" sexual practices) in the lesbian gender order of discourse allows for the utilization of a fantasy (lesbian) character that is presumably desired by a male part of the mainstream target audience.

For the first time in the drama genre there is a text that represents many elements of lesbian culture and life, but the majority of participants in this culture are feminized to a greater degree than participation in actual lesbian culture would suggest. This position adheres to the traditional notion of gender seen throughout the genre of soap and drama in the U.S. mass media. The repetition of this representation ensures some stability in the format and, therefore, the delivery of a mainstream (male and female) audience to advertisers (Stempel Mumford 43). The discursive and generic elements of *The L Word* appear to be anchored in drama/soap rather than social realism and perhaps this explains a discursive hierarchy that is anchored in the feminized lesbians.

This generic style of representation is also reflective of similar generic qualities related to femininity found in such shows as *Sex and the City* (sleeping in mind that *The L Word*'s season one promotional tagline is "Same Sex, Different City"). This style, coupled with the portrayal of similarly ideologically acceptable practices designed respectively for male and female members of a mainstream audience, can only be anchored by the opinion outlined by Showtime President Bob Greenblatt who is trying to attract a broader audience, particularly straight women (Goodridge 48).

But Shane's character and her linked ideological meaning also fulfill a distinct purpose for the commercial imperative. This is not only to sit in opposition to or reiterate the order of gender through sexual practice. Being further down the prevalent order of discourse does not mean that this representation is in any way constructed as "wrong" for a lesbian audience, it is merely the case of normalization being privileged over an alternative representation. Shane's behavior and meaning offers an unambiguous site for the lesbian part of the television market to identify with. She provides a link to distinct lesbian spaces through visual language and anchors them distinctly as lesbian through her actions and visual codes. This means that two alternative discourses of lesbian sexual practice and butch-ness are produced to enable a reflection and negating of a wider market than merely and singularly "lesbian" or "mainstream." Shane is rather like an instant shoveler to quickly identifiable aspects of lesbian culture (she is clearly a lesbian/dyke stereotype), whilst other "lesbian" aspects may be more hidden behind normative discourse practices (as outlined earlier) for the lesbian market to discover as each season continues, thereby maintaining the attention of such an audience in spite of more traditional forms of discourse.

Overall, these particular discourses are strongly linked to the commercial-ity to which the producers must adhere for success. Depictions of feminine lesbians are displayed in opposition to Shane's masculinized lesbian and provide a palatable and relatively normalized representation; meanwhile, Shane

allows an explicit stereotype and point of identification for the lesbian community.

It can be claimed that because of this some of the lesbian filmmakers, writers, directors, and producers involved in *The L Word* (some of whom initially emerged from the New Queer Cinema movement) are still restricted. They have moved away from a political movement where there was little point in asserting a distinct lesbian identity as queer politics posits that sexuality is entirely fluid and this detracts from a single identity position (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 25). Instead they have now situated themselves in a position in the market where, although lesbian identity can be clearly asserted to a wider audience than ever, this is not necessarily in such a fashion that diversely represents all aspects of a lesbian culture. The new discursive practices that control and restrict the potential for alternative representations and meanings are commercial in foundation but reach into other discursive and generic repertoires that reinforce and appeal to a majority mainstream audience in the first instance and the lesbian audience in the second.

What we see with *The L Word* are new types of lesbian cultural representation introduced into a mainstream media text; here there is certainly a distinct lesbian cultural discourse, challenging that which went before. However, hegemonically naturalized discourses and power positions such as heterosexuality remain stable and unchallenged as the dominant cultural identity; even elements of heterosexual gender relations are the foundation of discursive repertoires to be drawn upon in terms of emotion, relationships, gender, and social responsibility. Generic repertoires are also raised, as the traditional feminine aesthetic and emotional discourse appears to be central to broad success. Although the plurality of the market has acknowledged that there is a place for lesbian representation and culture, the range of discursive practice is defined by the need for a broad audience (within a narrowcasting context) and the resultant range of advertisers. These representational selections may enable alternative discourses, but not necessarily ideologically resistive discourses in terms of political identity and power relations.

Note

1. Fardough refers to such "orders of discourse" as being related to society's ideological hierarchies where certain viewpoints/ideologies take preference over others, thus aiding in the restoration of dominant ideological relations (*Media Discourse* 69).

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with the contention that such diversity would not, as Frank might put it (in Keen 2009: 13), be “helpful to us in getting the [audiences] to get it through” (to either network or viewers). With the revisions to the ENDA bill, and implied acceptance that gay and lesbian rights should not come at the exclusion of transgender rights, does this new attitude now extend to representation? When will television be ready for *The (Transgender) Word*? For as we look at where transgender representation on television today stands, it is much where lesbian and gay representation was twenty years ago. Within such a context, one must look at *The L Word*’s tentative steps with Max, forwards and back, and hope for a brighter future for transgendered representation on television. Here’s to waiting for *The T Word*.

Notes

- 1 See Elizabeth Jensen (2006: C5).
- 2 See James Hibberd (2005).
- 3 “Cisgender” refers to non-transgendered individuals.
- 4 This scene and relationship is discussed by Kim Akass and Janet McCabe in “What is a Straight Girl to Do?” (2006).
- 5 See also Beirne, “Lesbian Pulp Television” (2007).
- 6 See Bruce Bagemihl (1999).



The End of *The L Word*: Fan Pleasure or Fan Pain?

Faye Darris

Whenever a successful TV series ends, fans react in a variety of ways: with nostalgia, sadness or even anger. The end of *The L Word* (Chaiken 2004–2009) was no exception. A reaction from lesbian viewers was understandably, after all *The L Word* was the seminal lesbian drama series of the early Noughties. From its first broadcast, and given its representation and narrative, many lesbian fans considered the show was about them and, perhaps more importantly, *for* them. Speaking personally, this was an exciting time—a lesbian show with lesbian characters at the heart of the narrative! Given that the show generated excitement and intrigue among gay, lesbian, and straight audiences, but ended with more of a blip than a bang, it is important and relevant to explore the fan reactions to the cancellation and ending of the show.

This chapter explores fan reactions to the end of the show, and seeks to understand why viewers, unhappy with its cancellation, continued to watch, even if it was through gritted teeth and with trepidation about the direction of *The L Word*’s final season. To achieve some understanding of audience pleasures and anti-pleasures I looked to Showtime’s fan forum (<http://www.sho.com/site/1word/> interrogated). What became apparent from an analysis of postings and responses is that any enjoyment of the series came from non-traditional viewing perspectives that embraced the openness of the storyline or a celebration of the lesbian culture the show generally portrayed. The celebratory position was rare on the forum. Instead there were more negative posters who framed their lack of enjoyment within what they considered was the increasingly consumerist nature of the show’s production. But what is interesting is that viewers kept

on watching, even though a number of them were not particularly enjoying the storylines or final outcome of the series.

This particular forum was useful because it was consistently used by fans and was focused solely on the show. The forum contained 11,980 posts up to March 1, 2010. Other forums online did have a general show focus but often discussed other matters related to the lifestyle of lesbians and so would detract from the subject at hand. The forum was located on the Showtime website where the weekly appearances of the season six "interrogation tapes" were hosted and these also form the topic of some of the analysis of audience readings of the final season. These "tapes" (even though they were of little use in terms of storylines) followed on from the season finale and generated animated discussion online.

What became immediately apparent on the forum was that the fan relationship with the show had soured somewhat in the light of what were perceived as rather odd storyline developments in season six. It became clear that some lesbian fans were immensely disappointed with the lack of an answer to "who killed Jenny?" They were instead rewarded with a return to the traditional lesbian screen death seen throughout film and television history and discussed widely through the work of Russo (1997), Wilton (1995), and Tropiano (2002) among others. Some viewers felt this portrayed lesbians as untrustworthy at best and murderous at worst. This is interesting, as such a focus emphasizes how the cultural and social experience of lesbians can impact on what they actually want from television portrayals of lesbian life. Perhaps it can be posited then that the initial and distinct focus on social and cultural issues which impact on the lesbian community fielded the need in *The L Word's* lesbian audience to feel considered by producers in the closure of the final story arc. Initially this could also have been due to a general lack of lesbian-focused drama and positive portrayal in the media.

After noting this key mood change I really wanted to uncover why lesbian audiences kept watching *The L Word*, and why they felt the need to comment and vent their thoughts on the show in, often, vehement ways. What was clear from my initial reading of the forums is that there were clear trends around the declining enjoyment of the series and expectations from lesbian viewers to see positive lesbian characters and culture on-screen. What is blatantly obvious though is that this audience was "active," showing key insights into production

contexts and cultural politics. The notion of the active viewer is one long held in the cultural studies tradition. Stuart Hall (1997) argued that the cultural background of an individual media consumer impacts upon their reading and understanding of a media text. With regard to *The L Word* varying readings of the text are expressed through postings by "cult" fans who often critique, and display annoyance, with producers via online spaces (Hills 2002). This makes the focus on an online discussion board useful for exploring these propositions, as it provides detailed and relatively easily available data.

"I thought it was an excellent finale"

As stated earlier, it was quite clear when reading the forums that viewers were generally unhappy with the end of season six both during and after broadcast. But there were a small number of postings which did show that viewers found some pleasure in the ending of the show, and attempted to be fairly positive about the general existence of *The L Word*, rather than the much-maligned plotlines of season six. There were distinct reasons alluded to when discussing how the finale of the show was a pleasurable event.

I thought it was an excellent finale. I think it was true to life – you can't have things neatly wrapped up – that is why I like the *L Word* so much because it seems real to me. The relationships aren't perfect, the friendships are up and down and each character you like and dislike.

BBNash, March 11, 2009

I think we all feel this a great series and we all would love more ... but why does a series have to answer questions for you. Leave it to your imagination. Great job by the writers!! [sic]

Jeremy, March 12, 2009

Postings similar to these support the point that a few fans enjoyed the non-traditional ending that *The L Word* gave to us, where the narrative around the death of Jenny Schecter was left open and unanswered. These viewers embraced the sense of "realism" that the lack of answers provided. They define this by comparing it to the kind

of realism they experience in their own lives, one that is ongoing and doesn't give resolution to every problem. What was most important to these viewers was that the lack of resolution is vastly different from the so-called classic realist narrative that has all loose ends tied up and gives answers to any ideological questions. It differs from the theoretical understanding of media realism that "imposes coherence and resolution on a world which has neither" (Fiske 1987: 109). For these particular members of the audience the final season's pleasures are related to *The L Word* being what we could term a "writerly text" (Fiske 1987: 75) that allows them to continue in online discussions and fantasize about what actually happened to any of the characters. They embrace being able to use their imaginations to end the series for themselves and celebrate the openness of the storyline. This is also perhaps reflective of the growing culture of fan fiction about contemporary television drama and a sense that the text continues on beyond its initial network run.

Those viewers who did appreciate the lack of traditional closure arguably reflect a postmodern viewing position, as this particular season of *The L Word* seems to "eschew the codes and conventions of realism and narrative" and has a "significant tendency to tinker with television's earlier and more sacred realist traditions" (Calvert 2008: 179). Although rare, this pleasure in non-narrative closure appears to be a growing aspect of contemporary television and mirrors approaches to narrative seen in *True Peaks* (Lawery 1995) and, more recently, *The Sopranos* (Miklitsch 2006). Nevertheless, these pleasures appear to be limited to small numbers of the audience analyzed in the case of *The L Word*.

Postings also seemed to show that viewers liked the ability of the show to create discussion and draw attention to both itself and lesbian culture, and it didn't seem to matter whether this attention was positive or negative. It was clear that some forum contributors believed this made both the series and executive producer Ilene Chaiken an "artistic" success.

You really need to respect the artist's concept for the *L Word*. Like it or not, and obviously we loved the series! And whether you approved of the ending, it has gotten more comments and attention which is what any artist wants [sic].

Aimee Gaston-voss, May 5, 2009

Ileen Chaiken says to form you own opinion about the end. I think the last season was a creative jump that stands alone. It was intriguing, earth-shattering but what can I say, it mirrored life and sometimes there are no happy endings [sic].

Lucas DeLeon, May 14, 2009

Again, these fans celebrate the openness of the storyline and also take real pleasure in Chaiken's online interview (Showtime 2009a [online]) where she encourages viewers to make their own decisions about the end of the show. Posters refer to Chaiken's artistic creativity, as though she is an auteur who has produced something unique and groundbreaking in terms of both television drama and lesbian representation. These postings celebrate Chaiken as a creator and a producer who is creatively unique. In order to help explain this sort of audience position Jonathan Bignell (2009) considers why contemporary audiences refer to television in this supposed critically aware way. He links this to what he also regards as the contemporary nature of an audience's experience of televisual culture. Taking this point as a foundation I would argue that these postings reinforce the position that "everyone is now a critic." Television is so much a part of viewers' lives, it is also relevant to consider that, due to technological advances online, public spaces have become available for them to express a critical position. The very existence of online discussion forums makes viewers and fans feel like reviewers with opinions worthy of being shared and in this way act they find pleasure. Television in particular is discussed so widely and heavily that it has become part of an artistic discourse.

"... be grateful we had 6 years of our moment in the sun."

In terms of what lesbian viewers enjoyed about the show, their pleasures were focused more on the visibility of lesbians on television than on particular issues of narrative. Lesbian visibility, support, encouragement, and a sense of community are matters that are politically and culturally important to lesbians in contemporary western culture, especially as lesbians have a relatively recent emerging identity in mainstream culture.

LEAVE ILENE ALONE!!! yall should be happy we even had a series devoted to us ... just thank ilene and all the beautiful people for making this happen [sic].

kms, March 12, 2009

Who cares "who killed Jenny"? Get on with real life and be grateful we had 6 years of "our moment in the sun."

Barb, March 11, 2009

These were typical comments and suggested that whilst it was understandable for both lesbian and straight viewers to be disappointed and angered with the lack of a solid story for lesbian viewers there was a factor that should never be forgotten: that *The L Word* centered on lesbian characters as its main focus. The defense of executive producer, Ilene Chaiken, was focused on her bringing, arguably, the first lesbian ensemble drama to mainstream television screens. Although it can be argued that lesbian audiences have had a number of overtly lesbian characters to identify with since the early 1990s, and many of these representations dealt with lesbian topics and, more usually, problems (Becker 2004b), *The L Word* differed from other prime-time shows in that it focused on "lesbian life" and everyday culture. Lesbian characters are not just an add-on to the show to be tortured about their sexuality or disappear after a single supplementary storyline. *The L Word* managed to get beyond the treatment of lesbianism as a social problem, issue or deviation from the norm. Lesbianism as a social problem, issue or deviation, this perspective demonstrates that the show was both a (sub-) cultural success and, for Showtime, a successful commercial entity representing lesbians in a prime-time narrowcasting environment.

The pleasure for lesbian audience members was not just in the watching of the show, but also in its impact and integration into their own lives. Much of the enjoyment seems to have been linked to personal experience and this can be explained through Hall's claim that the decoding of media texts can be related to audiences' understanding of "meaningful discourse" through their own "frameworks of knowledge" (Hall 2006). The gratification of the viewers quoted is often explained in postings via their own social experiences. This seems to add to their sense of inclusion and exclusion in both lesbian culture and wider society. Specifically, many audience members described how the show

allowed them to begin a discussion of their sexuality with family members, how it encouraged them to "come out" publicly, even relating the show to their own acceptance of their sexuality.

I just want to thank the L word because it was a show I got into as I came into my acceptance of being gay. I relate most to Phyllis confused all her life and than discovering something that she never saw before. Watching this show with my partner of now almost two years has been so wonderful [sic].

Suzy Yaqub, April 29, 2009

But I have to admit that it played an enormously huge role in my life ... You guys pulled me out of the closet and continuously giving me courage to be out [sic].

Ryumen Zhou, May 1, 2009

These postings exemplify audience pleasures that came from "experiencing" *The L Word* as a site of recognition, identification, and community support rather than just a television show. They suggest that *The L Word* was important because it made lesbianism acceptable, everyday, and normal. This certainly seems to be the case in a posting from another lesbian viewer who responds with vitriol to a fellow poster's claims that the representation of lesbians in *The L Word* lacks diversity.

There is no way to depict every "kind of lesbian relationship and every lifestyle" and to believe so is extremely closed minded. What this show succeeded in doing is presenting lesbians to people who had no access to them. And shame on you for thinking to deny them. This show has been a life line to many people. People like me, who grew up in the bible belt, who were taught that homosexuality would damn us. In short go fix your screwed up relationship and stop hating [sic].

J.R., March 16, 2009

Pleasure for this viewer is explained through a solid understanding of the limits of any kind of representation on television. Clearly this poster understands that representations are framed, selected, and constructed by television producers, and that they can never be

"realistic" for every viewer's individual experience. This viewer finds comfort in the support and acceptance *The L Word* offered in the form of a challenge to the social experience of religion that they had personally encountered. Arguably the pleasure here was one that was formed from *The L Word*'s production of a representation of lesbianism that expanded and added to the viewer's existing experience. In a Foucauldian sense, this could be seen as a challenge to "force relations" (Hakman 1996) or what can be termed dominant stereotypes and ideas about homosexuality. For this viewer *The L Word* was a welcome addition and challenge to the society in which she existed, an important change in how she considered her own lesbian sexuality.

"I've never felt more betrayed as an L word fan"

There were a number of very negative responses to the end of *The L Word*. But my purpose in discussing these points is not to engage in an argument about whether or not *The L Word* is a good or bad TV show. Instead, I seek to understand the reasons for negative audience readings, or what we could see as anti-pleasures explained through a socio-political and commercial context. What actually became evident was that viewers had to put aside their anger and negativity about various production issues in order to continue to watch *The L Word* and still enjoy it.

As mentioned previously, the negative commentary on the forum is focused distinctly on the narrative and character development of season six. This is a vastly different focus from the previously discussed positive posters, who commented less on the actual TV show and more on the "bigger picture" of *The L Word*. Much of the anger about the show was anchored in the lack of resolution around the death of Jenny Schecter. This was due to the promotional material that promised: "This season one of our favorites will take her last breath ... and one of her friends will take the fall" (Showtime 2009b: [online]).

Both straight and lesbian viewers alike shared an angry response to the lack of closure:

... although only a recent (straight) fan (have only seen 2 seasons, all in 2 months), i am tremendously disappointed in this lazy, imitation sopranos ending. i don't need everything wrapped up

tidily, but when your tagline for the season is "who killed jenny schecter?" i expect and wait the answer with glee. this was the complete opposite of glee, i feel totally ripped off and i've never seen a worse series finale [sic].

splitfire, March 19, 2009

How could such a "break through" show that helped so many people be shown in this world. Have a place, come out, and be even more proud than we were before end like this? There are soooo many more questions than answers. I've never felt more betrayed as an L word fan [sic].

Yozite, March 16, 2009

What seems to fuel anger in these instances is a betrayal of audience expectations. Of course, serial drama has generic qualities that typically put off complete narrative closure and "happily ever after" stock conclusions. This is usually considered the best way of keeping the audience interested and watching. And it appears that *The L Word* managed to maintain interest through the expectation that questions would eventually be answered, rather than merely posed by the end of the final season. The subsequent lack of closure to that particular narrative strand caused the audience to feel cheated and led astray by the well-advertised plotline. The audience still wanted resolution after the end of the show:

"Can't you just have like a miny series to rap it up?" [sic].

Let Down, March 19, 2009

There were many posts asking Showtime and Lene Chalken for an *L Word* movie or for the series to continue, suggesting that viewers wanted the comfort and clarity found in the usual "season finale" of serial drama. One way to read this is that the producers had fulfilled the generic quality of narrative deferment excellently and had left their audiences wanting more. Sadly for the audience this was at the wrong time in the lifespan of the show: the end. A possible explanation for this production decision, and for the posters' request that *The L Word* continued in some form, may be found with Mary Ellen Brown, who writes, "Resistance to narrative closure provides an opening for speculation by auditors as well as by creators as to how the case itself

may be reopened" (1990: 56). Thus, not only did the open ending offer a potential comeback for the producers, it also fielded a fan call for continuation of the series. There was still a curious group available for the producers' commercial focus.

Interestingly, many audience members vocalized this particular viewpoint of why such a narrative decision had been made in the case of *The L Word* and why they had been subject to such a mass narrative deferral. This, for me, highlights the notion of the "savvy" television viewer who isn't merely concerned with the broadcast of his or her favorite television show, but also wants answers as to why certain production decisions are made in the broadcast, thus demonstrating a growing general awareness of the commercial imperative in relation to broadcasting among television audiences.

But the decision to leave the show open has potentially backfired in a commercial sense as a number of the savviest fans made it clear that this experience would stop them from consuming any further productions related to *The L Word*.

As you sit back, calculate residuals, begin scripting the now inevitable film and spin-off series, and gloat over what a fantastic money-maker your little "stunt" has proved, I hope you're well satisfied with yourselves.

Who cares if loyal fans have been sorely disappointed, who cares about artistic integrity, heck, who cares about the communities you were supposedly meant to represent—all have been sold out in favor of the Almighty Dollar. Now, the "L" word is, apparently, "lemnings," as we are supposed to continue blindly following you (while you swoon over the incredible number of website hits) in desperate hopes that we just *might* get the answers we crave. Thanks for playing us for suckers—makes me feel oh so warm and fuzzy for having dedicated six seasons-worth of my time to you.

Anyone else thinking that a boycott might be in order?
S, March 15, 2009

What is interesting about this particular strand of audience reaction is the clear criticism of commercialism. The fans who express these kinds of opinions want to know if they are being primed for further commercial opportunities. They want an explanation and

they feel maligned. Many fans and audience members understand the nature of the commercially driven television industry and this is seemingly acceptable to most fans much of the time. But what makes this particular viewer angry is that s/he feels the decision not to reward fans with the typical closed ending has a *patently* commercial motive. Furthermore, a number of postings described Chaiken as "calculating" and driven by the need for the prison-based spin-off pilot "The Farm" to be picked up by Showtime (it was subsequently rejected by the cable broadcaster). The reason for dissatisfaction is that fans feel that their viewer loyalty has been fruitless in terms of their own satisfaction.

Then after all of the money we as people have spent on buying these seasons, you would screw with it so badly that you go away from the original backbone of what the series portrayed. I am completely writing off anything else that comes out from these people [sic].

Karen Rogers, December 29, 2009

Some audience members outline that they will no longer participate in the commercial aspect of *The L Word* in terms of buying DVDs, merchandise or subscriptions to Showtime. Their response is to punish the producers in the only way they know how. In these instances the producer-viewer relationship has failed. This highlights some interesting considerations made by audiences in a narrowcasting and commercial "pay for access" environment. These fans believe that they have power, particularly as they can withdraw their subscription, interest, and investments in merchandise when they feel disregarded or unrewarded with the kind of well-rounded narratives that they consider essential in a quality television product.

Yes, I agree. No Movie. I would have loved to have an L-Word movie before I saw the ending. But seeing the ending and seeing this last season would lead me to have serious reservations about the quality of the movie.

Lynn, March 16, 2009

This is one distinct example of the problem of studying fans and represents the mercurial consequences of betrayal after heavy investment in the text. This, according to Matt Hills, gives rise to the

traditional notion of the "resistive" fan or cultist. *The L Word* fans quoted are devoted to the text and have very particular expectations. Any deviation from that expectation is at the peril of producers, as they will disrupt the very trust "placed in the continuity of a detailed narrative world" (Hillis 2002: 28). Still, as Hillis further explains, such a position doesn't allow for the consideration of a fan culture that appears to be commercially averse and yet still continues to participate in commercial activity in relation to the chosen text. What is most interesting about the discussion board is that for as many fans who expressed that they wouldn't continue to consume or be involved in *The L Word* in an economic sense, there were those who outlined their unhappiness but also admitted they would participate in the merchandising and any further productions, even if the position was a little contradictory!

Hene seems to know that most people will take anything at this point, Jessica, and that's the problem ... I refuse to pay for a movie when I was led all season to believe that there would be a resolution during the last show. I will also be getting rid of SHO if they are not going to air *The Farm*.

Facebook user, May 4, 2009

The wider context of this posting shows that the decision made by this poster appears to be based on the reasoning that there is so little lesbian-focused television material available. Although they have had their fill of *The L Word* they do want to see a pick-up of a related TV series. This was justified as being due to the significant amount of investment through time (six years) that fans had made in the show. However it is certainly arguable that such fan responses should be a consideration for commercial producers in a continually fragmented media market where there are more products competing for audiences in terms of viewing figures, subscription, and merchandising.

Other reasons for negativity towards the show were based much more around issues of lesbian identity. What further compounded the sense of betrayal for many fans of the show was the fact that it was about lesbians, and they considered it should have been "for" lesbians.

Is that really what you all want, for the show to go on? We all know now that season six is a segue to the farm, which is why it doesn't make any fucking sense. Hene Chaiken doesn't give a shit about you,

don't give her any more money to make any more ridiculous driven. I realise we will all miss the characters but I think that credit is more due the actors, not the 'Masturbatory opus' that the L word eventually became. Hene Chaiken has shown that she doesn't need us, we have to realise that and move on, something else will come along, and we will now be ready for it, but that's all the credit she deserves. [sic].

adele, March 19, 2009

The excerpt above suggests that although Chaiken is "one of us" (in a lesbian sense), now that she is successful she no longer needs "us." The very terms of reference used by the poster suggest some sort of "break up," which is emotional but has to be faced! There is a critique of the sexualization of the show as it continued and a sense that lesbians now need to actively look elsewhere for their community to be represented in what constitutes a more satisfactory fashion. For this poster, her lover has become more interested in other matters and she's never going to have her needs fulfilled in this symbolic partnership.

Chaiken is discussed in many of these vitriolic postings as individualistic and commercially driven, using the final season of *The L Word* to advertise and promote her new pilot. But what is clear is that the majority of these negative postings contain a sense of betrayal that further compounds the sense of community lost and disconnection from *The L Word*. There seems to be the rather unique expectation that Chaiken, as a lesbian, should have focused on the community, and that an ethical and thoughtful lesbian representation should have been at the forefront of her mind. For some it seems that betrayal has placed her outside of the lesbian community on a number of levels:

Way to piss off every lesbian on Planet Earth. Good job, Chaiken. I'm sure you'll EASILY be able to find more work again in this community. *eyeroll* [sic].

Krysina Kraus, May 20, 2009

Hene Chaiken responded to this perspective during *The Final Word: The End of The L Word* hosted by Showtime's website (Showtime 2009a), stating that she didn't intend for the show to be purely aimed at a lesbian audience as this would marginalize its appeal and, one would assume, its potential for pulling in a wider audience. For these

posters, her comments indicate that the lesbian community was not at the top of Chaiken's priority list, something that many find shocking. This potentially led to Chaiken's further ostracization—something that the release of the "interrogation tapes" only fueled further:

“... why are you violating us with these tapes?”

Postings to the Showtime forum evidence a detailed understanding of wider narratives and more traditional and accepted ideological representations of lesbians in both cinema and film. As noted earlier, the history of homosexuality in film is well summarized in a variety of key gay- and lesbian-focused historiographies and theoretical frameworks such as Russo (1987), Troiano (2006), and Wilton (1995). What is pertinent about notations on Hollywood representation is that lesbianism was often constructed as perverse, murderous, and often the cause of suicide until the early 1990s. In relation to these representations many audience members of *The L Word* signaled dismay at similar negative characterizations within the broadcast version of season six and also in the follow-up “interrogation tapes” which appeared on the Showtime official website for a few weeks following the end of the season. This is rather surprising given the ongoing success of the show and prior warm reception by lesbian audiences.

One particular issue that related to the end of *The L Word* concerned the characterization of lead characters as potential murderers. For some this was a clear move backwards in terms of lesbian representation, constructing lesbians as unbalanced, vengeful, and angry.

Thank you Lene Chaiken, for turning the women we could relate to into murderers. By leaving your little “whodunnit” question unanswered, that’s what you essentially did.

Facebook user, May 9, 2009

For these viewers the potential for one of the characters to be murdered by a lesbian was unacceptable. The comment above corroborated a high number of postings that clearly objected to Chaiken's construction of lesbians as at best unbalanced in a variety of ways and at worst as potential thieves, cheats, and killers. For the lesbian audience the fact that there was no narrative resolution to the

actions of the characters and no explanation for their immorality only caused further concern and upset.

These concerns were further underlined by the creation of the “interrogation tapes” which appeared on Showtime's official website for four weeks after the end of the televised show. Again, with regard to characterization the key issue for audience posters was the interrogation tape of Tina Kennard, who when asked if Bette Porter was her first lesbian lover responds with the revelation that her sister (who has since become a born-again Christian) was the person with whom she had her first lesbian sexual experience. The response of the audience postings was mainly negative:

... why are you violating us with these tapes?

Silver Main, April 6, 2009

Murders and committers of incest. The writers have completely gone to pot I am deeply offended and they have lost their vision completely [sic].

Facebook user, March 12, 2009

... with Tina's footage I'm reminded why I loathed the show on- and-off. What would be the point to introducing her relationship with her sister?? I have my opinions but would hope that they just made a mistake and wasn't trying to explain why she is a lesbian [sic].

Nicole, March 11, 2009

These examples evidence a distinct worry about what wider audiences will construct from both the broadcast show and also the additional “interrogation tapes.” Again there is a questioning of why generic narrative inclusions were not present in the televised version of the show, and why producers would want to introduce further narrative information that seems inconsequential. There is also a distinct sense of discomfort with the revelation that Tina had an incestuous lesbian affair with her own sister. There is awareness that representations tend to construct wider social meaning about particular sub-cultural groups, and this interrupts any form of escapism or enjoyment for lesbian audiences in this instance. Lesbian audiences express keen awareness of the potential implications for

"the lesbian" to be constructed as perverse or immoral "other" through attributes that are seen as socially problematic. It's clear that lesbian audiences do not consume in a vacuum and are aware that there are few mainstream lesbian representations available. There is a clear fear that these portrayals may have real and distinct consequences for how they are considered in social circumstances. Their worry and fear is a distinct example of Hall's position (1997) on reading and consuming media texts, but for this minority group the consequences may go far beyond a misrepresentation of or discussion on the merits of *The L Word*.

The greatest problem for these posters is the number of loose ends that remain at the end of *The L Word*. All the narrative work that had been undertaken to create rounded characters those viewers could identify with through their interactions as couples, as friends, and through their developments into what constitutes a family life, were undermined. Factors that could never have been imagined were introduced, but could go nowhere and seemed fantastical. From the responses it seems that, due to the lack of secure and distinct lesbian narratives generally in television drama, this development was a step too far.

The end?

To conclude then, there were a number of positions taken up by fans of *The L Word* in relation to both the finale of the show and its general direction over its six-year run. It seems that audiences enjoyed the "creative difference" of the show and felt that this was a unique artistic quality of American television. Arguably, this way of reading the show put the power to create meaning in the hands of the viewers. You could decide on your own ending!

For lesbian viewers, enjoyment was not specific in terms of the narrative of the show. Potentially this suggests that minority groups that have been traditionally under-represented find pleasures in being represented in any way whatsoever. This is certainly something worth exploring in relation to lesbian representation and adds another dimension to our consideration of minority audiences and their expectations. Indeed, a key defense of executive producer Ilene Chaiken was that she had been responsible for bringing the

first lesbian-focused drama to television screens. For many lesbian viewers that fact nullified their disappointment over anything else to do with the show; again, this links audience pleasure to cultural position. There is an integration of *The L Word* into lesbian social experiences—viewers use it as encouragement to come out, and as a basis for a more positive representation of the self. Thus, *The L Word* was not just a television show to be watched, but was also something these viewers experienced in other areas of their lives.

Negative audience responses dominated the forum and were mainly focused on the lack of narrative closure. Viewers felt they had been promised answers. Basically Chaiken "jumped the shark" in not providing answers! It appears that there was a distinct misjudgment on the producers' part of how viewers would react to the outcome of the show. Whether or not it was intended to provide the foundation for a spin-off, lesbian viewers saw it as a betrayal fueled by economy and greed, with a number of posters declaring their refusal to take part in any further economic consumption of *The L Word*. This confirms that generic convention is still central to the enjoyment of television texts. It also reveals that modern audiences can feel empowered through online discussion and their willingness to withdraw their financial investment in the show, although what is clearly questionable is whether these are merely empty threats.

Issues with the characterizations of immorality further compounded negativity, especially the morally perverse and potentially murderous. Not only could the audience see no end in sight, and no narrative resolution; they were also disturbed by the characterization of lesbians as a dangerous "other." The sexual identity of these posters had a distinct impact on how they read the text.

There are a number of key conclusions raised by this analysis.

The first is that creating television that represents lesbians to lesbian audiences has a weight of political expectation that is not found in relation to heterosexual audiences. For *The L Word*'s lesbian audience, loyalty and consideration of the lesbian community was a key factor in the reading and enjoyment of the text. When this didn't happen the cultural position of the lesbian viewers became an impediment to the enjoyment of the show. For lesbians to fully embrace the show they felt that their political needs should have been addressed through positive portrayals. When the show didn't portray lesbians in a positive light there was a distinct sense of betrayal. This work

indicates a need for further investigations into the commercial nature of lesbian-centered television and the audience's political expectations of the serial drama genre, as these appear to be the factors which have impacted the most on audience pleasures surrounding the show in its final season. Such factors should be of consideration to producers of lesbian-centered serial drama and wider televisual portrayals.

Whilst *The L Word* didn't suffer in terms of viewers dropping away from the show, perhaps these reactions highlight a disparity in the expectations of lesbian-focused drama between the audience and production. What seems difficult is Chalken's claim that this was never a drama for lesbians, but for all audiences. This claim is problematic for many lesbians, especially as there is so little content made for or singularly about us. Ultimately this has been seen as lesbian portrayal by those who are sometimes labeled in the forum as "taking ourselves too seriously."

What is also highlighted is that producer considerations of lesbian audiences may be a requirement in the production of any future lesbian-focused dramas. The experience of "The End of *The L Word*" may have heightened expectations for lesbian viewers the world over. The first lesbian drama has now been and gone, leaving behind some disaffected viewers in its wake. Next time the bar may be set much higher and lesbian loyalty may not be as kind with difficult narratives that never find any conclusion.

Notes

- 1 "Who Killed Jenny?" referred to Jenny Schecter and was the lead tagline for season six of the show in a variety of promotional material prior to broadcast.

PART 2

Laudations

