Televising Queer Women

A Reader

Second edition

Edited by

Rebecca Beirne

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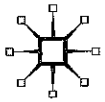

TELEVISING QUEER WOMEN
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Dana Heller's "Out for Life: Makeover Television and the Transformation of Fitness on Bravo's *Work Out*" was previously published in *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, vol. 22 no. 4 (August 2008): 525–535. Reprinted by permission of Taylor & Francis.

First published in hardcover in 2008 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN®
in the United States – a division of St. Martin's Press LLC,
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Where this book is distributed in the UK, Europe and the rest of the world, this is by Palgrave Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

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ISBN: 978–0–230–34098–5

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available from the Library of Congress.

A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Imaging Systems (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First PALGRAVE MACMILLAN paperback edition: September 2012

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America.

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that fact was never discussed. But now with this show [*The L Word*] and some of the others, people who wouldn't normally go out of their way to find out more about gay or lesbian family members can have an inside glimpse."

2. These criticisms are most succinctly articulated in a January 2009 entry of a blog called Midwest Gender Queer, written by transgender activist and performance artist JAC Stringer. Stringer writes, "Max isn't so much a transguy as he is a compilation of every negative trans-masculine stereotype imaginable. He's an insecure, hyper-masculine, misogynistic, homophobic asshole. And it just so happens that the character only turned into an asshole after he came out as trans." Rebecca Beirne critiques this characterization in "Dirty Lesbian Pictures: Art and Pornography in *The L Word*," for *Critical Studies in Television* (2007). Jennifer Reed also discusses the character's arc in "Reading Gender Politics in *The L Word*: The Max/Moira Transitions" in *The Journal of Popular Film & Television* (2009).
3. In January 2007, Alice's chart was spun off into OurChart.com, a social networking site for lesbians that included a blog by Ilene Chaiken and also invited fans of the series to contribute their names to a constellation of names. By January 2009, OurChart was shut down and redirected users to the official *L Word* page on Showtime's website, sho.com.

CHAPTER 8

Gray Matters: Bisexual (In)visibility in *The L Word*

Jennifer Moorman

A perusal of the history of American television reveals only a handful of regular or recurring characters whose behavior could be described as bisexual. Rarer still are those enabled to give this behavior a name. As Wayne M. Bryant suggests in regard to world cinema:

> The invisibility of bisexual characters in film is compounded by the dearth of writing on the topic. While there are a number of books on homosexuality in the cinema, there has never been anything written—until now—about bisexual characters in film (xi).

In this regard, not much has changed since his book was published in 1997. In their seminal books on queerness in television, Steven Capsuto (*Alternate Channels: The Uncensored Story of Gay and Lesbian Images on Radio and Television*), Steve Tropiano (*The Prime Time Closet: A History of Gays and Lesbians on TV*), and Larry Gross (*Up from Invisibility*) all mention bisexuality in a cursory fashion; only in Gross's book is the word "bisexuality" in the index, and only then with the qualifier: "on talk shows" (187). These omissions occur with good reason. The latest of these books was published in 2003. The Showtime network's hour-long drama, *The L Word*, which premiered in 2004, provided the first instance of an American fictional television program to depict multiple characters who exhibit bisexual behavior *and* had one character, Alice (Leisha Hailey), who openly identifies as

bisexual beginning with the pilot episode, and who explores and elaborates on her sexual identity throughout the show's run.

Much of the debate that has surrounded *The L Word* since its inception has focused either on its (in)ability to represent an underrepresented community, or on the nature of its intended audience. Some argue that, with its high concentration of "girl-on-girl action," it appeals mainly to a straight male audience, with the inference that this constitutes a betrayal of and an exploitation of the lesbian community. Others claim that the show offers a sympathetic representation of a lesbian community, and as such appeals to a lesbian audience seeking an articulation of their own experiences. But what of a bisexual female audience? Bisexual characters can play a unique role in helping to fulfill the creator's stated intent of demystifying queerness for a general (read: heterosexual) audience (Ilene Chaiken, quoted in Brown-Bowers D05), even as they open up a space for the questioning of and subversion of dominant conceptions of the nature of sexual identification. The extent to which the characters[1] of Alice, Tina (Laurel Holloman), Jenny (Mia Kirshner), Marina (Karina Lombard), Moira/Max (Daniela Sea), Paige (Kristanna Loken), Niki (Kate French), Molly (Clementine Ford), and Dylan (Alexandra Hedison)—all of whom exhibit what could be described as bisexual behavior—actually do fill this role is, however, compromised by the show's overall ambivalence in regard to bisexual representation.

Toward a Theory of Bisexual Representation

As suggested above, the issue of bisexual representation has occasionally been addressed by film theorists, but prior to the 2008 publication of the previous version of this essay, it had yet to be taken up in any depth in the context of television studies. In the history of American cinema, a fair number of characters have had intimate relations with both men and women, but the tendency among critics and viewers is to define any given character's sexual orientation according to the partner that the character pairs off with at the end of the film (and, yes, they are almost always paired off in the end).

As Esterberg argues, "Bisexuality has been variously defined as behavior, as identity, and as anti-identity. It has been seen as essential and, at the same time, as socially constructed" ("The Bisexual Menace" 216). In response to centuries of heterosexist oppression, the gay liberation movement adopted a predominantly essentialist mode of representation in the early 1970s and into the 1980s, for specific political motivations. If sexual orientation is not a "choice," but rather is an inherent trait like ethnicity, then one cannot be condemned as sinful simply for being oriented in a certain way. Bisexuality was, in this context, considered alternately nonexistent or irrelevant. From

the perspective of lesbian feminism, however, sexuality was reconfigured as a choice. This did not improve matters, however, as "bisexuals [were] seen as trading on heterosexual privilege and selling out the lesbian movement. In a sex-obsessed world, lesbians alone (and primarily lesbian feminists) [were] seen as standing firm against patriarchy" (216).

Meanwhile, even among those who identify as bisexual, there is no consensus as to how the term should be defined. The anthology *Bi Any Other Name: Bisexual People Speak Out,* edited by Loraine Hutchins and Lani Kaahumanu, for instance, includes people who acknowledge desire for both men and women, but who do not intend to act on all of these desires; men and women who consider themselves to be gender-blind; and conversely, those for whom being with a man is quantifiably different from being with a woman, and they simply enjoy both.

Bisexuals have been discussed at different times and in different circles variously as traitors, as a menace, as a myth, as sexually indiscriminate and irresponsible, as hopelessly confused, as bottomless pits of desire with a lust unsated by man or woman alone, and perhaps most commonly, not discussed at all. It is therefore no surprise that bisexual characters appear so infrequently in American cinema, and even less often in the explicitly commercial-driven medium of television. The greatest barrier to increased bisexual visibility seems to be that of the crisis of signification. Patrick Califia's observation that "It is very odd that sexual orientation is defined solely in terms of the sex of one's partners" (195), applies equally well to the realm of representation, if not more so: practically speaking, if a character is in a monogamous relationship, his or her sexual orientation is conventionally determined according to the sex of his or her partner—unless explicitly stated otherwise.

Maria Pramaggiore argues that: "temporal and narrative conventions are critical to a bisexual reading practice," and says that "narratives which reinforce notions of coupling and closure," whether the final coupling be heterosexual or gay or lesbian, may make a bisexual reading difficult or impossible" (278). Certainly, the notion of temporality is central to any discussion of bisexual representation based on behavior. In order for a character to exhibit bisexual behavior, s/he must appear long enough to have relations with or express desires for both a man and a woman. Triangle situations allow for a compression of such temporality. Pramaggiore focuses her argument on a discussion of films involving romantic triangles, as "such triangles can remain unresolved when the films' conclusions offer open-ended possibilities for erotic desires" (279).

Although a character need not be involved in a romantic triangle to be described as bisexual, the issue of ultimate coupling, a narrative tradition

that remains particularly strong in Hollywood narrative cinema, certainly complicates any attempt to identify a character as bisexual. The tendency of viewers and critics to designate a character's sexual orientation according to the gender of whomever that character is coupled with by the film's end is reinforced by widely held stereotypes about bisexuality; the most prominent among them is the idea that bisexuality is not a sexual identity in its own right, but merely a "phase" along the way to the adoption of either a heterosexual or homosexual identity. It would seem that, in order to ensure that a character is truly represented as bisexual, the character must either explicitly identify as such (and, ideally, continue to reiterate this identification even after the final coupling) and/or continue to have intimate relations with both men and women—to "oscillate" between the two, as Pramaggiore suggests—and/or not be engaged in a monogamous relationship at the film's end.

A Brief History of Representations of Bisexual Women on Television

Due to the primary role of temporality or duration in theories of bisexuality, one could argue that the episodic nature of serial television programming is ideally suited for both the representation of bisexual characters and for the practice of bisexual spectatorship. For practical reasons, serial television programming can allow for greater focus on character development, as opposed to the more plot-driven storytelling typical of narrative cinema. This is not to exaggerate differences between film and television based on essentialist terms opposing "the drama of character to the drama of plot" (Boddy 84). In *The L Word*, for example, viewers were able to watch various characters developing relationships with both men and women over the course of the series' run. The show simply had significantly more time to devote to the depiction of these relationships and the development of the characters than would a feature-length film on the same subject.

Nonetheless, despite the rise in queer representations on American television in the last few decades, bisexual characters have remained all but nonexistent. The general consensus among historians of queer TV posits C. J. Lamb of CBS's *L.A. Law* in 1991 as the first regular or recurring female character to be portrayed as bisexual on a fictional television show (Capsuto 273). Despite the uproar created by the "first lesbian kiss on network television," which was in fact a kiss between a bisexual woman, C. J., and a straight woman, Abby (Michele Green), the character was not allowed to develop a meaningful relationship with a woman during her time on the show. "The bisexual C. J. was given a lesbian former lover in one fall 1991 episode, but at the end of the spring season she was embarking on an affair with a straight man. After the season ended, she too left the show" (Gross 87–88).

The only regular or recurring bisexual female character to appear on American television between 1992 and 2002 was Nancy on *Roseanne*. According to Sarah Warn, writing on AfterEllen.com, " it wasn't until 2000 that we saw another bisexual woman on network TV—Sophie (Brittany Daniels) on the Fox sitcom *That 80s Show*—but her bisexuality was mostly used as a running gag, and the series didn't last long" ("*The O.C.*'s Alex Boosts Bisexual Visibility"). During this time period, HBO's *Sex and the City* occasionally referred to the concept of bisexuality in a flippant, ironic sort of way. In episode 3.4, for instance, Carrie (Sarah Jessica Parker) dates a bisexual man (Donovan Leitch), but suggests that she's "not even sure bisexuality exists." Samantha (Kim Cattrall) suggests that bisexuality is merely a fad: "That generation is all about experimentation. All the kids are going bi." In the same episode, Carrie attends a "bisexual party," during which she kisses another woman (Alanis Morissette). Her voice-over narration indicates that in this moment she "was in Alice in Confused-Sexual-Orientation-Land."

Beginning in 2002, a handful of shows included at least one regular or recurring bisexual female character: *All My Children* (ABC, 2002), *Two and a Half Men* (CBS, 2003), and *Coupling* (NBC, 2003). After or concurrent with *The L Word*, the following shows also introduced bisexual female characters in 2004: *Six Feet Under* (HBO), *North Shore* (FOX), *Rescue Me* (FX), *The O.C.*, *One Tree Hill* (WB), and *Starved* (FX).[2] As is discussed elsewhere in this volume, a bisexual character, Alex (Olivia Wilde), also appeared on *The O.C.* (FOX, 2004). Typically, however, her relationship with primary character Marissa (Mischa Barton) endures only through a few episodes, at the end of which time Marissa has seemingly reunited with her ex-boyfriend and Alex leaves the show in a jealous rage. Most recently, the Canadian series *Lost Girl* (Showcase, 2010) has become the first television program to feature a bisexual female lead, Bo (Anna Silk), but Bo perhaps epitomizes the oversexed bisexual stereotype in that she is in fact a succubus, who uses her sexuality to kill or control both men and women.

Unlike *The L Word*, none of these shows also includes regular lesbian characters; apparently, one type of queer woman is as much as any one show can handle. These lists, however, must be problematized, as their industrial and production contexts vary widely, and a concept that would be condemned as too radical on network television could be capitalized on, overtly and vocally, as cutting-edge in the context of a premium cable channel. Furthermore, the barrier to any attempt to identify all of the American

television shows to have featured bisexual characters is the perpetual question of how to define "bisexual."

As mentioned above, bisexuality has typically been defined either according to a behavioral model or through explicit identification. This issue has been addressed in psychological studies and in the social sciences, but it poses particular problems for representation. Should all characters who have desires for or sexual contact with both men and women be defined as bisexual? If so, then how would one describe, say, a character who had been in a heterosexual marriage, and left her husband for another woman, at which point she describes herself as lesbian? Should her behavior take precedence over her explicit sexual identification?

In the case of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (WB), Willow (Alyson Hannigan) has meaningful sexual and romantic relations with a man and subsequently also women, but her character is depicted as progressing from heterosexual to lesbian.[3] Joss Whedon, the show's creator, has argued that "it would be disingenuous for us to make her bisexual... and that would be a real betrayal to the gay community, particularly since we killed off her lover. So yes, she's gay to stay; she's here, she's queer; get used to it" (Naughton, "*Buffy:* Here to Slay?" 28). Thus a relationship that spanned more than two seasons—that between Willow and her boyfriend Oz (Seth Green)—becomes invalidated. While his dedication to serving the interests of queer fans of the show is admirable, for Whedon, bisexuality apparently is not queer enough; he feels that it would constitute a betrayal to the "gay community" for him to allow Willow to identify as bisexual, despite the fact that her behavior certainly could be described as such, and despite bisexuals' well-established place in LGBTIQ communities. Many of the characters on *The L Word* manifest a similar disconnect between behavior and identification: Marina, who is revealed to have a husband in Italy, despite her polyamorous relationships with women; Tina, who was in a relationship with a man before meeting and subsequently entering into a domestic partnership with Bette, and who later dates another man before returning to Bette; and Jenny, who was engaged to Tim even as she had an adulterous affair with Marina, and would later date both men and women, all ultimately identify as lesbian.

The B Word? Bisexuality in *The L Word*

While each of the characters mentioned above on *The L Word* exhibits what could be termed bisexual behavior, only Alice and occasionally Tina explicitly identify as bisexual, and in later seasons even Alice refers to herself as a lesbian as often as she describes herself as bisexual. Jenny initially resists defining her sexual orientation and ultimately identifies as lesbian, despite

the fact that both her behavior and her (rather vague) initial articulations of her desires suggest that she too could be described as "genuinely" bisexual, that is, in more than a purely behavioral sense. Both Alice's and Jenny's dialogue, character development, and interactions with other characters allow for a continuing discussion about the nature of sexual identity, even as they—in their dualistic desires—embody a mainstream-palatable segue into the lesbian world of the show by (theoretically) appealing to both lesbian and straight male audiences. In later seasons, other characters would also begin to question and deconstruct their identities, but in the first two seasons, it is Alice and Jenny who repeatedly rearticulate and/or rework their sexual identities—sometimes agonizingly or uncomfortably—and as such their sexualities stand in contrast to the monosexual identities of the other characters on *The L Word*, and indeed also to mainstream conceptions of sexual identity in American society at large. Even so, the show remains strangely resistant to the label and to the very concept of "bisexual" throughout its run.

Alice's sexuality is initially constructed through responses to other characters' questioning of and occasional hostility toward her sexual orientation. The antagonism Alice endures from her lesbian friends—most notably Dana—has some basis in reality. As Kristin G. Esterberg puts it, "Some of the sharpest debates about bisexuality have occurred within lesbian communities" ("The Bisexual Menace" 222–223). In the context of the second season, in which Alice and Dana become a couple, it appears that Dana has been criticizing Alice out of a combination of jealousy and insecurity, both in regard to Alice's confident self-identification and her (un)availability to Dana. Esterberg suggests that

> Bisexuality raises the issue of sexual jealousy among straights and gays alike. Even if a bisexual is involved in a monogamous relationship with a nonbisexual, holding bisexual identity continually brings to the fore the lover's potential inadequacy. (224)

Indeed, once Dana and Alice become a couple, Dana continues to question Alice's identity. When, for instance, Alice suggests that they use a strap-on dildo (2.9), Dana quips, "Is this a bisexual thing?" Dana will not agree to try strap-on sex until Alice has convinced her that "many bona-fide lesbians do it." In this case, Dana seems to be reacting to the fear that she is not "enough" for a bisexual woman or that a bisexual woman's relationship with her could constitute "just a phase," and that Alice could therefore leave her for a man.

Significantly, the only man we see Alice become involved with for any length of time is Lisa, a "lesbian-identified man."[4] Lisa and Alice consummate

their relationship (1.8) in a scene that works to contain notions of sexual difference. The sequence begins in a cabin on a lesbian cruise ship, during a party attended by all of Alice's friends, with a medium shot of Alice sitting on a bed, Lisa kneeling behind her, holding his hands beside her temples. Her eyes are closed, until he says, "I'm working telepathically on your glutes"—at which point Alice opens her eyes and begins to look every which way, as if searching for what on earth he could be talking about. This exemplifies the primary way in which *The L Word* ultimately depicts Lisa, and by extension the whole concept of a "lesbian-identified man"—as ridiculous. The viewer is encouraged, along with Alice, to read Lisa not as a gender nonconformist, but as a confused, New Age-y weirdo. As he begins to move his hands along her body, however, she closes her eyes once again and her face takes on an expression of sexual desire.

Alice and Lisa then begin to kiss passionately, removing most of their clothing. From a close shot of their faces, the camera pans across the length of their bodies to show Alice's hand reaching into Lisa's boxer briefs. Lisa grabs Alice's hand and says, "Wait," as the camera pans back up to their faces. He pulls out a dildo and runs it along her body, until the camera cuts to Alice's exasperated face as she asks, "You're kidding, right?" This exchange follows:

Alice: You're a man! You've got the real thing.
Lisa: That's not how I want to make love to you.
Alice That's how I want you to, okay?
Lisa: It goes against who I am.
Alice: You're a man. You're a man named Lisa, but you're definitely a man.
Lisa: I'm a lesbian . . . man.

As Lisa speaks this last line, the camera pans to follow Alice as she moves down the length of his body to perform oral sex. A cut to Lisa's face shows him opening his mouth and sighing in ecstasy, despite his protestations. The implication follows that she coerces him into performing a sex act he is uncomfortable with: heterosexual vaginal intercourse. Her unwillingness to accept his sexual identity on his terms naturally raises questions about her own identity; all the more so when one considers the ways in which her desires change throughout the series (in this case, she has chosen to become involved with Lisa after swearing off women for a while), and the fact that she must repeatedly defend her identity to her lesbian friends, who frequently question and/or tease her about being bisexual, and urge her, essentially, to choose a "side."

The actions in this scene are exclusively tightly framed. When they speak, we can see their faces; otherwise, we see body parts. This compartmentalizing camerawork is fairly typical of sex scenes in Hollywood narrative film and, to perhaps a lesser extent, in American fictional television, but in this case, it works to a particular effect. In the cabin, we have a woman (Alice) embodying desires for both men and women—but, as she reveals in this scene, not for both in the same person—and a man (Lisa) embodying both masculinity and femininity. Two phalluses in one room proves one too many for Alice; a shorthand indicating too much sex and gender subversion for one TV show. The tight framing of the scene suggests the need to contain the breaking down of boundaries within the walls of the tiny cabin, lest it undermine the normative frameworks through which American television has articulated sexual identification and gender roles since its inception.

The final scene of Lisa and Alice's interaction on the boat firmly establishes their sexual encounter as a violation. In a tightly framed shot of their heads and shoulders, they stand outside the door to the cabin in which they had sex. When Alice leans in to kiss Lisa. Lisa turns his head in disgust. His face passes through a series of anguished expressions, and as he storms off, Alice throws up her hands in exasperation and cries out, "But you had a good time!" In this way, the story line is framed as sexual assault; her dialogue resonates uncomfortably with the rapist's all-too-familiar line, "she wanted it." Through Alice's coercion of Lisa into using his penis, an old trope is revisited: the containment of sexual difference through sexual violence. And yet, the viewer's sympathies are clearly intended to lie with Alice, who remains a central, increasingly well-developed character, whereas Lisa's story line soon ends. Indeed, Lisa exists on the show only through his interactions with Alice. This works to define Alice against Lisa; her bisexuality can be read as less strange or threatening, by comparison with the supposed absurdity of a "lesbian-identified man."

Ultimately, Alice insists that when she wants to be with a man, she wants a lover who is 100% male. While some bisexual individuals insist that gender is irrelevant, that, as Alice puts it (1.1), they "look for the same things in a man as [they] do in a woman," others feel that there "are things [that are] fundamentally different with men and women" (Karen Klassen, quoted in Hutchins and Kaahumanu 332). Despite Alice's initial claim to be gender-blind, before meeting Lisa she has insisted on wanting to be exclusively with men for a while. As Shane explains to Lisa in season 1, episode 5, "She doesn't want to be a lesbian anymore." Shane's use of the word "lesbian" here provides the first, but not the last, instance of a character referring to Alice as "lesbian" or "gay," despite her explicit identification as bisexual. In this context, it means that Alice is entering a phase during which she does not

want to be with women. After Lisa, Alice briefly feels even more vehement in this regard. She seems to be rejecting her bisexuality. In episode 10 of the first season, Alice rescues Dana from a blind date with a man by approaching him and questioning him about his sexual preferences. When he insists that he is completely straight, she says dreamily, "So, no shades of grey or anything?... Wow."

Soon after all of this, Alice begins dating women once again. In the first episode of season 2, Alice again claims that "There is no difference between men and women." If that were so, then why is she happy to use a dildo with Dana, but not with Lisa? This statement of course also calls into question her earlier desire to be exclusively with men. Perhaps she has merely changed her mind; but this depiction does little to challenge common stereotypes about bisexuality: "Bisexuals are seen as hopelessly confused: as fence sitters, unable to make up their mind about what they 'really' are," Esterberg comments ("The Bisexual Menace" 216). In the absence of different representations of bisexuality, and alongside Jenny, who remains overwhelmingly confused about her sexuality throughout most of the first two seasons, Alice's confusion in fact seems to perpetuate these stereotypes. The show, via Alice's dialogue, keeps telling us that bisexuality is normal and valid, but the show's actual depiction of bisexuality remains unstable and conflicted.

Ilene Chaiken, the show's creator, acknowledged the need for a multiplicity of representations of queerness, and implicitly acknowledged the limitations that any one show invariably encounters in attempting to depict a queer community. With "so many stories to tell," she noted, "*The L Word* cannot hope to portray them all" (quoted in Kelly-Saxenmeyer, "Articulating '*The L Word*'"). These considerations certainly influence the depiction of bisexuality on a show that was created, first and foremost, for lesbians. That we do not see Alice in the course of six seasons date a "real" man—that is, one who does not call himself a lesbian—for any significant length of time is perhaps indicative of a desire on the part of the show's creators not to alienate the queer community by depicting too much straight sex. As one viewer complained of season 1, episode 4, in which Jenny has sex with both Tim (Eric Mabius) and Marina, "There was more straight sex in that episode than gay sex" (Brown-Bowers D05).

At the start of the series, Jenny is introduced as the girlfriend of Tim, who lives next door to Bette (Jennifer Beals) and Tina (Laurel Holloman). Jenny has just moved in with Tim, and on her first day in Los Angeles, she sees Shane making love to a woman in Bette and Tina's pool. She is aroused by this, and tells Tim about it later. As she describes the scene, Tim takes off her clothes and they too have sex. In later scenes, after having met and developed a strong attraction to Marina, Jenny will again fantasize about lesbian sex while having sex with Tim. After Jenny and Marina have surreptitiously indulged in sexual encounters, Jenny repeatedly envisions her female lover, Marina, while engaging in heterosexual intercourse with her boyfriend, Tim.

In one such instance, when she actually sees Marina's face superimposed over Tim's; she is in effect participating in a *ménage-a-trois*. Indeed, it is the triangularity of Jenny's desires that indicate her potential bisexuality; however, unlike Alice, throughout her personal odyssey of sexual identity, Jenny only once uses the word "bisexual" to describe herself (1.9).

After the affair with Marina has destroyed Jenny's relationship with Tim, she discovers that Marina is in an open but committed relationship with another woman. To Jenny's shock and pain, Marina responds: "You'll find that your life is richer, more full of possibilities and choices... I opened up your world." This seemingly optimistic articulation of her seduction of Jenny in fact embodies one of the classic fears at the root of homophobia: the idea that a lesbian or gay man can "turn" a straight person gay. One almost expects Melissa Etheridge to show up, bearing a toaster oven.[5] Viewed from this angle, Marina's words become sinister, pathologized. In a sense, it delegitimizes Jenny's (bi)sexual identity, by suggesting that it was manipulated into being by an outside agent (namely, Marina); yet, at the same time, it functions to affirm the fluidity of sexuality.

This becomes clearer still within the context of the next triangle in which Jenny involves herself. After Marina, she briefly dates a man, Gene (Tygh Runyan), and a woman, Robin (Anne Ramsey), concurrently. In season 1, episode 13, she brings Gene home, only to find Robin waiting for her. As the three listen to a message from Marina left on Jenny's answering machine, her dates become uncomfortable, and each offers to leave. Jenny replies, "No, no... I don't want either of you to leave." This constitutes the most explicit articulation of Jenny's bisexuality of any point during the first two seasons. As the episode ends, we watch through the window as the three play a board game, and later, Jenny sits awake, seemingly pondering her sexual identity, as the other two lay asleep on separate beds. Both of these triangles in which Jenny participates function to illustrate the fluidity of Jenny's sexuality. At the start of the show, she identifies as heterosexual; and she is initially surprised and disturbed by Marina's attempt to seduce her. By the end of season 1, she clearly feels confused, but also intrigued by the idea of exploring her options. At the start of season 2, she refuses a lesbian identity (2.1), but soon thereafter adopts the term and uses it more or less consistently throughout the rest of the show's run.

In episode 5 of the second season, Mark (Eric Lively) asks his new roommates, Shane (Katherine Moennig) and Jenny, if he can conduct a video

interview with them for a "project" that he's working on. It turns out that this "project" involves candidly filming the two women in their most personal moments...Mark encourages the women: "Just think about how you're helping some lonely little lez out in the Midwest without a role model in sight." At this point, they are unaware of his ulterior motives and reluctantly agree to being interviewed. He immediately begins to interrogate them about lesbian sexuality. He refers to Jenny always as lesbian, and she does not contradict him—despite her attractions to men.

In a scene from season 2, episode 9, the series acknowledges the difficulties inherent in any attempt to represent a marginalized group. The porn producer to whom Mark attempts to sell his (at this point, rather tame) tapes of Jenny and Shane insists: "We want hot, lesbian sex and we want it now." Mark responds, "This isn't just about sex." This line could be speaking directly to the supposed 62% of the show's audience comprised of straight males, ironically both warning them that the sex scenes should not be read as gratuitous and that the show's intent is not to sensationalize, and acknowledging the impossibility of avoiding sensationalized receptions of the show (Brown-Bowers D02).

Characters like Jenny and Alice can be read as intermediaries between the presumably disparate worlds of straight male viewers and lesbian viewers. Just as in mainstream pornography marketed to straight males, Jenny and Alice love women, but they love men too—and are thus presumably less threatening to the fragile collective straight-male pride. This idea caters to yet another stereotype accorded to bisexual women: that they are in effect consorting with the enemy. If both Jenny and Alice move toward being romantically involved exclusively with women, it could arguably be for this reason—to ward off accusations that they exist to cater to straight male fantasies.

Similarly, when Tina begins to date Henry in season 3, most of her friends view it as disloyalty to her community: she is supposedly "cleav[ing] to the heterosexual paradigm" (3.12). Perhaps most tellingly, Alice, the show's resident bisexual, accuses Tina of being "stuck in the far reaches of heteroville" (4.2). When Tina replies that she seems to recall Alice "lurking around there" herself, Alice says, "Yeah, but I came to my senses." She seems to be joking, but not entirely. Alice later tells Papi that Tina "went straight. Feels like a betrayal" (4.8). In seasons 4 through 6, Alice seems to adopt and then cast off both bisexual and lesbian identities, sometimes for political reasons, as when she identifies as lesbian during Tasha's trial (5.9). Significantly, Alice is not shown to struggle with or examine her sexual identification; rather, she flippantly refers to herself as bi in one episode and as a lesbian in the next. This could perhaps be read as a depiction of bisexuality as a fluid identity, but it seems more likely to represent the show's unwillingness to allow for bisexuality—or queerness as a broad term for fluid sexuality—as a coherent identity.

As for Tina, she initially fights back against these accusations, but ultimately seems to internalize and accept them. At one point in season 3, Tina actually slips up and begins to refer to straight people as "we," before correcting herself (3.6). While still dating Henry in season 4, Tina insists, "I still identify as a lesbian." Alice demands, "Why don't you just be a bisexual," to which Tina responds that she thinks of "lesbian" as a political identity (4.4). Once Tina breaks up with Henry, she fully readopts a lesbian identity. As Rebecca Beirne puts it, "Although Tina's 'return to men' is explained away by the character in the fourth season as being accounted for by her 'humiliation at finding out that her lover was cheating on her' (4.9), this does not narratively make sense in light of both her relationship with Helena that directly followed Bette's affair or the intensity of her desires for men as they were portrayed in the third season" ("Lesbian Pulp Television"). Tina eventually describes Henry as boring, and the show depicts the entire affair as unfulfilling and in every way inferior to the lesbian partnerships: again and again we see that Henry simply does not "get" Tina the way Bette and her friends do. Once they break up, Tina once again adopts a lesbian identity, and viewers presumably breathe a sigh of relief.

There is something to be said for that, however. The show clearly wants to resist any narrative in which a character can be perceived as becoming straight or in which a character's queerness could be viewed as just a phase. Beirne writes that mainstream society finds the idea of the feminine lesbian particularly threatening, so "portraying these lesbians as always potentially bisexual undermines the challenge of depicting such characters, assuages the discomfort of potentially homophobic viewers, and allows male viewers to feel that they 'have a chance' with such women" ("Lesbian Pulp Television"). Perhaps it is more than that. Bisexual behavior per se does not prove particularly threatening to the binary oppositions required by dominant conceptions of sexuality. Regarding a bisexual female character, sex with a man can be described as heterosexual, and sex with a woman as lesbian sex. Bisexual identification, however, does undermine these mainstream behavioral frameworks of sexual representation. That which is not named—a character's oscillation between male and female lovers, ultimately coupling with one or the other—allows for the perception that such behavior constitutes a phase, in line with liberal models of "progress." Alice's insistence, however, that she is bisexual even when she is in love with Dana, in the final episode of season 2, constitutes a radical act, one that is practically unheard of in the history of American fictional television programming.

At the close of season 2, Alice goes so far as to romanticize her bisexuality, "I follow the heart and not the anatomy" (2.13). At this point, it seems as though the serial nature of the show and the writers' willingness to explore issues of sexual identity in depth allow for Alice's sexuality to be depicted ultimately not as confused, but rather as fluid. Like many people, she has moments of self-doubt, and like many bisexuals, she has moments of feeling more attracted to one gender than to another. Her character emerges from the first two seasons as complex and well-rounded, rather than simply (and stereotypically) confused. So why does the show insist upon undermining this complexity in the seasons that follow?

Much like Mark's documentary from season 2, Tina and Jenny's film, *Lez Girls* reflexively acknowledges the challenges inherent in trying to depict bisexuality. In season 5, the producers decide that Jesse (the character based on Jenny) should go back to her boyfriend at the end of the movie (5.12). Tina argues that *Lez Girls* was meant to be a movie by, for, and about lesbians, and furthermore was supposed to be the movie that "changed all that"—"all that" being "the guy gets the girl, the end." The producer replies that the film is still "chock full of lesbians," and adds that "Elise [nee Alice], the bisexual, she's not interested in men."

Chaiken seems to be reflexively acknowledging her own fear that, even in a show "chock full of lesbians," having even one character return to the straight world (in the show's terms) undermines the depiction of lesbian sexuality. By calling attention to the importance of closure—of who a character ends up with—the show is in effect imposing a cinematic paradigm on a TV show. In six seasons of programming, with dozens of queer and lesbian characters, would it really undermine the show's depiction of lesbian sexuality to allow just one character to maintain a bisexual (or queer/fluid) identity throughout, or to allow a female character who identifies as bi to be in a fulfilling relationship with a man at some point?

Those characters who do exhibit bisexual or fluid behavior on the show refuse to consistently identify as such. Paige initially balks at Shane's characterization of her as straight, insisting that she'd "rather not be called anything. I'm sexually fluid" (4.9), and she doesn't so much revoke that description of herself as not deny it when she is described as "gay" in a later episode (4.11); soon thereafter she disappears from the show. Max becomes interested in men after transitioning, but the possibility for bisexuality appears to be dismissed when he explains that he's read that what is genetically encoded in us is not attraction to men or to women, but same-sex attraction (5.9). This statement is problematic in that Max is saying it to Grace, with whom he has just had an affair, so we might not take it at face value, except that it constitutes the show's last depiction of Max's articulation of his sexual identification. It raises a number of interesting questions about what it means to be trans, as well as what it means to be queer, but it nonetheless seems to shut down the possibility for thinking of Max as sexually fluid or bisexual; he may have undergone an (outward) gender transition, but his sexuality can remain static.

Dylan never quite defines her sexual identity, but it is suggested in season 6 that her relationship with Helena has made her realize that she's a lesbian. When Helena sees her in her club, the following exchange occurs:

> *Helena*: "You were looking for a girl club? A lesbian girl club?"
> *Dylan*: "Yeah, you helped me with that."

Again, the show does not seem to have a problem with flirting with the homophobic stereotype that lesbians can "turn" women gay, but resolutely refuses to allow a character to identify consistently as bisexual, presumably because that would undermine the show's representation of lesbian sexuality. In the end, only one very minor and nonrecurring character maintains a consistent bisexual identity: Uta, who (surely not coincidentally) also happens to believe that she's a vampire.

Ultimately, *The L Word* attempts to alleviate the anxieties associated with bisexual identification, through both its initial tendency toward the stabilizing of identities and its willingness to embrace sexual difference and to depict sexuality as open and fluid. This attempt is compromised both by the very nature of bisexuality, its polysemy and its fluidity, and by the series' apparent desire not to alienate its core lesbian audience through the depiction of "too much straight sex"—even when at least one of the people engaging in said sex does not identify as straight. A sexual identity with so many different meanings and such varied manifestations cannot be done justice through one, or even two or three, representations. In the context of an utter dearth of such representations, each one bears the burden of embodying The (monolithic) Representation. And, as such, each inevitably falls short.

I maintain that serial television programming, among other audiovisual media, has the unique capacity to allow for more variegated, complex representations of bisexuality, and of sexuality in general. *The L Word*'s examination of sexuality comprises the most complex treatment of female bisexuality to date, but there is still much to be accomplished in the ongoing struggle for representations of sexual diversity. Among the calls for butch characters and other less mainstream-palatable images of queer women on television, I would have liked to see more in-depth examination of the many forms that sexuality can take.

Notes

1. Technically, Phyllis Kroll (Cybill Shepherd) also exhibits bisexual behavior, in that she was married to a man and then begins to date women; but hers is depicted straightforwardly as a coming-out story, in which she realizes that she has been a lesbian all along.
2. I am indebted to www.AfterEllen.com for its timeline of lesbian and bisexual female characters on television.
3. I discuss this at length in a previous article, "'Kinda Gay': Queer Cult Fandom and Willow's (Bi)Sexuality in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*," in Jes Batis, ed., *Supernatural Teens: Essays on Magic, Mutation, and Adventure* (New York: Lexington Press, 2011).
4. She does date one other man while with Lisa, and she continues to have sexual relations with him after she has broken up with Lisa. She mentions her interactions with this man to her friends, but after their first date we never actually see them together.
5. This reference is to "The Puppy Episode" of *Ellen*, in which Susan (Laura Dern) facetiously suggests to Ellen Morgan (Ellen DeGeneres) that lesbians who reach their quota of having "turned" other women gay win a toaster oven.

CHAPTER 9

Somewhere between Love and Hate: Disidentification and *The L Word*

Marnie Pratt

The L Word was by no means the first television program to have lesbian characters. Queer female characters had already been appearing on cable and on regular network shows for over 20 years when *The L Word* debuted in 2004. Often these characters were secondary or peripheral; however, *The L Word* was not even the first series to address contemporary issues through a lesbian main character. This distinction, of course, goes to *Ellen*, when its main character, Ellen Morgan (played by Ellen DeGeneres), made television history by coming out during prime-time television. However, *The L Word* was unique in that it contained a large cast of main characters who were almost entirely queer women, and these characters' lives, relationships, and political or social issues were the focus of the series. Additionally, by airing on a premium cable network, the show was subject to fewer regulations than a network drama and thus was allowed to depict certain scenarios in a more open manner.

Despite these innovations, the show's immense popularity, and the largely positive media recognition *The L Word* received, it failed to be universally hailed by the communities it aimed to represent. Queer presses, community spaces, and new-media networking sites were rich with arguments over whether or not the show signified a positive change for queer individuals within the larger culture or whether it was just as damaging as

CHAPTER 10

(Un)recognizable Lesbians: Young People Reading "Hot Lesbians" through a Reality Lens

Sue Jackson

In January 2011, an article bearing the headline "Gay and Lesbian Characters Are Popping Up on Shows for Young People" appeared in the *LA Times;* it was about the growing number of coming-out story lines in teen-targeted television shows (Jan 3, 2011). Compared to the early 1990s, today's young television audience is certainly somewhat more likely to encounter queer representations on their TV screens; some of the shows include lesbian characters. Since Ellen DeGeneres's highly publicized coming-out episode on *Ellen,* lesbian characters have appeared on our screens in shows such as *Friends, Sex and the City, Bad Girls, At Home with the Braithwaites,* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* to name a few. As Rebecca Beirne notes in the introduction to the 2008 edition of this book, however, the portrayals of lesbians on television scarcely invite a progressive trajectory; rather the pattern is one of "advances and retreats" (Introduction 3). Thus, for example, although more ongoing inclusion of lesbian characters is in evidence (a stand-out example is the *The L Word),* fleeting appearances are markedly persistent (for example, on *Desperate Housewives* and *Grey's Anatomy).* As Diamond, Ciasullo, and Driver have observed, increased visibility hasn't necessarily brought increased diversity. The visibility of butch, black, poor, and teen lesbian women continues to be largely obscured. Where women of color have been included, there has been a trend toward

"double othering," wherein lesbianism can be understood by an audience as a racialized phenomenon that reinforces a marginalized status and doesn't threaten white heterosexuality (see Hidalgo, chapter 5 of this volume). In recent years, the homogeneity of lesbian representation on television has been even more deeply carved out in the figure of the commercialized "hot lesbian." Depicted by Lizzie Thynne (202) as a commodifed figure used to sell anything "from Kronenbourg beer to Peugeot cars and sunglasses," the hot lesbian can be described as a "sexy," attractive heterosexualized product designed for consumption by the male gaze, in much the same way that heterosexual women may be cast as "eye-candy" for a male audience (see also Ciasullo, Garrity, and Tricia Jenkins).

In this chapter. the importance of lesbian representation on television is viewed from the perspective of a teenage audience—particularly, but not exclusively, that of teenage girls. The pressing need to gather audience readings of contemporary popular culture texts has been emphasized by a number of feminist media scholars, who point to the dominance of textual analyses in media/cultural studies research (for example, Kearney); this tendency is even more striking in the interrogation of queer media representation (Driver). Since media are significant cultural resources for young people in making sense of themselves and of their experiences, exploring their understandings of texts through audience research is important. In a culture where heterosexuality is normative and alternative expressions of sexuality are marginalized and regulated, media may, for some, provide the primary or only informational sources about queer possibilities for oneself. So too may media contribute to ways in which the queer sexuality of those in young people's social networks is understood and responded to.

The concept of media as a cultural resource informed the research project from which the material in this chapter is drawn. The broader project investigated high school students' perceptions of gay and lesbian representations on television; in this chapter we focus on a strand of that material, in which students discussed representations of lesbianism. Perhaps reflecting her media dominance (Tricia Jenkins), the presence of the "hot lesbian" was striking in participant responses. Our intention in this chapter is to contribute new perspectives on how the hot lesbian may function in relation to understandings of lesbian sexuality. At the same time, we hope that our work, by contributing material from a New Zealand study, deflects from the Americo-centricism of the literature observed by Beirne ("Introduction"), albeit in a small way. Given our focus on a young audience, we begin with a brief review of lesbian representation on television shows that are generally popular with teen viewers, before describing our research method and discussing our research material.

Lesbian Possibilities for Teen Viewers

The television viewed by young people in New Zealand is predominantly American-produced, but there is a scattering of British, Australian, and New Zealand productions. Relative to the portrayals of gay sexuality, the limited presence of lesbian characters is striking; this is particularly so in shows that have more specifically targeted a teen audience (for example, *Dawson's Creek, Home and Away, Neighbours, Beverly Hills 90210, My So-Called Life,* and *Glee*). This skewing of representation toward gay males has historical persistence and, as noted by Susan Driver (*Queer Girls and Popular Culture*), girl-girl sex has perpetually been shadowed in popular culture. Notable exceptions among shows for teen audiences include, in more recent times, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Degrassi: The Next Generation,* and *Once and Again.* The latter two did not screen in New Zealand. It's important to note that these shows featured lesbian relationships that offered more than a fleeting appearance; in the case of *Buffy,* the relationship included a sex scene.

Depictions of sex between lesbians are relatively rare on television; Beirne ("Introduction"), Torres, and Dow all have noted the desexualizing and minimizing of expressive sexuality and sexual desire in the lesbian characters, compared to heterosexual characters. In tandem with going beyond sex as titillation, *Buffy*'s producers also avoided recuperation of a developmental narrative in which same-sex desire is constructed as an adolescent crush, a phase that the teens will grow out of en route to mature heterosexuality (Driver).

Although representations of lesbianism in *Buffy* may be less than ideal, there does seem to be more substance in terms of relationship, compared with the proliferation of hot lesbian representations in other shows. Among shows attracting a younger audience, *The OC* provides a good example: Melissa and Alex are both "white, rich, beautiful, and slender," and Melissa ultimately decides she is heterosexual after all, resurrecting the heterosexual maturation narrative (Driver; see also Burgess, chapter 6 of this collection). As Driver notes, however, there is a dearth of shows that feature teenage lesbians; in this adultcentric television arena, the richest source of representations are to be found in shows branded as suitable for adult audiences; in New Zealand these are shows screened outside of prime time, during hours known as "the watershed," when adult content may be aired. Sitcoms such as *Sex and the City,* comedy/dramas in the manner of *Desperate Housewives,* and soap dramas such as *EastEnders, Coronation Street,* and the New Zealand soap drama *Shortland Street* have all at some point featured lesbian characters; these shows may potentially hold some attraction for a teen female audience (Buckingham and Bragg). The first lesbian character on

Coronation Street was teenager Sophie Webster, although she did not appear until 2009. Representations in the British soaps have arguably conformed to the "seamier side of relationships" (Buckingham and Bragg) that marks their genre. These contrast starkly with the heterosexualized lesbians of both the American and New Zealand shows. Ciasullo, drawing on the earlier (now dated) television examples of the "thin, perfectly coiffed" brides in the *Friends* lesbian wedding, and the lesbian couple on *Mad about You,* suggests that such heterosexualization of lesbians reifies the femme and obliterates the political, feminist butch. Alternatively it could be argued, as does Eves, that the media representation of a femme lesbian brings overdue recognition to femme lesbians on the viewing side of the screen, for whom visibility may only be achieved through a butch partner.

The American shows cited above also exemplify the treatment of same-sex desire as temporary or experimental. In *Sex and the City,* for example, Samantha's heterosexual identity was reaffirmed once her passionate affair with Maria ended. Similarly, in *Desperate Housewives,* Katharine's liaison with lesbian character Robin is but a briefly-lit candle, although the episode deals well with the emotional aspects of a first same-sex desire. The depictions of lesbianism as transient in both these shows suggests "heteroflexibility," a term popularized by Diamond, and accords with a fashionable, chic, styled lesbianism (Jackson and Scott) wherein woman-woman sex is seen as "exciting," "safe," "fun," and, it is important to note, completely unthreatening to one's being heterosexual (Wilkinson).

Although *Shortland Street,* the only New Zealand–made program of relevance here, has heavily appropriated the hot lesbian since 2004 (Maia, Jay and, more recently, Nicole), the lesbian characters were firmly anchored in the show until Maia's departure in 2011. Thus, unlike some shows, in which the characters are defined only in terms of their sexual otherness, *Shortland Street's* characters are portrayed dealing with everyday issues, from homophobia to child care. On the other hand, recuperation of heterosexuality has also featured in story lines through, for example, both Jay's and Maia's affairs with male characters. Nicole, first introduced as Maia's new partner in 2009, declared herself later in the show to be bisexual and, with Maia's departure from the show, she has since been in a heterosexual relationship.

The question of interest to this chapter is what meanings young audiences may make of the kinds of lesbian representations, "hot" or otherwise, that are made available to them on the small screen. That the heterosexual audience is generally more aware of "lesbian" sex displays as acts of performance than they are of heterosexual portrayals is perhaps, at least in part, influenced by the knowledge that the actors portraying them are (often)

"really" heterosexuals. For example, a sceptical audience attributed the MTV Britney Spear–Madonna kiss, and subsequent comments about it, as a media ploy to attract a male audience (Diamond). Diamond suggests that this interpretation precludes a subversive reading of the kisses as a challenge to the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy. Moreover, when girl-girl sexualized acts are framed as staged performance, they lend themselves to being read through a lens of the pornographic male fantasy of observing women having sex with women (Jenefsky and Miller). The matter of how straight and lesbian women or girls make sense of viewing girl-girl sex has been given relatively little attention in feminist scholarship. Straight and lesbian women make different readings of such portrayals as to, for example, whether the girl-girl sex is understood as "lesbian." As Wilton points out, such sense-making is "a contested process determined as much by lesbian/non-lesbian reading as by lesbian/non-lesbian text" (5). Similarly, Moritz observes that the complexity of television texts leaves them particularly open to a variety of often-contradictory readings. Lesbian viewers may variously enjoy, subvert, resist, or appropriate mainstream representation of "lesbians" (Clark; Simms).

Acknowledging the central importance of complexity in readings that may be made of television texts, we now turn to our focus in the remainder of the chapter: How young people "read" contemporary representations of media lesbians, and to what extent such representations inflect their own constructions of lesbian sexualities? However a purportedly lesbian text may be read, for us the importance lies in its possibilities, especially for queer girls, for making meanings, finding connections, and accessing a language with which to talk about experiences and feelings.

At the same time, we recognize the possibilities in media to harness and reproduce damaging and limiting stereotypes and to create new "impossibilities." Gross, for example, notes that if young people consume only heterosexual versions of sexuality and have no access to alternative sources of information (for example, in their social environment), they may "have little choice but to accept the media stereotypes they imagine must be typical of all lesbians and gay men" (16). Robert Cover similarly argues that a relatively inexperienced young audience is more likely to naively accept heteronormative representations if they are not provided with alternatives to stereotypical information. However, the viewpoints of both of these authors appear to position youth as an uncritical audience that simply absorbs everything that is watched, read, and listened to. Conversely, a growing body of research illustrates that young people are critical consumers, as seen in Buckingham and Bragg's 2004 investigation of young people's responses to sexual content in the television programs they watch. Distinctions between

notions of audiences as passive and active are not as clear-cut as they may seem (Blackman), but in this chapter we view young people as actively making sense of the lesbian representations they encounter in the media.

Details of the Study

As indicated previously, the material we discuss in this chapter has been drawn from a broader study about television representations of homosexuality. A full description of the study is available in an earlier publication (Jackson and Gilbertson), and only a brief account will be given here. Our research took place in an inner city New Zealand high school that serves a broad ethnic and socioeconomic population. The study involved single-sex focus groups with 16– to 18-year-old high school students, predominantly Pakeha[1] (non-Maori New Zealanders). There were 12 male students and 13 female students in the groups. The school was selected for both its diverse student population and for its active support of lesbian, bisexual, and gay (LBG) students. However, we did not actively recruit LBG students, since these identity categories might have deterred students who engaged in same-sex relationships but did not use a sexual identity label. We considered it important to include heterosexual perspectives, since representations may be a primary source of heterosexual students' information about LBG relationships.

We recruited students through information sessions at a senior high school assembly and met with those choosing to take part, in groups of 6 or 7 students. Tamsyn Gilbertson conducted the interviews. These sessions were audiorecorded and were transcribed for subsequent analyses.

To stimulate discussion in the groups, we incorporated a selection of clips from TV shows featuring characters identified as gay or lesbian; these were used at various stages of the focus-group session. The clip of relevance to our exploration of talking about representations of lesbianism was from New Zealand's only local soap drama, the long-running *Shortland Street,* which at the time featured two long-standing lesbian characters. Screened in prime time, the show targets the 15- to 25-year-old demographic and regularly features teenage story lines and characters, although not teen lesbians.

The scene presented to focus groups portrayed two adult lesbian characters, Jay Copeland (Jaime Passier-Armstrong) and Maia Jeffries (Anna Julienne), who had been in the show for several years. Although they were not the first lesbian characters to be featured on *Shortland Street,* Jay and Maia were the first long-term lesbian couple in the show, and they were also a first for a New Zealand television drama, because they featured the legalization of their relationship though a Civil Union[2] ceremony. The scene

selected for discussion occurred during a separation between the two characters. Jay had recently returned to New Zealand after living in Australia for a short period of time. Maia was living with another woman. The scene shown to participants began with Jay and Maia getting into bed together, ostensibly to "talk all night" as recently reunited friends. However, it soon became apparent that Maia had something else in mind, and, after initial reluctance on the part of Jay, the two women kiss passionately. The scene ends with this kiss.

Discussions generated rich material, offering both uniform and distinct perspectives about representations of homosexuality on television. Our analyses of transcribed material were informed by poststructuralist approaches to discourse analysis (for example, Gavey; Willig) that view "talk" as both productive of and produced by the cultural fabric of people's everyday lives. Thus, in the context of our study, we understand young people's talk to be illustrative of the myriad discourses in circulation about lesbian, gay, and bisexual sexualities, as well as a site for rupture to those discourses. At the same time, we do not hold young people's accounts to be the way they "really" perceive lesbian sexuality, but consider them as a particularized story produced within a discussion with other students and an interviewer who was some two to four years older than they were.

The particular story that we focus on in this chapter is the way participants made sense of "authenticity" of representations through comparative readings of the "hot lesbian" against "not hot dykes" and the known lesbians in everyday life. In the extracts presented in the following pages, participants' names have been changed to protect their identities, and it should also be noted that the text is written as spoken, so it, for example, includes repeated words.

"Pretending to Be Gay"

Although the topic of authenticity peppered participant discussions of both gay and lesbian representations on television, the matter of realism assumed a markedly greater presence in discussions about lesbianism. Audience research with young people suggests that although they clearly differentiate the "fantasy" elements of a television show, the line between fiction and "realism" is nonetheless blurred, since its possibilities can be visualized in an imagined future (for example, see Granello's study on *Beverly Hills 90210*). Accuracy seems to be a central criterion in evaluations of "realism," assessed in terms of how well a portrayal approximates what young people are familiar with in their daily lives (Buckingham and Bragg). In Buckingham and Bragg's study of how young people viewed sexual content on television, for

example, the viewers said that *Friends* lacked reality because "real people in their twenties don't act like that" (170) and *Coronation Street* was likewise deemed unrealistic because of its depiction of numerous concurrent affairs.

Somewhat similarly to these previous studies, we found a critical stance toward portrayals that participants considered to be a poor imitation of what lesbians might do in "real life." In some moments, this critique related to the absence of explicit sex; in others, it was the depiction of lesbianism as "experimental" and constructed within norms of heterosexualized attractiveness. In making such critiques, participants demonstrated an acute awareness of television shows as a product for audience consumption. For example, sanitized portrayals were seen to offer a palatable version of lesbianism that would not alienate a heterosexual audience. The matter of a show's ratings intersected with such considerations; students constructed the "hot lesbian" in particular as designed to attract an audience while simultaneously meeting requirements of palatability.

Another aspect of authenticity that was discussed by participants related more to the production of a show in terms of the scripted activity and the actors' abilities to perform a lesbian role in a convincing way. Rosa, for example, talked about how straight actors playing lesbians couldn't relate to it, resulting in their looking uncomfortable with kissing or touching. She also explained how the actors' discomfort "just makes you feel very uncomfortable." In some cases, it was the transparency of performance that drew critique, as with the girls' comments about the actors portraying Maia and Jay in the clip from *Shortland Street*:

Tamsyn: So you said they're not gen...[3] they don't really fit the lesbian type. What, what is the lesbian type, do you reckon?
Genna: No, they just seem like...they'd like guys, in real life, which they pretty obviously do.
Kat: They look like street girls pretending to be gay.
?[4]: Mmmm.
Kat: They're just like experimenting. They don't look like it's a lifestyle choice. They look like, they're, like, hey look we're in the bed together. Oh, I threw away the pillow, let's make out.
[*Laughter.*]
Tamsyn: So are you thinking, not really, doesn't look like a serious full time...How do you think they would have done it to make it look like a serious full time...?
Kat: Umm, I'm not really...Well, act like a normal couple. Just, they weren't acting like a couple. They were acting like a bunch of teenage girls and...

Sasha: That kind of set the scene as like a slumber party.
Kat: Yeah, like, "How are we supposed to stay up and talk all night. Woo, pillow fight." But yeah...

Earlier in the discussion, the girls had described the *Shortland Street* lesbians as not fitting the "lesbian type." The clarification sought by Tamsyn comes not by way of addressing what a lesbian type *is*, but what she is not, and in so doing, the girls construct notions of the authentic through the inauthentic lesbian. In part, the lack of authenticity perceived by the girls draws in the on-screen, off-screen distinction of straight women playing lesbian roles and, perhaps implicitly associated with this, a failure to convincingly portray "real" lesbian women. Part of Kat's critique also orients to a construction of lesbianism as "temporary," a passing phase or an experiment. Feminist critiques similarly note the way that heterosexualization maintains the possibility of recuperation into normative heterosexuality (for example, Ciasullo; Diamond). So too are notions of experimental lesbianism particularly found in constructions of teenage girls' lesbian desire (Sue Jackson; Tricia Jenkins) and in a developmental trajectory of moving toward maturity and proper heterosexuality (Burgess; Driver). Kat makes explicit teenage referencing in her account of the pillow fight, which she takes as further evidence of an inauthentic, trivializing portrayal. By way of contrast, an implicit signaling of an authentic lesbian can be found in Kat's comparative constructions of "a normal couple" who have made "a lifestyle choice," pointing to a construction of lesbianism as a serious, more stable, and consciously decided way of life: as a choice.

"A Girlfriend Who Is Real"

We found a fluid movement between media and lived experience in students' talk, as in those occasions where they compared a media representation with lesbians they knew in everyday life. At a later point in their discussion, Kat and Gemma's group talk at length about people at school who are homophobic, and Kat relates a story about her sister, who identifies as a lesbian. A discussion about "lesbian stereotypes" follows and is ultimately drawn back into media portrayals:

Sasha: Yeah, but um, but yeah you you definitely, I think camp gay guys have got, are are really cool at the moment, but um but lesbians are still underdeveloped in terms of everything.
Kat: Oh well guys think it's hot but they don't necessarily wanna like see it.

Kristen: But not but not dykey lesbians, they're not hot.
Kat: Yeah yeah.
Kristen: It's only...
Kat: And then they're not accepting because it's not hot. Like, guys don't accept things that aren't hot, they don't...
[*omitted text*]
Gemma: My friends would, but yeah, they're friends. [*Laughs.*] They ah, like um like with like, I do think, like an actual person they might like. I don't know just just for chicks I've just realized like there's there's so many stereotypical lesbians. There's you know there's the lesbians who aren't probably real lesbians or whatever and then there's the you know man hating lesbian, you know and feminist and stuff, there's no real faces that you can identify [as] lesbians that you might know with, like there's just not that many...
Kat: And in the media too there's like there's...
Gemma: People, like there's not examples of being best friends and, with her and a girlfriend who is real, you know.

In the "real-life" world being referenced early in the discussion, the "cool" status of being gay, compared with the "underdeveloped" status of being lesbian, contrasts with the rapid rise of a "cool" lesbian visibility in the media, notably in the shape, quite literally, of the hot lesbian. A feminist scholarship's articulation of the heterosexually stamped hot lesbian as designed for a male gaze (for example, Ciasullo, Tricia Jenkins) finds compatibility with the girls' discussion here in a construction of boys as accepting "hot" lesbians but not accepting "dykey" lesbians, who are "not hot." Gemma differentiates her male friends from the generalized "other" in having the potential to "like" a lesbian who didn't meet the "hot" criteria; this seems to trigger a pondering about the absence of lesbianism's "real faces," obliterated in the stereotypical representations of lesbians as "probably" not real or as "man-hating" feminists. Although she doesn't elaborate about the "probably" not real lesbian, one possibility is that she refers to the chic, commodified, and heteroflexible "hot lesbian." For Gemma, these flawed stereotypes belie a "real" lesbian relationship, which would involve friendship; thus the TV portrayals lack resonance with "real" lesbians whom the viewers may know in the lived world.

"I Haven't Really Seen Any Butch Lesbians on TV"

The "dykey" lesbian referenced in Gemma's group had a counterpart in talk about the "butch" lesbian as the other to the "hot lesbian." Across the

discussion groups, "butch" stood as a stereotypical category, no more "real" than the "hot lesbian," but, unlike the hot lesbian, she drew little, if any, affective response. The structure of the butch stereotype is elaborated in the boys' talk below. The group had been talking at some length about the "acceptance" of lesbians relative to gays—in particular, about the idea that the acceptance was related to (a) invisibility, for example, "lesbians don't have as distinct sort of characteristics;" "nothing gave off a lesbian vibe" and (b) the "hot lesbian's" appeal to "horny boys." We take up the continuing discussion from this point:

Tamsyn: So you said horny boys? Like could you elaborate?
Bart: No, it's just like, I dunno. You could almost see it as like being a... I mean it it depends what where and you know what where you're coming from what attitude you have but one of the views is that if if you are quite... I dunno if you see it as quite a sort of male-orientated world, you know, the whole guys getting off to lesbians thing. I mean that, that could have something to do with it. I mean, yeah.
Matt: Like at the same time you said there aren't any women gay stereotypes. I mean they weren't really stereotypical lesbians but quite often there's the girl who's really into her soccer and... (*Bryn:* Yeah) and dressed as like a guy and...
Josh: Short hair...
Matt: ...doesn't shave and stuff and... But at the same time there's also... (*Bart:* Yeah)... the real girly girl. I dunno.
?: I mean it's...
Matt: But most of the gay girls I know are nothing like that so...
Tamsyn: Nothing like?
Matt: Nothing, nothing like nothing like um nothing like the stereotypical lesbian.

Bart sets out the construction of a voyeuristic male "getting off" on looking at "hot lesbians" in careful terms, not owning the view personally but working within a frame of generalized possibility (indicated in the punctuation of his talk with "I dunno," "if," and "you"). While the "butch" stereotype is not named, the joint construction of a lesbian within terms characterized as "masculine" connotes such a reading—she plays a "masculine" sport, adopts a masculine dress code, shuns body hair removal, and sports short-styled hair. A polarizing binary is established through Matt's reference to the butch counter of the "real girly-girl," a description that evokes the figure of the "hot lesbian." However, when held up to a mirror of the lived world, neither the butch or "girly-girl" stereotype is deemed to reflect what Matt knows

of lesbians, leaving open the possibility that stereotypes may be fantastical rather than "real."

The absence of a "butch" lesbian stereotype, in contrast to a saturating presence of a hot lesbian on the small screen, garnered particular attention in discussion groups.

Rosa: I haven't really seen any butch lesbians yet on TV.
Anya: No. That will be the next step.
Rosa: Yeah. We'll get there.
....
Tamsyn: So would you think that that would be a positive step or...?
Rosa: Yeah, I think so. I mean, it's showing just another aspect of it.
Siobhan: It's just real. It's not.
Rosa: I mean it's showing another...
Siobhan: It's not just for sleazy men. I mean it's for...
Rosa: Yeah.

The inclusion of "butch lesbians" in television shows is constructed by the girls in this group within a progressive narrative as a "next," "positive step" in lesbian representation that shows another face of lesbianism. The "realness" of butch lesbianism is underscored both by the insertion of "Reality TV" as a source for staging butch lesbianism and, more specifically, by Siobhan's comments that butch lesbianism is "real" and, unlike the "hot lesbian" identified earlier in their talk, is not designed to appeal to "sleazy men." Disparagement of "hot lesbian" and "not real" representations typified much of our participants' talk about television portrayals of lesbians, as shown in another excerpt from the same group's discussion:

Rosa: I think also with the gay guys they make them more stereotyped and when they put lesbian couples they make them more normal, like they do have very out there stereotypical gay guys.
Riley: So it's easier to [*indistinct*]
Anya: Yeah, they do.
Siobhan: It's not like, "ah ha."
Rosa: Its not like the stereotypical like butch lesbian couple on TV. It's always young, pretty...
?: Yeah it is, yeah.
Anya: Yeah, they've used, like I watched the *OC* the other day and...
[*Indistinct conversation, multiple voices*]
Riley: It was just, it's always weird. It's not like unrealistic; it's just not real.

Rosa: It's always two pretty girls...
?: Yeah, exactly.
Rosa: ...it's never like
Siobhan: So it's catering more for men than for women.
Rosa: Yeah.
?: Yeah.
Rosa: I mean like, you, you think, well they look normal and then you know they act normal, however you perceive normal to be and, but then, I don't know, it just doesn't work as you would see a lesbian couple in real life.

The girls' discussion explores the notion of normality in relation to depictions of lesbians on television. As the talk progresses, the meanings of "normal" can be seen to orient around the notion of appearance. Whereas the stereotypical gay guy is, in Rosa's view, more likely to stand out, (perhaps through a camp appearance, although this is not stated), the lesbian portrayals conform to standard representations of women on television— "always young, pretty." As observed by Ciasullo, one of the ways this normalizing, heterosexualized appearance functions is to, paradoxically, heighten invisibility; "hot lesbian bodies" convey "above all, sameness to mainstream images of heterosexual bodies" (595). This sameness is caught in Siobhan's comment about the absence of an "ah ha" realization moment. So too does the homogenizing of lesbian representation as white and middle class obscure the plurality of lesbianism—not only the absence of a "butch stereotype," as Rosa notes, but also the diverse positions in between and outside of butch-femme categorization. Young women in Driver's study *Queer Girls and Popular Culture,* for example, found identification in ambiguity such as androgyny or boy/girl fusion ("birls").

The American television show *The OC* was a frequently cited example of "hot lesbian" representations across discussion groups, and here the girls also use it to characterize the kind of representation they have been discussing—a lesbian constructed to cater to men. Riley makes the intriguing comment that the portrayal "is not unrealistic" but "just unreal," and while it is difficult to untangle what seems to be a contradiction in terms, one possibility is that the show displays realism but the portrayal of lesbianism does not. She later clarifies her position by making a comparison with "real life," in which a lesbian couple neither behaves nor looks like the hot lesbians depicted on television. Taken together, the girls' views expressed here offer an aware and incisive critique of the hot lesbian that recognizes her narrow construction in normalizing and heterosexualizing discourses, as well as her derailing of other forms of lesbian expression. As in other examples of students'

discussions presented here, their critique is particularly informed by what they consider to be "real," from their knowledge and experience of lesbianism in their everyday lives.

Concluding Commentary

At the beginning of the chapter, we stated our intention to explore how participants' understandings of lesbian sexuality connected with their readings of the "hot lesbian." In the main, our exploration points to a place of rejection and alienation, with the hot lesbian archetype being seen as an unhelpful figure in imagining possibilities for being or for becoming lesbian. From the perspectives of our participants, the hot lesbian is not representative of lesbians in a lived world (see Marnie Pratt's discussion of representation, "This Is the Way We Live... and Love!"), but rather is a normalized, heterosexualized figure produced to titillate and lure male viewers. Our participants' talk recognized the hot lesbian as a narrow, exclusionary, exclusive figure whose visibility on television speaks to white, pretty, slim, middle-class girls, rendering alternative expressions of lesbianism—in particular, butch women—invisible. Participants identified how, in looking like all of the other pretty straight women on television, the "lesbian" becomes unrecognizable, and even explicitly sexual acts may be understood as experimental displays between women who are "really" heterosexual.

Although I do not argue that televisual lesbians ought to somehow obviously convey lesbianism through appearance, the issue of erasure accomplished through the hot lesbian is, as others have noted (most particularly Ciasullo; Diamond; and Jenkins), a significant one in terms of underrepresentation. Lesbian erasure accomplished through the hot lesbian is heavily reinforced by the accompanying absence of other forms of lesbian sexuality, leaving a landscape that Ciasullo describes as "at once incredibly full and altogether empty" (605).

The resonances of our participants' critiques of the hot lesbian with those of feminist scholars such as Ciasullo, Tricia Jenkins, and Diamond are strong. What we learn from our viewers' perspectives is the strong part that the knowledge of lesbians in their everyday "real" world plays in informing those critiques, which is important. We would be cautious about interpreting such comparative readings as "what young people do," given that we were talking with students in a school where homosexual visibility is made safe. In other words, these students have, at the very least, a school-specific cultural resource in the "real world" to draw on in making sense of lesbian sexuality. On the other hand, this referencing of the cultural resources of social and peer networks in readings of the "unreal" in popular culture has been more broadly found in critiques of American shows by Israeli girls (Reznik and Lemish) and by British young people (Buckingham and Bragg). In a different medium than television, Dawn Currie has articulated a practice of comparison reading used by girls in her study of girls' magazines; comparison reading refers to the way in which experiential and discursive (sociocultural) knowledge intersect in a process of assessing "the truth status of the text" (277).

However, for girls exploring their sexuality who do not have experiential referents in their everyday lives, the exclusions produced by the hot lesbian may present a challenge, for how can "sexy fat femmes, poor dykes, queers of color, androgynous girl-boys and butch and trans-youth" (Driver 9) recognize themselves in her apparition? The normalizing and essentializing brush of the hot lesbian may present nonheterosexual sexuality more as impossibility than possibility for girls' own negotiation of sexuality. However, dismissing the hot lesbian as "unreal," as do our participants, may function to erase femme lesbian identity and may position butch as the "genuine" version of being lesbian. Such a possibility permeated the notion of butch lesbians as subjects in reality TV, although the mention of "butch" also largely references a stereotype, rather than a reality. Although we cannot conceive of our participants as a typical young audience, their critical perspectives on the circumscribed representation of lesbian sexuality through the "hot lesbian" highlights the need for much greater complexity in constructions of queer characters. Acknowledging television's "problem" of how to make lesbianism both different and not-different (Torres) and moving beyond the dominance of the unidimensional hot lesbian requires pushing past universalizing sameness into sexual plurality.

Acknowledgments

We wish to thank the students who so were so willing to discuss and share their views with us and also the school for allowing us to work with the students and providing us with the facilities to do so. Additional thanks go to Tamsyn Gilbertson for her help in compiling the data.

Notes

1. Maori are the indigenous people of New Zealand. *Pakeha* is the Maori term for nonindigenous New Zealanders.
2. According similar rights as marriage, the Civil Union Act came into New Zealand law in 2005 for same-sex and other-sex couples.
3. Series of dots denote a brief pause that sometimes involves another speaker interjecting.
4. ? denotes that we were unable to identify the speaker on the recording.