THE L WORD MENACE: ENVISIONING POPULAR CULTURE AS POLITICAL TOOL

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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green
State University in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

August 2008

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation interrogates the intersections that may occur between media, culture, and politics through a case study of the audiences surrounding the popular television drama *The L Word*. While much of the press discourse related to the series is positive, often labeling it as groundbreaking television, the viewer response is much more diverse. Many individuals are deeply invested in the show and the ability to witness visual images of queer women in mainstream popular culture. However, other viewers are unsatisfied, if not angered, by *The L Word*'s representations and storylines. I investigated these varied responses and the ways in which audiences have made use of the series. My methodology was mainly comprised of participatory ethnography, but was also complimented by an online survey, which generated over 100 responses. These were placed in conversation with a historical narrative of queer women's social and political interactions with popular culture, the economic framework that has been labeled the gay marketplace, and a theoretical framework comprised of several scholars. Employing Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theories of the closet, I argued that queer individuals may have deep investments in visual representations because of the unique nature of their oppression, which is centered on invisibility. José Esteban Muñoz's work on disidentification presented a possible rationale for audiences that continue to interact with the show, despite its unsatisfactory aspects. Finally, Henry Jenkins' theories of convergence culture provided an understanding of how the Internet and new media influences audience interaction and use value, and his theories on fan communities' extensions into political arenas helped support my contention that the actions of *The L Word*'s viewers may even hold implications for the wider queer women's social and political movements. These ethnographic, historical, economic, and theoretical frameworks,

when taken together, helped explain audience reaction to, interaction with, and use value of *The L Word*. Finally, this project has illustrated that the consumption of media and popular culture is an increasingly complex terrain, and as scholars, it is necessary for us to examine not only cultural texts but also the audiences interacting with these in order to gain a stronger understanding of a cultural production's significance.

This dissertation is dedicated to those who will create the future phenomena of queer women's popular culture. May you have the strength and means to begin your journey, the support to see it through, and the willingness to bring all of our vibrant communities along for the journey.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would first like to thank my committee, Ellen Berry, Bill Albertini, Jonathan Chambers, and Susan Peet. Your support, suggestions, and insight have been invaluable, and this work is much stronger as a result.

This project has been several years in the making, and I would also like to thank the numerous current and former Bowling Green State University faculty members that offered suggestions along the way. I promise I gave each idea serious consideration and thought of your input during the process.

I also owe a great debt of thanks to my numerous friends and colleagues (you know who you are!), who have offered endless hours of support and camaraderie. My days at BGSU have been some of my happiest and most inspiring. That would not have been the case without all of you.

I would like to thank my family, who has always told me that I could be anything I wanted and that they would love me no matter what.

Finally, I would like to send my deepest gratitude and love to my partner, Jamie Stuart. You have offered me so many things; I could never list them all. Instead, I will simply say that I greatly look forward to a life filled with many, many more adventures that begin with "crazy talk!"

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INTRODUCTION

On April 30th 1997, Ellen Morgan, played by actor/comedian Ellen DeGeneres, made television history by coming out as a lesbian on her popular sitcom, *Ellen*. It is virtually impossible to find a history of contemporary queer representations that does not reference this moment. For many queer individuals, it remains one of those cultural events that is referenced ad nauseum, as if they are Americans remembering their location and activity when Elvis appeared on *The Ed Sullivan Show* or the first astronaut landed on the moon. After all, never before had a television series' main character both come out as a homosexual and continued to exist within that identity. Of course, DeGeneres was not allowed to portray her queer character for very long; the series was cancelled the following season. But perhaps *Ellen*'s greater contribution rests within its impact upon future queer popular culture images.

Since the show's famous "Puppy Episode," televisual popular culture that includes queer content has increased significantly, and it is difficult to imagine this trend occurring without *Ellen*'s significant role. Not only has there been an abundance of queer characters surfacing on "straight cast" shows, such as *ER, Friends, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, All My Children,* and *Nip/Tuck*, but there have also been several shows with queer main characters, such as *Will and Grace, Queer as Folk, Six Feet Under,* and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. In addition, queer-themed cable and online television networks have debuted within the last few years, such as LOGO and here!.

Ironically, while *Ellen* depicted a lesbian woman, many of these newer roles, and arguably all of the main characters, are gay men. There are significantly fewer queer female images, and of these, almost none receive the same kind of acclaim as their gay male

counterparts. In fact, Showtime's drama *The L Word* is the only series that stands out as meeting this cultural deficiency.

Despite *The L Word*'s position within this representational void, its immense success and popularity, and its largely positive media recognition, it has failed to be universally hailed by the communities it aims to represent. Mainstream and queer presses, queer community spaces, and Internet discussion boards are rich with arguments over whether or not the show's representations signify a positive change for queer individuals within mainstream society, or whether they are just as, if not more, damaging than no representation at all. Often these debates have been heated and thick with high levels of emotional investment.

In support of these representations, viewers most often cite the excitement and empowerment they feel over finally being able to witness images and stories similar to their own lives within mainstream culture. For example, at a lecture given by the show's creator, Ilene Chaiken, during a seminar on queer television, an audience member stood up with tears in her eyes to proclaim her gratitude to Chaiken. "I grew up in the 60s," she explains. "When I was a teenager it was rough. You are doing something besides making entertainment. You are performing a public service. You're not just creating television. You are saving lives" (Glock 26).

A similar feeling is displayed by another viewer posting on a discussion board for *The L Word*: "As a gay viewer, the desire to see yourself or your life represented on screen can't be underestimated… . It's why as dykes we'll watch any old crap just for an infrequent glimpse of a gay minor character because up until [*The L Word*] there have been so few opportunities to see *any* lesbians on TV let alone cool, sexy ones that are shown in a positive light" (honeytheif, emphasis in original). These two responses are neither extreme nor unique. Audiences of the

show frequently discuss how important the series is to them and how their lives have been profoundly changed by it. These types of reactions are also often connected with a politics of visibility, which has been popularized by the mainstream queer movement. This tactic generally argues that a greater number of public representations (i.e. visibility) coincides with an increase in political or social power for queer individuals.

Alternately, the emotional investment of other viewers takes the form of disappointment as they critique the series as inaccurate, damaging, and stereotypical. One such person responded to an article written by performance scholar Jill Dolan for *Flow TV* by arguing, "[T]he unfortunate reality is that *no* shows seem to be taking on the challenge of portraying a different kind of gay individual…the *only* representation available of gay and lesbian culture on television are those that are rich, beautiful and professional. What is harmful then, is not the existence of this particular representation, but the fact that no alternate representations are available" (Wimberly, emphasis in original).

A negative opinion of the series is also given by a member of the online lesbian networking site *Pink Sofa*, who states, "[I] can't understand why everyone is so obsessed with something that features such unrealistic looking women. …The whole thing seems to me to be promoting an unrealistic image of femme lesbians that is aimed at pleasing straight men, and the vast majority of the cast are straight in real life" (maria14). These examples illustrate that most often audiences who take issue with the series find its representations inaccurate, limited, and compromising for queer female communities.

The deeply emotional and generally conflicted reactions, along with the immensely consuming popularity of this series within queer female communities, have led me to interrogate the functions of *The L Word* for its audiences. However, I must be forthcoming and "lay my

cards on the table," so to speak. I also come to this project for personal reasons. As cultural studies scholars, we are often blessed (and sometimes cursed, I suppose) to be able to study the things that we enjoy. As is the case with many other academics, this project is also a labor of love.

I come to this project as a queer woman who has witnessed firsthand the ways in which *The L Word* has permeated nearly every aspect of queer female culture. I've witnessed everything from *The L Word* viewing parties to *The L Word* fashions; *The L Word* contests in queer women's magazines to a *The L Word* weekend at a women-only campground in Michigan. The series is featured in publications, on websites, and at events; referenced within other popular culture (like film, standup comedy, and other television); and has become a staple of conversation among communities of queer women with whom I've associated. Sometimes the characters are even referred to as if they are part of the larger queer female community, such as how some women "mourned" the loss of Dana Fairbanks when the character died of breast cancer in Season Three. In fact, *The L Word* has become so pervasive that it prompted me to claim to a group of friends recently that it was as if *The L Word* has become synonymous with queer women's culture.

I also come to this project as a viewer of the series since its debut in 2004, who has been both excited and disappointed by the show. When I began to consider research topics, I could no longer ignore this sensation of queer popular culture occurring within the communities with which I interacted. I had to begin to unpack how and why queer women appeared to be so invested in this television show. Of course, I quickly discovered that most viewers felt a wide range of emotions for the series as I did, which only made the puzzle of the show's popularity more intriguing.

The majority of the work that has already been produced on *The L Word,* and queer-content television as a whole, stems from the disciplines of film and media studies and generally interrogates or "reads" a series as a text. While I certainly value (and have even performed) this type of work, I do not believe that it gets at the heart of what is most interesting to me about *The L Word*.

In *The Art of Protest*, T.V. Reed addresses similar feelings regarding academic work on social movements and cultural productions. He asserts that:

> Much cultural studies work has offered brilliant interpretive readings of cultural texts (movies, TV shows, pop music, or fashion), but this work has not always been well grounded in relation to the institutions and structural social forces that shape and move through culture. In my view, the best cultural studies work has attended to three interrelated levels of analysis: cultural production, the texts produced, and audience reception. (xvii).

His work examines connections between popular culture, activism, and social movements, and he shifts his textual analysis from interpreting cultural productions to examining the social movements themselves.

This project seeks to follow a similar trajectory by investigating the productive intersections that arise between popular culture and political or social movements through a case study of the audience communities surrounding *The L Word*. In other words, the study uncovers the impact of historical and contemporary queer women's movement politics on the reception of the series (which will include the influences of other movements, such as feminism and queer rights), the current debates surrounding this reception, and uses of and interactions with the series by its viewers. In each of these endeavors, the audience, their responses, and their actions

serve as texts for interpretation. *The L Word* itself is only examined as a text in order to further an understanding of these viewers and their actions. The multiple relationships between politics, history, popular culture, media (particularly new media), marketing, and identity will all be addressed.

Since I am refraining from textual analysis, I must seek a methodological framework elsewhere. In *Cultural Studies: A Critical Introduction*, Simon During takes up the history of television studies and argues that work on the medium has followed one of two general paths. The first is the aforementioned content analysis, but the second is to subject television to the theories found within audience or reception studies (117).

Much of the initial work performed on the study of audiences was characterized by an emphasis on examining the effects of media. This approach theorized about passive audiences that were "injected" with the messages of mass media. The work of Frankfurt School scholars, such as Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, are prominent examples of this line of thought. Adorno argued that the "culture industry" bombarded the masses with its hegemonic messages, against which they were powerless to resist (Machor and Goldstein 204).

By the 1960s, this "effects of" approach was challenged by a new school of thought that emphasized the "uses and gratifications" of media. These scholars argued that audiences could be active in their relationship with mass media, and their research emphasized not only what messages or ideas audiences took away from their experiences with media, but also how they made use of that media. In other words, what types of activities did audiences engage in as a result of their media consumption? These two methodological camps competed for dominance until the late 1970s/early 1980s when several works emerged that cemented "uses and gratifications" as the prevailing model.

Of these, the most well known is Stuart Hall's article *Encoding/Decoding*, which argues that audiences interact with (decode) media in one of three ways: dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, or oppositional. In the first, meanings that viewers take away from media are in sync with the messages the creators intend (encode) it to contain. Audiences are either unaware they are being given a message, or they are already in agreement with the encoded message. Negotiated decoding implies that audiences are aware of and understand the dominant meaning within media, and while they may see and/or agree with the importance of that message, they are also able to alter aspects to fit their own needs. Therefore, in this decoding process, both intended and oppositional meanings apply. The last type of decoding involves audiences who may or may not understand the encoded meaning within media, but regardless, reject it in order to employ an alternate and oppositional message (S. Hall 515-517). Hall's audience-centered methodological approach that focuses on encoded media and decoding viewers has been greatly influential to many scholars within a wide range of disciplines.

One such academic is John Fiske, whose work on television and culture has gone on to be considerably influential in its own right. Fiske's most often cited texts include *Television Culture* and *Understanding Popular Culture*, the former of which is often considered the foundational text to the field of television studies.   Similarly to Hall, his work argues for an active audience that both accepts and reconfigures messages found within mass media. Additionally, he contends that viewers bring specific interpretations to a text because of their unique social and cultural positions (Fiske *Television Culture* 17). While these theories may sound obvious or rudimentary today, this is only the case because of Fiske's significant contributions to the discipline.

Contemporary work in audience studies continues to take its methodological cues from the important work of scholars like Hall and Fiske and visualizes an active audience that negotiates with mass media. However, During does address one other more recent methodological shift within the field: the use of qualitative participatory observation ethnography. This type of research is practiced by scholars who are no longer distant observers, but rather consumers of media themselves. By interacting within audience communities and simultaneously maintaining a critical framework, they produce nuanced interrogations of viewer interactions with television and other media (During 117). The body of work most known for this methodology is fandom studies.

Henry Jenkins almost single-handedly built the field that is now known as fandom studies. His initial text on the subject, *Textual Poachers*, popularized the "Aca/Fen" concept, which refers to individuals that simultaneously occupy the positions of academic and fan. While this duality obviously presents some difficulties for each identity facet, it also permits a unique understanding. Jenkins fully acknowledges that these types of scholars risk producing an overly positive analysis because they are too invested in their fandom; however, he also points out that those who have previously presented themselves as objective scholars have failed to prevent "their personal fears, anxieties, and fantasies about the dangers of mass culture" from influencing their research (6). In other words, some level of interaction with and/or investment in a fan community may allow a scholar specific insights that are otherwise unobtainable. Jenkins' Aca/Fen methodology is also likely responsible for the praise and respect he has received from both academic and fan communities. His work is not only insightful and well-researched, but also has garnered more respect for fandom communities by giving them a voice and depiction previously lacking.

The Aca/Fen methodology is largely the approach employed within this project. I have utilized a combination of survey data, online interaction, and participant observation in order to understand and interpret the audiences of *The L Word*. The insights gained are then connected with historical narratives and applied to a theoretical framework in order to interrogate questions of use value and impact. Since media audiences are the focus of this project, it may also appear logical to begin constructing the project's theoretical framework with the theories of fandom studies; however, I believe there to be unique aspects to *The L Word*'s viewers that the existing theories on fan communities fail to acknowledge.

First of all, while Jenkins' work on fandom has been extensive and highly influential, he has only given a small amount of consideration to fans that possess marginal identities. Ironically, as will be presented more thoroughly in Chapter Five, he does often describe fandom as a marginal positionality, but rarely considers the consequences of more traditionally stigmatized identities intersecting with this fandom. Other fandom scholars have taken up identity categories, but generally this is interrogated for its function within a fan community. In other words, how does gender function within fan groups for *The X-Files*, or how is sexuality policed among *Star Trek* fans?

I contend that *The L Word*'s audiences present an interesting case study for fandom because many of these viewers interact with the series *as a result of* their identity, rather than a love for the media item. The fieldwork presented in this project contains examples of individuals who participate in viewer communities because they make them feel connected to the wider queer female community; watch the series out of a sense of political or social obligation; and do both of these simply in order to critique *The L Word*. All of these instances indicate that, for a

significant number of viewers, their desire to interact with *The L Word* and its communities initially stems from their sexual identity, rather than an attraction to the series itself.

Furthermore, I argue that the continual occupation of a marginalized identity by many of these viewers fosters unique types of interactions, many of which are or intend to be political in nature. While fandom studies generally believes audiences to be active negotiators of meaning, many scholars within the field remain hesitant to grant them too much cultural power or describe their activities as political. In Jenkins' second major work on fandom, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*, he states that "there's often resistance to political labels altogether within fandom, and I think it's legitimate to say that fans themselves are more likely to use…aesthetic or religious analogies rather than political analogies" (23). This is most certainly not the case for the audiences of *The L Word*, who often conceptualize their interactions, the series, and their communities through political frameworks, such as the previously discussed visibility politics. As will be illustrated, these political narratives stem from the political and social histories of queer women, their allies, and their social movements.

Therefore, while Jenkins' work will eventually be returned to, I will temporarily set aside the theories of fandom studies and instead begin constructing this project's theoretical framework with a body of work that addresses the specific nature of queer marginal identities: queer theory.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* addresses the unique nature of marginalization and oppression for queer individuals. She describes the closet as ever-present and explains that, "vibrantly resonant as the image of the closet is for many modern oppressions, it is indicative for homophobia in a way it cannot be for other oppressions. Racism, for instance, is based on a stigma that is visible in all but exceptional cases…; so are the oppressions based on

gender, age, size, [and] physical handicap" (75). Thus, while visible markers may *cause* many marginalized groups' oppressions, those markers also render them visible. They constitute those individuals as existing in that identity. For queer individuals, who are often haunted daily by 'the closet' and hiding an important aspect of their identity, invisibility becomes central to their oppression.

As a result, the investment in positive representations may be high for all marginalized groups, but for queer individuals, it is tied up with the ability to exist at all. Furthermore, several historical narratives in this dissertation will point to connections between the emergence of visual media (cinema, television, advertising, etc.) and public conceptions of homosexuality. In other words, the larger culture began to place an increasing significance upon the *visual* and the *visible* at the same time that homosexuals were being continually forced into *invisibility*. Therefore, Sedgwick's theories, taken in conjunction with such historical accounts, create plausible theories for an unusually strong investment in queer visibility and representations when they finally occur.

The examples of viewer responses already discussed in this introduction and others that will be presented throughout also appear to support these ideas, in that the most common reason cited for a positive reaction to *The L Word* is the visibility and validation the show provides queer women. However, not all viewers feel this way about the series. For every viewer who enjoys the show, there seem to be nearly as many who take issue with it. So, while these theories may account for investment, they do not explain viewers' continued engagement with a show, despite its perceived problematic aspects.

Fandom scholars, of whom Jenkins was the first, have explained these types of fluctuating interactions by using the term "poaching," which is borrowed from Michel de

Certeau. When poaching, fans simultaneously accept agreeable facets and reject or reconfigure objectionable aspects to the same media text in order to heighten enjoyment, engagement, and investment. *The L Word*'s audiences appear to be engaging in what Jenkins and other fandom scholars would refer to as poaching; however, queer theory also offers a similarly functioning term that is also more grounded in queer identity and politics.

José Esteban Muñoz's contribution to queer and performance theory, entitled *Disidentifications*, deals with the concurrent engagement with and dismissal of cultural productions. "Disidentification," he explains, "is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship" (4). Muñoz is arguing that disidentification allows minority groups to resist or reconfigure certain aspects of their interaction with a cultural object or practice in order to make use of these or survive within the dominant group. He argues that disidentification is even possible with representational images that perpetuate stereotypes and/or provide a limited view of a marginalized group in some other way.

His work also provides examples of how these strategies can be applied to items of popular culture, in that he describes his relationship growing up and listening to early punk rock music that was empowering, but also racist and homophobic. He explains:

> Back then it was the only avant-garde that I knew; it was the only cultural critique of normative aesthetics available to me. …I somehow found a way to resist these [racist and homophobic] identifications. The luxury of hindsight lets me understand that I needed [punk rock] and the possibility of subculture [it] promised at that moment to withstand the identity-eroding effects of normativity.

something other than queer or racialized. (93-4)

I contend that some viewers of *The L Word* employ similar practices of disidentification in order to continue receiving the positive aspects the series provides, and in Chapter Four, I identify four narratives operating within viewer communities that I argue help facilitate this disidentification. While the show is sometimes viewed negatively because of poor cinematic qualities, storylines, watered-down politics, or stereotypical representations, its existence and the visibility and validation in a mainstream venue that it does provide are often deemed by its audiences to be more important.

Muñoz also explains that individuals who are marginalized as a result of multiple identity markers may find it even more difficult to identify with the dominant culture, or to locate representations within that culture. This may cause a more intense excitement over representation when it does finally occur, or it may indicate a more pressing need to disidentify with aspects of a representation if it is inaccurate or unappealing.

On the other hand, this may also cause some viewers to find disidentification exhausting and unsatisfying, or the benefits received from the practice to be seen as insufficient. After all, those with multiple marginalized identities have not only suffered the "closet" and lack of representations the same as the rest of queer culture, but they have also been marginalized *within* that queer community. The historical narratives of Chapter Two will point to several examples of how the mainstream queer movement has often failed to include the wide range of voices present within its ranks, such as those of women, people of color, and transgender individuals.

Since these groups and their allies have found it difficult to have their social and political goals validated by the mainstream queer movement, they are less inclined to find its emphasis on

visibility to be more important than fully examining problematic representations present in mass media. The viewer responses collected support this contention, in that those containing negative reactions towards *The L Word* most often centered upon issues with representation. For these audiences, rather than being a source of empowerment and pleasure, *The L Word* remains challenging. The series still creates an impact through the visual, but this time, it is viewed as more damaging than beneficial. Sometimes these viewers simply disengage from the series; however, its immense success and permeation of queer culture make this difficult. As a result, some of these individuals generate their own communities and cultural productions as a way to utilize the series for fostering dialogue and activism.

In order to offer insight into these uses of *The L Word*, I now return to Jenkins. While his and other existing research on fandom did not prove fully applicable regarding viewer investments and reactions, I do feel that Jenkins' most recent work concerning fandom in the age of new media provides an ideal framework for the final portion of this project that addresses cultural productions and activism.

In *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins describes the process of convergence as "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want" (2). He believes that media corporations are using top-down models of convergence to market and profit in new ways, while media consumers are making use of "grassroots convergence" to connect with other consumers and exert new levels of control over media production (18). When media fans form groups, which he calls knowledge communities, the discourses in which they participate create collective intelligence. These practices allow groups of media audiences to access new levels of power unavailable to

individual consumers. Finally, he believes that these media fans and their behavior could provide a template for how grassroots convergence might be harnessed for political purposes.

This dissertation illustrates that *The L Word*'s viewer communities are not only knowledge communities creating collective intelligence, but that their marginalized identities already provide a political nature to their convergence practices. Audiences that are unsatisfied by disidentification employ new media, the Internet, knowledge communities, and convergence thinking as a way to create vibrant new spaces for popular culture and social/political activism. Chapter Five discusses examples of how they communicate with the series' creators, impact the show's text, identify ways to alter Showtime's profitability, make the series more widely accessible, and produce new media texts that rework show content to include a wider variety of narratives, communities, and representations. Additionally, these viewers may initially connect with others over *The L Word*, but they continually extend their discussions to address the wider social and political issues. So, while the historical narratives of the queer women's movement may have shed light upon how *The L Word* is received, viewer use and consumption may be illuminating current practices of and future possibilities for queer social and political organizing.

Taken together, these varied responses to and interactions with *The L Word* indicate that popular culture and media consumption is an intricate and multifaceted terrain complicated by aspects such as identity, history, social space, politics, and other media formats. As scholars within the discipline, it is certainly important that we participate in practices of textual analysis, which bring us ever-more insightful and useful readings of cultural texts. We should not see these as merely academic exercises, but rather the seeds for discourse with our colleagues, our students, and all others with whom we come in contact. However, it is also essential that we not fail to lose sight of the wider audiences that also consume and interact with these items. As this

project illustrates, these audiences simultaneously agree with and contradict different academic assumptions regarding cultural productions, such as *The L Word*. Thus, academic work that places academic theories in conversation with audience use and interaction of media and popular culture is likely to gain a better sense of cultural significance.

Before moving into a breakdown of chapter content, I would like to quickly address a few caveats regarding terminology. First, despite its sometimes unwieldy nature, I employ the term *queer women* as opposed to *lesbian*, unless the latter term is used self-descriptively by the group or individual being addressed. I consider the term *queer* to be far more inclusive than *lesbian*. *Queer* includes individuals and groups focusing on both sexuality and gender transgression, such as (but not necessarily limited to) lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and genderqueer identities.

Similarly, I use the terms *audience* and *viewer*, as opposed to *fan* or *fandom*. As previously discussed, *The L Word*'s audiences are unlikely to consistently label themselves as such, and often their sexual identities precede any fandom. Thus, I prefer the former terms' more neutral natures.

Finally, I would like to address the idea of community. Though the two often intersect, I fully recognize that not all queer female communities are also viewer communities for *The L Word*. Hence, I focused upon groups and individuals that signaled their viewership in some way. Likewise, I accept that not all of *The L Word*'s audience communities are queer female communities, and I am by no means attempting to argue for a monolithically all-queer female audience for the show. Nor am I arguing that those who participate in the latter portions of this project's theoretical framework (disidentification, new media creation, grassroots convergence) consistently occupy multiply marginalized identity categories.

Instead, I hope to point to large trends within *The L Word*'s audiences. Queer women

tend to be the dominant identity of these viewers, and those that take part in disidentification,

new media, and grassroots convergence generally take issue with or address multiply

marginalized identity categories. However, I also believe that those who occupy an allied

position to any of these marginalized groups maintain a political aspect to their own identity and

are applicable to the functions of this project's framework.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter One delineates a history of the social or political movements that have impacted

the lives of queer women. This history is not limited to any monolithic queer women's

movement, but instead includes intersections of multiple movements focused on several identity

categories that include gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality. The chapter begins with how

the identities of homosexual and lesbian came into being, but moves quickly into how those

identities were then used as a catalyst for organization and mobilization. I have broken this

chapter down into sections of approximately a decade each, and it is my hope that readers will

leave each with an idea of what was considered a viable activist methodology and realistic

social/political goals during that historical moment. Finally, Chapter One also charts a history of

queer popular culture, and focuses on how this has been important to or reflects the ideas of

queer women's social or political issues. In other words, how have activists employed popular

culture to advance the goals of the movement and how has popular culture reflected the social or

political nature of each timeframe?

Chapter One takes the reader up to present day politics, much of which is now conceived

of in terms of consumer power and the economic marketplace. Therefore, Chapter Two will

focus on the concept of the gay market, which is a term developed by marketing research firms

in the late 1980s/early 1990s to refer to how they viewed the queer community as a valuable

niche market. This chapter gives a brief marketing history of how the term came to be used, but

then spends a more significant amount of time on the two camps of authors (marketing and

cultural studies) that have published on the concept of the gay market. I highlight major trends

in each group, main points, and arguments. The chapter concludes with a list of five major

points I find particularly useful when considering popular culture as a commodity within the gay

market, and I briefly extend each point to its relevance with *The L Word*.

Chapter Three applies what has been garnered thus far from Chapters One and Two to the

audiences of *The L Word*. It begins with a brief history of queer representations on television

and moves on to describe the history specific to the series. This chapter then combines

information from survey responses and participant observation of viewer communities to

determine major trends in audience responses. Historical narratives are combined with the

project's theoretical framework to offer insights into why audiences are invested in and how they

respond to *The L Word*.

Chapter Four picks up where Chapter Three leaves off and continues the discussion of

audiences and *The L Word*. However, this chapter shifts from focusing on investment and

responses to use value, interactions, and cultural productions. Jenkins' theories of convergence

are outlined in detail and then applied to *The L Word*'s viewer communities. The chapter

addresses the concepts of grassroots convergence, collective intelligence, knowledge

communities, and how marketing and the control of media is changing. I conclude the chapter

with a consideration of what grassroots convergence offers queer female politics.

Finally, the Conclusion chapter serves to not only summarize the research findings, but

also consider the project as a whole in relation to the fields from which it stems. Additionally, I

will attempt to consider the wider implications of *The L Word* and its communities for queer

popular culture and social or political activism.

Reed points out that "those forces labeled cultural may at times have a deeper and more

widespread impact on most of our lives than political or economic forces. But my intent is not to

argue for the greater importance of culture, just for its importance alongside and entangled with

political, social, and economic forces that have traditionally gained more attention" (xvii). I find

this idea to be of great importance when attempting to understand the significance of *The L Word*

and its audience communities. Clearly *The L Word*, as a cultural force, is currently exercising an

immense impact upon queer women's lives. Is it more important than legislation that allows

queer couples to adopt children, get married, or remain safe from violence and other forms of

discrimination? Of course not. However, what I believe Reed is trying to get his readers to

consider is that it also should not necessarily be considered less important. In fact, hierarchizing

the forces related to the social, political, cultural, and economic is likely an unproductive task. If

we instead attempt to understand how these forces work together, we not only gain a better

understanding of our world, but also of how we might begin to change it.

CHAPTER ONE: NO WORD TO *L WORD*: THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL HISTORIES OF QUEER WOMEN

Before any interrogation of use and consumption regarding *The L Word* can be embarked upon, it is critical to delineate a historical framework that leads up to the current cultural moment in which *The L Word* is contained. Popular culture does not occur in a vacuum. Its creation, reception, and use value are all dependent upon the cultural history that precedes it. In her study on working-class women and their leisure activities in early twentieth century New York, Nan Enstad similarly explains that "[w]hile cultural forms can have multiple meanings, these meanings are historically and socially constructed, and are not infinite" (12).

On the other hand, it is impossible to be able to understand everything that each individual audience member brings to the table when they interact with *The L Word*; therefore, for the purpose of this study, I will begin with a history that the queer (and allied) women interacting with the series are likely to share: queer women and their involvements with social or political movements. However, I do not assume that every queer woman identifies with some monolithic history. In fact, most queer histories have tended to privilege the white, the middle class, and the male. With that in mind, I will attempt to produce a trajectory which complicates any traditional narratives by emphasizing a queer female history that intersects many others, including those based on race and class, as well as gender and sexuality. Similarly, it is also possible that a given audience member or creator may be unaware of, or have little investment in, a history related to their identity group; however, it would be highly unlikely, if not impossible, that none of those interacting with *The L Word* have any connection to this history. Consequently, while one specific person may not know her roots, others with whom she comes into contact will, and therefore, they remain impacted in some way.

Hence, this chapter will outline a history of queer women and the social or political frameworks that have been a part of their world. In other words, it will examine the social movement for queer women's rights and the types of political action that movement has deemed relevant or useful throughout its duration, but it will also look at social aspects to queer women's history, such as identity formation, community creation, and cultural productions. This project is interested in how the subculture of queer women arrived at a cultural moment when it was possible to not only create *The L Word*, but have it be received as it is.

Conversely, I also believe there are several ways in which this section of the dissertation could be executed that are not useful to the larger project. I am not interested in searching all of history for every sign of women loving other women. I do not intend to produce an exhaustive (and no doubt, tedious) list of dates, events, and names. And, I am not interested in getting bogged down in the minute historical details for every organization, life history, or event. In the long run, these will most likely prove fairly irrelevant to this project. Since *The L Word* is an example of popular culture, this study will emphasize the aspects of queer women's history that similarly involve popular culture[i].

As discussed in the Introduction, an excellent model for this approach is T.V. Reed's *Art of Protest*, in which he explains that he is "more interested in movements as sites for the production and reception of cultural texts than in the formal interpretation of these texts. …I am interested in exploring a variety of ways in which culture matters to movements and movements matter to culture" (xvii-xviii). Thus, this chapter will chart a history[ii] of queer women's contentious politics (social movements), in which examples of how popular culture (cultural production) has interacted with this history are highlighted.

In order to accomplish this, the chapter will be broken down into decades, for the most part. There will obviously be some events or themes that overlap these convenient bracketing points and I will do my best to note those where they occur. Within each decade, I will outline major events, but more importantly, I will outline the general social and political climate for queer individuals. I will then elaborate upon the types of popular culture in each decade that played important roles in queer lives and politics. Often, this popular culture has been produced from within queer communities; however, there will also be interesting and important examples of popular culture that has been created by the larger dominant culture but employed for use and consumption by queer communities.

<u>Early 1900s: Identity Formation and Romantic Friendship</u>

In Lillian Faderman's *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, which remains virtually the only comprehensive history of queer women's politics and culture, and from which I will therefore draw heavily in this chapter, she argues that lesbian[iii] identity begins around the turn of the twentieth century because this is when sexologists begin to name homosexual behavior between women as abnormal. "It was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that the *category* of the lesbian – or the female sexual invert – was formulated. Once she was widely recognized as an entity, however, relationships…took on an entirely different meaning – not only as viewed by society, but also as viewed by the two women who were involved" (Faderman 2). Faderman's argument is reminiscent of Michel Foucault's contentions regarding largely male homosexuality in *The History of Sexuality*:

> We must not forget that the psychological, psychiatric, medical category of
> homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized….
> Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed

from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphrodism

of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was

now a species. (Foucault 43)

Previous to this moment, those who participated in same sex behavior did not have the types of

concepts or terminology to define themselves, as were available after this shift.

In other words, once these relationships were defined as aberrant and the behavior

undesirable, participating women were faced with choices. They could deny their behavior was

what "real" lesbians did, repress their desires, hide their actions, or accept the sexologist's

definitions and formulate their new identities (Faderman 3).   This final option enabled women

to be "free to seek out other women who also accepted such an identity and to form a lesbian

subculture, such as could not have existed before love between women was defined as abnormal

and unusual" (Faderman 3-4).

It follows that if this was the first moment that homosexual behavior was named as

deviant, it was also the first time that those who practiced it found themselves outside the main

culture. It was the first time they were named as a subculture. In other words, the action that

sexologists performed in an effort to impose power over those they viewed as undesirable was

the same action that empowered those individuals to identify each other, band together, create

community, and produce their own subcultural products. Thus, this was the beginning of their

interactions (as members of a self-described queer subculture) with popular culture and

accordingly, it will be where this dissertation begins its history.

Prior to this moment of naming, at least for women who participated in homosexual

activities, it had not always been seen as unusual or dangerous. In fact, Faderman's work

highlights that for women in some social settings, such as middle- and upper-class women's

"romantic friendships," these types of relationships were seen as normal and even encouraged (1). Romantic friendships were a product of a time period in which women's sexuality was thought to be nearly non-existent. Both Faderman and Miller speculate on whether or not these intense relationships involved a sexual element. Of course, they were also usually seen as an immature precursor to "real love" that would eventually be found within the arms of a male partner. If such male love presented itself, a woman was expected to concede it the primary place in her life (Faderman 1).

While sexologists were first beginning to identify the concept of the aberrant homosexual identity, women were utilizing these romantic friendships as a way to continue participating in same sex activities and even develop some of the earliest queer female communities. Changes in the status of women within early twentieth century Western culture altered the nature of the romantic friendship. "Education and economic possibilities were opening up for women," explains Miller. "With economic independence, with less pressure to marry and have children, and with increased social mobility, conditions existed in which women could live without men" (xxiii-xxiv). For the first time, women were able to enter into a romantic friendship with the knowledge that they did not necessarily have to eventually renounce it for a heterosexual pairing. As a result, women created communal living spaces within colleges and other professional institutions. These educational or professional populations were most common in the eastern United States where there was a large grouping of women's colleges, hence the popular moniker "Boston marriages" (Faderman 15). Ironically, since society at this time found women who pursued an education or a career unfit to also function within a heterosexual marriage and family, in essence, these early communities were actually encouraged by the larger culture.

Regardless of whether or not these relationships actually contained a sexual element, they did provide women of the era with a valuable connection. Heterosexual relationships and education followed by a career were generally irreconcilable in early twentieth century America, and as a result, pairing with similarly educated and career-minded women brought not only understanding and solidarity, but also a level of economic security similar to a heterosexual marriage without the societal pressures to conform to traditional femininity through homemaking and family (Faderman 18). Of course, as Faderman also reminds us, those who were able to participate within these early communities of queer women were "for the most part, of middle- and upper-middle-class backgrounds" (12).

Gay and lesbian historians argue that romantic friendships, while fairly common among early twentieth century middle- and upper-middle-class women, do not appear to have proliferated among working-class women in the same way. In fact, some of these historians give little attention to working-class women at all. For instance, Miller does not address working-class women until the 1920s. And while Faderman spends over a chapter on middle-class women's romantic friendships in the early 1900s, she dismisses the possibility of same-sex pairings for working-class women (except for prostitutes and those in prison) rather quickly by asserting that "[w]orking-class women may have realistically felt that they did not have the luxury to engage in a connection that neither promoted survival as its chief aim nor promised starker sensual pleasures that could help them forget the bleakness of their labors" (39).

Furthermore, prominent histories of working-class women and their initial forays into the worlds of leisure and consumerism, such as Kathy Peiss's *Cheap Amusements* and Enstad's previously mentioned *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure*, also ignore any possibilities of same sex relationships. On one hand, it is important to acknowledge that due to rates of illiteracy

among working-class women of this time period, historians do not have the same types of first-hand accounts available to them for these women, as they do for middle- and upper-class women. However, hopefully without imposing a twenty-first century point of view onto the women of this era, I might still raise possibilities that previous historians have discounted regarding the sexuality of working-class women.

Faderman argues that economic independence was of the most important things in helping middle-class women begin to assert their sexuality apart from men. She states, "it was most crucial that women have the opportunity for economic self-sufficiency that would free them from the constant surveillance of family" (9). Similarly, both Peiss and Enstad's work center around the idea that working-class women did enjoy new economic opportunities after the turn of the century and that they often spent their money on leisure activities and consumer goods. In fact, some of these women were willing to risk their economic security for these new consumer opportunities. "Maintaining style on the streets, at dance halls, or at club functions was an achievement won at other costs – going without food, sewing into the night to embellish a hat or dress, buying on installment, leaving school early to enter the workforce, and forcing confrontations within the working-class family," explains Peiss (67). If these women were willing to jeopardize the economic survival that Faderman argues they hold so dear for a new dress or a pair of shoes, is it all that inconceivable that they would have done it out of a deep connection to another woman?

Faderman also points to women's colleges and similarly women-centered environments, which promoted a closeness that could eventually lead to romantic friendships for middle-class women, as being critical to the development of an independent sexuality (19). However, working-class women had similar women-centered spaces and relationships. Since there were a

limited variety of work environments available to this emerging group of working women, these

women often found themselves grouped together at the same jobs. These environments created a

connection and camaraderie not previously available to these women. Peiss elaborates, "[w]hile

women characterized the workplace as tedious and demanding, a necessity to be endured, most

tried to create places of sociability and support on the shop floor. Women sang songs, recited the

plots of novels, argued politics, and gossiped about social life to counteract the monotony and

routine of the workday" (45-46). In addition to the workplace, some women formed social clubs,

such as the Lady Flashers and the Lady Millionaires. These were similar to the men's

organizations of the times (Faderman 60).

These newfound companionships within female-centered spaces, in combination with an

increased amount of freedom that brought young working women out of their family structures

into social settings such as dances, movies, and even bars are very similar to the opportunities

granted to middle-class women of the same time period. Again, we cannot assume, especially

with a lack of confirming first-hand accounts, that these factors automatically created same-sex

relationships that were similar to romantic friendships. However, it does construct an

atmosphere that may have made the possibility seem more realistic for women who may have

already found themselves attracted to other women.

Finally, near the end of her chapter on dances and the emergence of modern dating, Peiss

describes a practice that may give one last bit of compelling evidence for the possibility of a

working-class equivalent to the romantic friendship. She states:

> One way women exerted some control over their interactions with men was by
>
> attending dances and other leisure activities in the company of a "lady
>
> friend."…The formality of these relationships was observed by Ruth True: "It is

very constant and means that the two share most of their pleasures together.

There are distinct requirements; one must 'call up' and 'wait in' and not 'go

round' too much with anyone else." The lady friend enhanced social occasions,

as a companion to share the fun of a dance and a confidante for whispered gossip.

At the same time, she performed another function, serving as an implicit protector

whose presence helped to deflect unwanted sexual attentions. (Faderman 113)

If it is known that the lady friend was designed to help women navigate the developing dating

pool, is it impossible to believe that she may not have also served for some pairs of women as a

consistent "deflector" of *all* male suitors? In a space of emerging sociable and pleasurable

activities, unconventional sexual and gender roles, and newfound independence, the world of

working-class women was not all that different from middle-class women. And, while it is not

possible to be certain of the existence of same-sex working-class relationships during this time

frame, by ignoring or denying these women any possibility for these relationships, I believe our

analyses become imbalanced, if not classist.

Regardless, as the early 1900s moved on, the literature of sexologists began to filter down

into the larger culture and all women-centered relationships became questioned. "Suddenly

[women involved in same-sex partnerships] learned that what was socially condoned so recently

was now considered unsalutary and dangerous," states Faderman (51). Even mainstream

publications began to publically discuss the concept of same-sex love between women; of

course, they did so exclusively with negative depictions that warned of the perceived destructive

nature of these practices. However, despite these newly enacted negative connotations, a new

social identity had been formed, and the groundwork for community formation had been laid.

Women who found themselves attracted to other women now had an identity, and could begin to

seek out others like them.

<div align="center">The 1920s: Loneliness, Bohemia, and the Blues</div>

By the 1920s, the general public was well-aware of the concept of homosexuality among

both men and women. Thus, the age of innocent friendships had ended and intimate

relationships between two women were now often assumed to be sexual (Faderman 65). The

public knowledge of and interest in homosexuality was also felt within a continuation of popular

culture representations. These included novels, such as Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*

and *The Sun Also Rises*; Sherwood Anderson's *Poor White* and *Dark Laughter*; and plays, such

as Henry Gribble's *March Hares* and Thomas Dickinson's *Winter Bound* (Faderman 65).

However, none of the queer women within these texts were given voice by a queer female

author. The novel that finally ventured into this territory not only enjoyed success, but also

weathered international scandal.

Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* was first published in England in 1928 to

generally quiet and mixed reviews. However, that changed within a few weeks of its release

after a scornful review from the *Sunday Express*, which condemned the book as "unfit to be sold

by any bookseller or borrowed from any library," drew the attention of England's Home

Secretary and Director of Prosecutions (Miller 186). Despite the resulting obscenity trial in

England, *The Well of Loneliness* was published in the United States the following year, and

became a best-seller by moving over fifty-thousand copies within a short period after its release

(Miller 190). After several long and public trials, the book was eventually ruled obscene in both

countries; however, the decision was fairly quickly overturned within the U.S. It was not

published again in England, however, until 1949, six years after Hall's death (Miller 190).

What makes *The Well of Loneliness* so critical to this study is that it marks the first significant use of popular culture by a queer woman to discuss or politicize sexuality (the "sexual invert," as Hall utilizes the language of her time). Her political intentions regarding the book are quite clear in a letter she wrote to literary scholar Gorham Munson. She states:

> [The book is on] a subject which I desired to bring to the attention of a wide public in all sincerity and frankness. ...I hoped that it would encourage the inverted in general to declare themselves, to face up to a hostile world in their true colours, and this with dignity and courage. ...I hoped that normal men and women of good will would be brought through my book to a fuller and more tolerant understanding of the inverted. (par. 2-5)

This was a dangerous undertaking in the 1920s, and Hall was well aware of the possible consequences of her actions for her career. In fact, she argued that her public role was, in actuality, an asset to her cause by stating, "I waited to write it until I had made a name for myself as an author… . Also I wished to offer my name and my literary reputation in support of the cause of the inverted. I knew that I was running the risk of injuring my career as a writer by rousing up a storm of antagonism; but I was prepared to face this possibility" (par. 4). Hall remained true to those convictions when at the obscenity trial for *The Well of Loneliness* in England, she spoke, explaining, "I do not regret having written the book. All that has happened has only served to show me how badly my book was needed" (qtd. in Miller 190).

It is clear that Hall used and believed in the potential of using popular culture to raise awareness of the issues facing the marginalized identity group of which she was a member. Furthermore, while she admitted that notoriety actually made her quite uncomfortable, she knew there was power in her persona (R. Hall par. 11). The editors of *Out in All Directions: The*

Almanac of Gay and Lesbian America discuss the visibility politics of today: "It is invisibility that has led many people to dismiss the important contributions lesbians and gay men have made to society. …It is one thing to know we are everywhere; it is another to become visible (Witt, Thomas, and Marcus 7). The case of *The Well of Loneliness* illustrates that queer individuals actually have a very long history of emphasizing political visibility and 'coming out.' Moreover, the concept of the queer celebrity activist is much older than today's era of red AIDS ribbons and HRC benefit concerts.

Hall's letter to Munson does point to a level of uncertainty regarding the impact of her book, stating: "[w]hether or not I have succeeded in my aim time alone will show" (par. 5). On the other hand, near the end of the letter, she also mentions that, "I undoubtedly opened the door to a flood of literature on the same subject…." (par. 11). This is a grave understatement. As Faderman confirms, "[w]ith the American publication of *The Well of Loneliness* at the end of the 1920s, there was suddenly a great interest in the lesbian as a sexual freak, and the floodgates opened. Each year saw the production of new novels that were even clearer than Radclyffe Hall's book…" (101). Unfortunately, this also indicates that much of what Hall wrought was not entirely positive or empowering, as she had hoped. But several other items, which she would no doubt find more gratifying, point to the magnitude of her legacy.

At the time of Hall's death in 1943, *The Well of Loneliness* was selling a hundred thousand copies per year worldwide and even today; it is "reprinted more than any other work of lesbian fiction" and remains a "landmark in [lesbian] literary tradition" (Lesbian Herstory Archives par. 5). Additionally, it is impossible to deny how *The Well of Loneliness* changed public consciousness. As Miller elaborates, "[f]or the first time, lesbianism truly entered public consciousness both in England and the United States. ...As a result, large numbers of lesbians

were able to recognize themselves and their sexuality" (Miller 190). As Billie Tallmij, a member

of the early lesbian organization Daughters of Bilitis, recalls, "*The Well* opened the door for a lot

of people, including me. I read that book and found that I was coming home. I recognized

myself in the characters, and I also recognized the emotions that were so beautifully written

there. …This was the answer that I had sought for a long time" (Tallmij 71).

Faderman further elaborates upon the book's impact on queer culture by pointing to how

it actually provided a model of lesbianism for emerging communities who struggled to create

their own identities in the subsequent decades. Hall's text was perhaps one of the most

significant influences on the creation of a butch aesthetic during the 1940s and 1950s. Some

women even suggested that the term *butch* be replaced with *clyffe* in her honor (Faderman 173).

There should be no uncertainty as to the influential nature of Hall's work: "[women] who were

hungry for any discussion or information about their secret life and could find no other source,

were very affected by the most obvious literary model" (Faderman 173).

Meanwhile, while Radclyffe Hall was creating some of the first public representations of

queer women, others were creating some of the earliest public communities. Whereas the early

groupings of queer women developed within the middle-class context of the private education

system, in the 1920s queer communities were found within working-class areas of large cities.

Artistic or "bohemian" neighborhoods like Greenwich Village emerged as progressive and free-

spirited enclaves that accepted the expression of non-normative values, including sexuality.

Moreover, unlike early middle-class women's communities that were also white, the most

notable of these new communities was located in the heart of the largest black neighborhood in

America, Harlem.

During this time period, which has become known as the Harlem Renaissance, the area became a well-known district of nightlife, music, art, literature, and nonconformity. Since Harlem was already a subculture to the dominant culture due to race, those individuals that found themselves outside of the normative culture for other reasons, such as sexuality, found a comfortable and even safe environment within Harlem (Witt, Thomas, and Marcus 183). As a result, early predecessors to the gay bars, sex clubs, and drag performances of later generations developed first here in Harlem. This is not to say that Harlem was entirely a free-for-all culture that fully accepted homosexuality. After all, the area was one founded upon collective racial experiences, not sexual ones. However, for a community that flourished from the money of tourism, sexual exoticism sold (Faderman 69).

This tourism also became the reason whites (and often heterosexual whites) traveled into Harlem, as "slumming it" became their trendy pastime. This cultural exploitation often created a disjunction between those who were beginning to accept their fledgling minority identity and those that came to simply experiment with the identity for night. Faderman explains, "More often they simply considered themselves adventurous, since there was not yet a pressing need to declare, even to one's self, one's 'sexual orientation'" (71). But, for a group of individuals who had few other opportunities for community available to them, a space with restrictions and day-trippers was better than none at all. The bars and clubs of Harlem became focal points for both early kinships and money-making and the popular culture that dominated these venues was music, namely the blues.

One aspect of blues music that set it firmly apart from other musical forms of this time, and no doubt encouraged its connection with female queerness, is that it often addressed issues of sexuality, particularly women's sexuality. As Angela Davis points out:

Those aspects of lived love relationships that were not compatible with the

dominant, etherealized ideology of love – such as extramarital relationships,

domestic violence, and the ephemerality of many sexual partnerships – were

largely banished from the established popular musical culture. Yet these very

themes pervade the blues. What is even more striking is the fact that initially the

professional performers of this music – the most widely heard individual

purveyors of the blues – were women. (3-4)

Furthermore, the blues had a tradition of being tied to political themes. Davis continues, "[the]

intermingling of the private and public, the personal and political, is present in the many

thousands of blues songs… . There is also a significant number of women's blues songs on

work, jail, prostitution, natural disasters, and other issues that, when taken together, constitute a

patchwork social history of black Americans during the decades following emancipation" (91).

These characteristics of the blues, in combination with an environment more amiable to

unconventional sexualities, created an exciting opportunity for black queer women within this

popular culture form.

One of the most well-known of these women is Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, whose sexual

relations with women were well known among both associates and audiences in Harlem. In fact,

after being caught with several women at a house party, she turned the scandal into profit by

putting an image that invoked the infamous scene on the cover of her next single, "Prove it on

Me Blues" (aka: "Prove it on Me"). The song was also a blatant admission of sexual exploits

with women. Its lyrics state:

Went out last night, had a great big fight

Everything seemed to go on wrong

I looked up, to my surprise

The gal I was with was gone

Where she went, I don't know

I mean to follow everywhere she goes

Folks say I'm crooked, I didn't know where she took it

I want the whole world to know

They said I do it, ain't nobody caught me

Sure got to prove it on me

Went out last night with a crowd of my friends

They must've been women, 'cause I don't like no men. (Rainey)

Rainey was also rumored to have been responsible for initiating Bessie Smith, for whom she served as a mentor, into "the life" of queerness (Faderman 74).

Bessie Smith's exploits with women were also fairly well-documented, despite her marriage to Jack Gee. In Chris Albertson's biography of Smith, in which he obtained much of his facts and stories from Smith's niece Ruby Walker, he clearly exposes that the only person Smith was afraid would discover her bisexual exploits was her husband. She often threatened her chorus troupe, stating, "If any of you tell Jack about this, you'll never work in my shows again" (Albertson 80). And, in the retelling of a story in which Gee actually does discover Smith with other women, she is described by Walker as "terrified as only Jack could make her" (Albertson 81). However, this fear did not appear to have ever stopped Smith's relations with women.

Other performers who included queer content in their lives and performances included Ethel Waters, Alberta Hunter, Jackie "Moms" Mabley, and Gladys Bently. The latter of these

was very popular during this period in Harlem. Bently, who often performed at the popular (and queer-friendly) night club Harry Hansberry's Clam House, was a male impersonator and played with the popular image of the "bulldyker." Her gender-bending practices reached their public height when she married another woman in a civil ceremony in New Jersey (Witt, Thomas, and Marcus 184).

All of these women had fairly well-documented and known relations with other women and none of them appear to have had their careers damaged by those relations, as long as they maintained them under the guise of bisexuality. In fact, Rainey and Bently's careers even profited from their aberrant sexualities. "Although unalloyed homosexuality may still have connoted in 1920s Harlem the abnormality of 'a man trapped in a women's body,' bisexuality seems to have suggested that a woman was super-sexy," states Faderman (75). Their art presented an unapologetic glimpse at queer women. Though less explicit in their intentions than Hall, they similarly utilized their craft towards a politics of education and visibility. In many ways, these blues songs and performances stand as predecessors to the women's music of the 1970s (Davis 40).

As for those who may have watched these performances, it is harder to surmise what they took away from them. Faderman argues that the statements of these performers, which can very much be seen as an assertion of lesbian pride, must have caused them to be seen as outlaws. And, this would have made them "a culture hero in an oppressed community" (77). Similarly, Davis describes these women as "role models for untold thousands of their sisters to whom they delivered messages that defied the male dominance encouraged by mainstream culture" (41). The editors of *Out in All Directions* even go as far as to say these women "helped lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals…accept themselves" (Witt, Thomas, and Marcus 185). However, Faderman

is a bit more cautious about making such a sweeping assessment from our twenty-first century

perspective, instead stating that "[t]he listener to [the] 1920s blues apparently took whatever he

or she wanted out of the songs. To the heterosexual male they were provocative. To the

potentially bisexual female they were suggestive and encouraging. To the lesbian they could be

affirming" (78).

Regardless of their impact, the prominence of Harlem as an early queer enclave

unfortunately faded quickly. The U.S. economy collapsed as the 1920s became the 1930s and

the nation's emphasis turned to conservation and survival, as opposed to excess and

experimentation. This, in turn, made the expression of non-normative sexualities seem

gratuitously extravagant (Faderman 93). In fact, there is little documented culture or

representations of queer women during the 1930s. There were a few notable exceptions within

mainstream film, theater, and literature, but these all participated in the popular trend of

depicting the lesbian as evil or a monster (Faderman 101). In other words, there continued to be

a mainstream emphasis on negative depictions, despite the few attempts by some early queer

women to fashion those representations themselves. Furthermore, attempts to transform those

images became increasingly difficult now that queer individuals were seen not only as abnormal,

but also a threat to national prosperity. However, the following decade would contain national

events that would again change the cultural landscape for queer individuals.

<u>The 1940s: World War II and Political Consciousness</u>

While queer individuals had the language to acknowledge themselves and each other by

the 1940s, the fledgling queer communities that were able to develop did so only within the

confines of already existing neighborhoods, such as Harlem and Greenwich Village, or

institutions, such as women's colleges. Popular culture had been utilized by this point to fashion

a type of early visibility politics; however, despite Radclyffe Hall's hopes for *The Well of Loneliness*, popular culture had not been used for any concrete political movement organizing or mobilization. Nevertheless, the opportunities granted to queer individuals during and immediately following World War II would result in the foundations of the social movement that would eventually bring significant changes to the lives of gay men and women.

World War II had particular significance to women, since it encouraged unprecedented numbers of them to enter the military and procure employment previously unavailable to them. As a result, women connected with each other and fostered a new sense of independence. Additionally, women who were attracted to other women found an environment that could be conducive to their desires, not unlike the women's colleges were for middle-class women in earlier decades. Faderman describes the effect of these cultural changes:

> For those who already identified themselves as lesbians, military service, with its opportunities to meet other women and to engage in work and adventure that were ordinarily denied to them, was especially appealing. For many others who had not identified themselves as lesbians before the war, the all female environment of the women's branches of the armed services, offering as it did the novel emotional excitement of working with competent, independent women, made lesbianism an attractive option. …And even women who were not in the military now had opportunities in civilian life…to meet other women and to form attachments that might have been unthinkable during the 1930s. (120)

In addition to simply bringing queer women into contact with one another in all-female environments, the U.S. military of World War II encouraged queerness among its members in other ways.

For example, despite its new screening procedures to aid in the rejection of homosexual recruits, the military's great need for soldiers during World War II outweighed its homophobia and many homosexuals were admitted and filtered into jobs that the military felt stereotypically matched their abilities. Men became medics, clerks, chaplains' assistants, and even female impersonators in troop entertainment variety shows. Women, on the other hand, were believed suited for jobs as vehicle operators and mechanics (Miller 233-4). Additionally, since the gender traits traditionally associated with queer women were also those sought by the military, their queerness could be more easily overlooked and they were given a wider diversity of appointments (Faderman 123).

The military's tendency to establish bases within port cities or allow its members to take leave within such locations also helped establish larger communities of queer individuals than existed earlier. At the war's conclusion when military personnel were discharged into these sites, they often set up roots within these enclaves, rather than returning to their places of origin. Therefore, cities such as Boston, New York, and San Francisco developed large neighborhoods of queer folks, which included the establishment of gay and lesbian oriented businesses, such as bars or clubs (Faderman 126).

While there had been venues in Harlem during the 1920s that had certainly catered to a queer clientele, these enterprises existed within the already established racial subculture of the Harlem Renaissance. The bars that opened during this post-war moment were established specifically with queer patrons in mind. In other words, for the first time a queer subculture was existing without the aid of other subcultures and within its own space. Additionally, there was a large enough population for these businesses to even make gender distinctions between gay men and lesbians. "The migration to big urban centers of large numbers of women who identified

themselves as lesbians during and after the war," Faderman explains, "meant that for the first time in America a number of bars could survive economically if they catered exclusively to lesbians" (127). Some of these bars included the If Club in Los Angeles, the 181 Club in New York, and the Music Hall in Portland.

These venues provided queer women with a place to socialize with other women like them and to begin to see their identities within a group context. Identifying as a lesbian had shifted from being about individual shame to the excitement of shared experiences. This was a crucial psychological step for women to take in order to see themselves as a minority group with rights and the ability to mobilize in order to obtain those rights (Faderman 127-8). It is also fortunate that this group consciousness arises at this moment, because the 1950s brought the hostile backlash of McCarthyism. With these connections in place, it became much harder to drive queer individuals back into hiding and self-hatred, as had been done in the 1930s.

<div align="center">The 1950s: McCarthy, Organizations, and Publications</div>

The optimism and excitement over the conclusion of World War II ended quickly as The Cold War ushered in an age of fear and distrust. Americans had found it difficult to cope with the War and longed for what became known as a "return to normalcy." In an effort to secure this and advance American patriotism, Wisconsin Senator Joseph R. McCarthy began heading up government-sponsored witch hunts. Communists were, of course, first on the list of enemies. But who was a communist, or was considered at risk for communism, was vaguely defined, and many other less-desirable citizens also found themselves in danger. In 1950, when Undersecretary of State John Peurifoy stated before a Senate committee that many of a large group of government workers that had recently been dismissed for disloyalty also happened to be homosexuals, communism and homosexuality became fused in the public consciousness. This

was furthered by the Senate committee's statements that homosexuals were both security risks and "generally unsuitable [to] normal standards of behavior" (qtd. in Faderman 141). Unfortunately, queer individuals, who were already targets of discrimination and scorn, found these sentiments amplified as they also became prime targets of investigative surveillance.

This persecution also caused an increase in the discourses surrounding homosexuality and more and more women were able to identify themselves within these. Ironically, this resulted in a proliferation and solidification of queer female subcultures, rather than dispersal (Faderman 160). Bars that had been established after the war continued to thrive and many more were added to their numbers. These remained some of the only places that many had available to them to connect with other women. This was particularly the case of working-class women. "Young and working-class lesbians who had no homes where they could entertain and were welcome nowhere else socially" explains Faderman, "were held in thrall by the bars, which became their major resort" (162).

Within these bars, queer women were able to feel at least some sense of security among others similar to themselves, despite the fact that police raids and entrapment were still a constant threat. The identity categories of butch and femme and their presentational markers became ways of identifying subcultural membership and evading possible undercover officers. In other words, cops, who were often unfamiliar with the staging of butch and femme identities, often stood out, and thus, could be avoided. This, in conjunction with the subculture's desire to create its own cultural codes of authenticity that separated it from the dominant culture, no doubt accounted for the strict rules regarding butch and femme presentation and behavior that developed during this time. Faderman states that "[b]eing neither butch nor femme was not an

option if one wanted to be part of the young or working-class lesbian subculture. Those who refused to choose learned quickly that they were unwelcome" (Faderman 168).

Some women became tired of bar culture, with its emphasis on drinking, constant threat of raids, and rigid rules of presentation and attempted to meet women in other and more creative ways. For example, in 1947, Lisa Ben[iv] began what she called "America's Gayest Magazine" (Streitmatter 7). She launched this first-ever lesbian (or queer, for that matter) publication, *Vice Versa,* while working as a secretary for RKO Studios in Los Angeles. She published the magazine, which ranged anywhere from nine to twenty pages, on her typewriter at work and used carbon paper to make copies. Each issue, of which there were nine over the course of approximately one year, numbered twelve[v] copies and actually looked more like a term paper than a magazine (Streitmatter 7). She recalls distributing *Vice Versa*: "I handed out the magazine for free. I never charged for it. I felt that that would be wrong. It was just some writing that I wanted to get off my chest. …Then I would say to the girls as I passed the magazine out, 'When you get through with this, don't throw it away, pass it on to another gay gal.' In that way *Vice Versa* would pass from friend to friend" (Ben 9). The magazine included entries, such as essays, fiction, poetry, book and film reviews, and opinion columns. Most of these were written by Ben, but she was able to obtain outside submissions from time to time.

While Ben created *Vice Versa* largely as a way to meet other women, it also had distinct political qualities. For example, in one issue she makes a statement that Streitmatter compares to militant cries of the 1990s gay liberation movements: "The Third Sex[vi] is here to stay. Homosexuality is becoming less and less a 'taboo' subject, and although still considered by the general public as contemptible or treated with derision, I venture to predict that there will be a time in the future when gay folk will be accepted as part of regular society" (qtd. in Streitmatter

8). Her opinions on the shame many homosexuals felt at this time were also political. "My feelings in such matters have always seemed quite natural and 'right' to me…I, for one, consider myself neither an error of nature nor some sort of psychological freak" (qtd. in Streitmatter 8). More recently, Ben qualified these statements by explaining that in 1947 she didn't see these ideas as political, but that she now understands them to be so (Streitmatter 8).

 Again, it is important to refrain from imposing a contemporary viewpoint on this historical document; however, it is hard to deny the importance of this inaugural publication. Regardless of its small circulation, it displayed themes and standards that other queer press publications would contain for many years, such as opinion columns and letters, fiction, and media reviews (Streitmatter 2). Furthermore, Ben's readers were clearly moved by her work. One writes, "I wish to thank you for the privilege of seeing this unique publication," while another excitedly explained that Ben's magazine made her feel that she had finally found a "group she belonged with" (Streitmatter 7).

In her fourth issue, Ben alluded to the possible influence or legacy of *Vice Versa*: "Perhaps even *Vice Versa* might be the forerunner of better magazines dedicated to the third sex, which in some future time might take their rightful place on the newsstands beside other publications, to be available openly and without restriction to those who wish to read them" (Ben 11). No doubt Ben had no idea this might be realized within only a few years.

While Ben's publication is actually historically located within the 1940s, it is clearly an early predecessor to a trio of similar periodicals emerging from the West Coast during the 1950s. The first of these started in 1952 with a small group of Los Angeles gay men, who began having meetings to discuss the issues facing homosexuals at the time. Two of these men, Dale Jennings and Johnny Button, found the meetings to be insufficient. They felt there needed to be a stronger

emphasis upon political action, as well as discussions, and that these both needed to reach a larger audience. Out of these concerns was born the organization ONE, Inc., *ONE* magazine and, as the men involved would later claim, the whole Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement (or the homophile movement, as it was known at this time) (Streitmatter 18).

  ONE contained material similar to Ben's *Vice Versa*, such as news, columns, reviews, fiction, and letters to the editor. The organization and publication's goals were to "bring to light the lack of civil rights protections for the homosexual and to bring homosexuals together in closer communication" (qtd. in Witt, Thomas, and Marcus 199). Additionally, it promoted a similar sense of homosexual pride that *Vice Versa* proclaimed. Editor Martin Block recalls, "We weren't going to go out and say you should be gay, but we said, 'You can be proud of being gay.' You could be proud of being yourself. You could look yourself in the mirror and say, 'I'm me, and isn't that nice?' That in itself was radical. Nobody put it in words, but that was the underlying thought and underlying feeling behind the magazine" (Block 41).

  The organization ONE, Inc. was not the first of its kind, however. Two years earlier, Henry Hay was the instrumental performer in the formation of the Los Angeles group, the Mattachine Society, which was a secret society formed in order that its members might have a network of support. But it also intended to educate the public in order to change the conditions facing homosexuals at the time. Hay elaborates: "Our organization would renegotiate the place of our minority into the majority. To a large extent that's what the whole movement was about. I was thinking of an amendment to the United States Constitution" (Hay 410).

  Then again, it is unlikely that all movement members would have agreed with Hay's assertion. Those who had started ONE, Inc believed that Mattachine's approach to politics was too assimilationist, in that the group sought the acceptance, as opposed to the transformation, of

mainstream society. This political approach was also reflected in *The Mattachine Review*, a publication begun by the organization in 1955 when ONE, Inc refused to join with the group and allow their magazine to become the representative voice of the Society. "The *Review's* philosophy was designed to win acceptance on mainstream society's terms, rather than to challenge conventional values," explains Streitmatter, "An editorial in the *Review's* first issue insisted that the public's attitude towards homosexuality would improve as soon as 'sex variants[vii]' began behaving in accordance with societal norms" (38). Although the two magazines had differing opinions on what constituted effective politics for the homophile movement, they did provide their readers with options and topics for consideration.

However, both magazines did come under attack by queer women who pointed out that neither publication gave attention to their issues. To make matters worse, *Mattachine Review* editor Hal Call explicitly stated that they were not interested in presenting lesbian viewpoints (Streitmatter 21). Call more recently justified this position, stating that "[l]esbians were not under fire the way men were. They didn't have the kinds of problems with the police that gay men had. Cops and other straight men felt very threatened by male homosexuals; they didn't feel threatened by lesbians. They just thought a lesbian was a woman who'd never been fucked good" (qtd. in Streitmatter 22). Rather than justifying the Society's stance on the exclusion of women, Call's statement actually points more towards why it was so crucial to acknowledge the viewpoints of queer women. If a magazine that purported to understand what homosexuals experienced could be so crass with regards to the lesbian experience, what must the rest of the population be like? Not only was there little understanding of a queer female experience, but the little "knowledge" that was out there actually put them in greater danger. For example, queer women were taken into custody at bar raids quite often and the stereotyped opinion of lesbians to

which Call refers actually often resulted in the police forcing these women into sexual acts (Streitmatter 22).

In 1955, a group of San Francisco women, who like Ben before them, hoped to give women a safer social alternative to the bar culture that contained such injustices. They founded the organization Daughters of Bilitis, and one year later began publishing the third in the trilogy of queer publications of the 1950s, *The Ladder*. They also intended for their organization and magazine to rectify the lack of discourse surrounding queer women; however, ironically they did so without knowledge of this exclusion from either of the male-dominated organizations of the time. In fact, they were unaware that either ONE, Inc. or the Mattachine Society even existed. Member Billie Tallmij explains, "You see, not only did the lesbian not exist – psychologically or historically or whatever – in the minds of the general public, there was also a tremendous division between gay men and women" (Tallmij 76-7).

While their focus on women set them apart from ONE and Mattachine, their approach was similar, in that they emphasized education and pride. "My main drive was to educate the public, but foremost, to educate our girls, to give them the answers I had once needed and to give them some sense of who they were. We had to teach our people that it wasn't a crime to be a homosexual," emphasizes Tallmij (74-5). *The Ladder*, which had similar content to *ONE* and *Mattachine Review*, became the organization's main means of disseminating these ideas. Politically, *The Ladder* appeared to be more in step with the accommodating stance of the *Mattachine Review*; however, some scholars have challenged this as being too dismissive of the politics practiced by DOB and *The Ladder*. For example, Marianne Cutler argues that the political methods of DOB were heavily influenced by both their members' gender and sexual identities. She starts by explaining that women have to present themselves in a certain way and

utilize certain types of discourse in order to be considered legitimate within the male-dominated sphere of public debate. This was further complicated by sexuality for the women of DOB, and as a result, their discourse sometimes appeared assimilationist or inconsistent. She states:

> As the producers of *The Ladder* had two delegitimating statuses to overcome – their homosexuality and their gender – a seemingly contradictory rhetoric pervaded the magazine's discourse. Entrenched ideology regarding the appropriate place of women in the domestic sphere of society impelled the producers of *The Ladder* to implicitly masculinize lesbians in order to elevate their status and establish legitimacy as participants in the public sphere. However, the implicit threat to gender ideology embodied by lesbians also pulled for the use of strategies that defused this male/masculine identification. (235-6)

In other words, when DOB and *The Ladder* are regarded as less politically radical than other queer groups at this time, the specific intersectional nature of their oppression is ignored and the tradition of silencing their experiences is maintained.

Instead, it is necessary to recognize that all of these organizations and their respective publications were critical in establishing not only the early queer press, but also the queer liberation movement as a whole. These organizations may have employed different tactics or levels of militancy, but their actions reflected what each organization felt was realistic and utilized the available resources of the historical moment. It is also important to consider that these organizations all developed and carried out their business within one of the most conservative decades for homosexuals. As Faderman reminds us, this was "perhaps the worst time in history for women to love women" (157). "That America's first widely distributed gay and lesbian publications appeared in the shadow of McCarthyism attests to their founders being

persons of strength and valor," concurs Streitmatter (17). Much of what they participated in was not only considered aberrant, but was in fact a crime, and some of these groups paid a price for this. For example, all three of them were at some point under investigation by the F.B.I., and ONE, Inc. even went to trial against the U.S. postal service regarding their right to mail material that had been ruled obscene. Their 1958 victory in this landmark case set a precedent and secured the ability of future generations of queer publications to utilize printed popular culture to give support, raise visibility, educate, and build and mobilize coalitions.

Finally, it is necessary to consider what these publications meant to the men and women who consumed them. The three publications together had subscriptions totaling approximately 7,000[viii] readers; however, we can be certain that they reached much wider audiences, since they undoubtedly were passed between groups of friends. In the case of *The Ladder*, for example, historians have documented that women often held "*Ladder* parties," in which one subscriber would invite groups of women over to enjoy the magazine together (Streitmatter 28).

Generally, these readers were exceedingly grateful for the existence of these magazines. For example, some readers of *The Ladder* were simple in their praises, such as one woman who declared she was simply "glad as heck that you exist" (qtd. in Gittings and Lahusen 425); others were more ornate in their praises, such as one who found it to be "a light in the dark night and a warm fire for alien souls" (qtd. in Streitmatter 28).

Finally, to some women, these publications offered the ability to simply carry on. Tallmij recalls a number of the letters DOB would receive:

> We had people in Podunk, Iowa, writing letters that would break your heart.
>
> …Everyone of them felt like she was the only voice crying out in the wilderness.
>
> If the Daughters did nothing else – and we did a lot else – we were able to bring a

sense of solace to these women. Just knowing that we were there would

sometimes keep them from cracking up or from suicide. I talked more than one

person out of suicide in those early days. (Tallmij 75-6)

While it may be hard for those of us within a contemporary framework to comprehend how

women might be saved from suicide by a magazine, it is necessary to place these quotes within

their cultural context and appreciate how recognizing themselves and others like them for the

first time within popular culture offered not only a sense of validation, but also the hope of

community.

 The Ladder, however, was not the only place that queer women of the 1950s could find

these representations of themselves. A recently expanded publishing industry also caused a

sudden wealth of depictions of queer women to emerge from the dominant mainstream culture in

the form of lesbian pulp fiction novels. Even though this form of popular culture has often been

disregarded as being demeaning towards queer women, during its cultural moment it provided

many with things similar to the queer press publications, such as support, hope, connections with

other women, and even a means of survival. Furthermore, because these novels were produced

from within the mainstream culture, they were more widely available to a greater number of

queer women than previous publications or representations. Lesbian pulp fiction marks the first

significant moment in which the wider culture employed and queer women consumed depictions

of lesbians within mainstream popular culture.

 Pulp fiction novels were inexpensive (usually $.25 - $.50) mass-market paperback books

that contained shocking or explicit stories of mystery, romance, crime, or adventure. Lesbian

pulp fiction refers to the fairly significant sub-genre of these novels that included some type of

lesbian content. This content was usually indicated to its reader through sensational cover art

with catchy titles or taglines that included words such as *twilight, odd, strange, shadows, forbidden*, or *unnatural*. Even though there are novels that fit these criteria published both before and after, the "heyday" of lesbian pulp fiction is generally considered to be from 1950 to 1965 and in that time frame, over 500 titles were produced (Y. Keller "Was I Right…" 388).

However, this new wealth of representations did not come without complications. After all, many of these novels were written by male authors (although several queer female authors were employed within the genre later) and publishing companies were not issuing these novels with the lesbian reader in mind. As Vin Packer (aka Marijane Meaker), author of the popular lesbian pulp *Spring Fire* explains, "[*Spring Fire*] was not aimed at any lesbian market, because there wasn't any that we knew about. …We were amazed, *floored*, by the mail that poured in. That was the first time anyone was aware of the gay audience out there" (qtd in Y. Keller "Was I Right…" 390). Instead of these novels being aimed at a queer female audience, they were marketed to a straight male reader as essentially soft-core pornography. As a result, many of the texts touted little more than ultra-feminine women on their covers and voyeuristic sex inside. And even though pulp fiction experienced less censorship than other entertainment forms, publishers still felt an obligation towards a moral code and required authors to properly "punish" lesbians in their stories with turning heterosexual, institutionalization, unhappiness, and even death. While Yvonne Keller argues that the few lesbian authors of pulp fiction did occasionally attempt to subvert the homophobic nature of the genre, the politically conservative climate of McCarthyism made the strategies available to these authors very limited (Y. Keller "Pulp Politics…" 5-6). Interestingly, despite all of these negative aspects, queer women read, traded, and collected these books by the millions, both loving and loathing them.

While the queer press publications indicate that lesbian pulp fiction was not the only representation available for women, the responses of women at this time illustrate that it was still a very important one. "Given the fierce public disapproval of homosexuality, lesbian representation was scarce and lesbians of the time repeatedly attest to the frustration of their desire for such images in popular culture," explains Keller ("Pulp Politics…" 1). Many queer women were able to "see" images of themselves in ways that previously did not exist. In fact, the mainstream nature of lesbian pulp fiction enabled characteristics that the previous examples of popular culture were unable to provide queer women, such as recognition of existence by the dominant culture and wide or mass distribution of the cultural production. At the very least, they were discovering that they were not alone or abnormal. As author Ann Bannon discusses:

> [T]he most important things [readers] learned were that 1) they weren't unique and doomed to lifelong isolation, 2)…they weren't "abnormal," and 3) there was hope for a happy life. …Their lives were so insular, their access to information so restricted, that they were convinced they were an isolated mistake of nature. So it was the really important and affirmative message that my books carried out to the farthest nooks of this nation to people who most needed to hear it: You have company! You are okay! (qtd. in Dean par. 23-25)

In addition to a sense of validation, queer women began to use these novels as ways to both identify each other and form communities. As David Bianco describes, "For millions of lesbians in the 1950s, buying a pulp novel could be a courageous public act, one that expressed a desire to explore or claim a lesbian identity in a time of repression. Lesbians…circulated them and discussed them, creating an underground community of lesbian readers" (par. 9).

However, it is also important to point out that despite the fact that these novels were one of the first, and in many cases the only, representation available to women at this time, they were not consumed uncritically. Bannon notes that while she enjoys the attention and sentimentality that have become attached to the texts now, "at the time, I wanted something dignified" (qtd. in Munger par. 14) and writer Joan Nestle states that "our need was greater than our shame" (qtd in Y. Keller "Was I Right…" 404). Perhaps the most powerful statement on this topic comes from Donna Allegra, "I look back now and see where those books and their ideas rotted my guts and crippled my moral structure, [but] in nothing and nowhere else in the world I live[d] in could I have seen the possibility of a lesbian happily-ever-after" (qtd in Y. Keller "Was I Right…" 386). It seems clear that these books, despite their often homophobic representations, were a critical element in the survival and structure of queer women's communities emerging at this time period.

Furthermore, while the existence of queer press publications wanted to ensure that lesbian pulp fiction was not the only representation available for queer women at this time, the responses of readers remind us that pulp fiction still provided important depictions. Perhaps this is due in part to the wider distribution of lesbian pulp, which made it more accessible to women who were not located within large cities or were otherwise prohibited from knowledge of organizations like DOB. Or, it is possible that part of the lure of lesbian pulp was that it was actually produced by the dominant culture. In other words, while it was certainly exhilarating to have their own voice within queer publications, there was also something special in this acknowledgement of existence by the oppressor, after years of silence and contempt.

Either way, it remains apparent that these publications were very important to queer women of this historical moment and that what mattered more than quality of representation was

use value. Queer women were able to make use of lesbian pulp fiction, despite its often negative

characteristics. They felt validation, empowerment, and recognition as a result of the genre's

stories and images; connected with other queer women through reading and trading the texts; and

sometimes voiced versions of their own stories by venturing into authorship themselves. These

are all important examples of identity formation, community, and visibility that were provided

by lesbian pulp fiction, regardless of its creation by the oppressive dominant culture.

<p style="text-align:center">The Late 1960s and the 1970s: Multiple Movements and Self-Production</p>

While the 1950s and early 1960s had been a time of immense oppression, they also

contained critical efforts towards early organizing. These would flourish by the end of the

1960s, which was a tumultuous decade characterized by the emergence of numerous social

movements, a growing youth movement, student protests, political upheaval, and the rejection of

the traditional social and moral values of the 1950s. This atmosphere had a profound impact

upon the young homophile movement. "During the 1950s," *The Ladder*'s editor Barbara

Gittings explains, "homosexuals had looked inward, focusing on themselves and their problems,

begging society for tolerance. In the 1960s, we looked *outside* ourselves for the roots of the

problem. We came to the positions that the 'problem' of homosexuality isn't a problem at all.

The problem is society. Society had to accommodate us, not try to change us" (qtd. in

Streitmatter 51).

This newfound emphasis for queer individuals on external obstacles and the aspiration to

change these was no doubt advanced by witnessing the successes of other marginalized groups of

the time. In fact, John D'Emilio contends that the action based upon radical politics during this

time happened "because of the mass radical movements that preceded it" ("Gay Politics…" 466).

However, the desire for more overt political action was not universally felt. "[The other social

and political movements of the 1960s] not only energized the nearly fifty gay organizations across the country, but also inspired bitter internal battles over the direction of what was then called the homophile movement," explains Eric Marcus (171). In other words, while there was much excitement over the changes occurring in the culture at large, many queer individuals and the organizations they participated in disagreed on how they should capitalize upon these changes.

Unfortunately for some, the consequences of these disagreements were irrevocably damaging. For instance, those involved in the production of both *ONE* and *The Mattachine Review* refused to adhere to the more progressive viewpoints, and, as a result lost much of their readerships. These struggles were exacerbated by the fact that the new political climate also persuaded numerous new and more progressive publications to materialize in the 1960s (Streitmatter 53). Included in these new publications was *The Los Angeles Advocate*, which developed out of a newsletter, *PRIDE Newsletter*, published by the organization Personal Rights in Defense and Education. *The Los Angeles Advocate* is noteworthy because it still maintains a wide readership today under the shortened name *The Advocate* (Streitmatter 87). This makes it the longest running queer publication to date. Before the decade's conclusion, magazines such as these would eclipse both *ONE* and *The Mattachine Review* and cause them to cease distribution (Streitmatter 53).

For queer women of this period, similar tensions between old and new politics were experienced and they too found themselves at a crossroads. In the case of the major lesbian organization DOB and its publication *The Ladder*, these conflicts did not devastate quite as quickly as they did for *ONE* and *The Mattachine Review,* but they were still profound. Regardless of the motivation behind it, DOB had usually promoted fairly assimilationist politics.

In other words, while they hoped to educate the larger public on homosexuality, what they also hoped to illustrate was that lesbians were not all that different from everyone else. This viewpoint was not all that alienating (or unusual) during the 1950s when queer women were making the initial connections with each other they so longed for; however, in a more politically-progressive 1960s, this stance was quickly becoming outdated. Many of the women involved in DOB felt these divergences quite deeply.

Shirley Willer served as a DOB chapter and eventually national president during the mid to late 1960's. She explains the atmosphere of the time:

> They [DOB] just felt we were putting too much time into associating with the male homosexuals and not enough trying to conform to society's regulations. …Despite the objections of a lot of women in DOB, I even supported public protests and went to them – in high heels! …This split between those who wanted to make noise and those who wanted to do things quietly affected me very directly. During the second half of the 1960s, I was more and more at odds with the official position of DOB. (134)

Willer was not alone in her disagreements with DOB, *The Ladder*'s editor Barbara Gittings felt similar tensions between her developing political ideologies and the official stance of DOB.

Gittings became the publication's editor in 1963; she hoped the magazine would be an outlet for her emergent, but increasingly militant political ideals. Upon assuming her position, she began making several changes to the magazine, the first of which was adding the subtitle *A Lesbian Review*. She explains her motivations: "Adding those words to the cover helped our readers gain a new sense of identity and strength. That subtitle said, very eloquently I thought, that the word *lesbian* was no longer unspeakable" (qtd. in Strietmatter 55).

Gittings complemented this affirmative identity with a new journalistic tone, as well. The magazine attempted to be more positive towards a wider group of lesbian identity presentation, as opposed to the older tendency to praise only those whose self-presentation meshed with the larger society. In fact, it was quite controversial when the magazine promoted women wearing pants in 1964 stating: "Pants are proper! This season you can wear pants absolutely anywhere – which means dandy pants for town and fancy pants for evening" (qtd. in Steitmatter 55).

Gittings also began publishing photos and interviews with "everyday" queer women about the experiences with their identity. This diverged greatly from the previous practice of only presenting the opinions of medical experts regarding homosexuality, no matter if they appeared inconsistent with the lesbian experience or even homophobic. These new directions did not sit well with the leaders of DOB, however, and the resulting clash led Gittings to leave the magazine in 1966. It continued under new direction for several years, but these types of conflicts and declining readership forced it to cease publication in 1972.

Other aspects of queer culture were changing right along with the publications. A number of new organizations were being started, such as the Homophile Action League, the North American Conference of Homophile Organizations, the Society for Individual Rights, and the Council on Religion and the Homosexual, to name only a few. The number of bars and clubs increased markedly, as well, providing queer individuals with new social outlets.

Of these venues, The Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village became the stage for what many historians now consider the most significant event in the history of queer politics. On June 28, 1969 it made its mark upon the historical landscape when a group of queer patrons sparked a

riot after they refused to be taken into custody during one of the bar's routine police raids. Stonewall Inn patron Rey "Sylvia Lee" Rivera describes the scene:

> I don't know if it was the customers or if it was the police, but that night everything just clicked. Everybody was like, "Why the fuck are we doing all this for? Why should we be chastised? Why do we have to pay the Mafia[ix] all this kind of money to drink in a lousy fuckin' bar? And still be harassed by the police?" It didn't make any sense. The people at them bars, especially at the Stonewall, were involved in other movements. And everybody was like, "We got to do our thing. We're gonna go for it!". (191)

The Stonewall Rebellion, as it became known, continued for several days and was followed a few days later by a large demonstration. Additionally, those who intended to keep the momentum rolling quickly formed new organizations (most notably of these was The Gay Liberation Front) and staged numerous other demonstrations over the following months, such as a march at Washington Square consisting of several hundred gays and lesbians (Miller 368). Another participant in the rebellion, Morty Manford, describes the time: "For me, there was a slight lancing of the festering wound of anger that had been building for so long over this kind of unfair harassment" (201). What became known as the gay liberation movement had begun.

Over the course of the next year and throughout the following decade, the gay liberation movement would radically change life for queer individuals through numerous developments. The movement received mainstream press (and one with a more sympathetic viewpoint) for the first time in publications such as *Time* magazine and *The San Francisco Chronicle* (Faderman 196). Organizations such as the National Institute of Mental Health issued statements urging lawmakers to see homosexual activity as a private matter and to legalize homosexual acts

(Faderman 196). And by 1973, The American Psychiatric Association dropped homosexuality from its list of mental disorders (Witt, Thomas, and Marcus 225).

The movement would also finally determine and communicate distinct political tactics, and while these tactics may have existed within the consciousness of queer individuals before this historical moment, they were never this universally revered as having political potential. The first of these was an emphasis on visibility politics. Miller explains, "[a] proud (and often public) declaration of one's homosexuality became the first act of joining the new movement…" (369). As *Village Voice* writer Jill Johnston wrote, "COME OUT. Come out of hiding. Identify yourself. Make it clear. Celebrate your sexuality" (qtd. in Miller 369). Once someone had "come out," it also became important to promote a sense of pride over this newly declared identity. With this in mind, prominent activist Frank Kameny, inspired by the civil rights slogan "Black is Beautiful," coined "Gay is Good" (Gross and Woods 545).

Community-building became another political emphasis for the new movement. This not only established a system of support for the numbers of queer folks who were now declaring their gay pride, but also helped distinguish the queer community from the larger dominant culture. "In the view of the early liberationists, new community institutions and a distinctive gay culture were what was required," states Miller (371). This quote also illustrates that the establishment of queer-centered institutions, such as support groups, community centers, publications, and social venues, was viewed as an integral component to the continued growth of LGBT culture and communities.

Despite this sudden surge of political activity and the intended inclusion of both gay and lesbian issues by the decade's prominent organizations, such as the GLF, queer women still often found themselves and their issues excluded from gay liberation politics. This oversight became

more and more agitating as their feminist consciousness developed through the women's

movement. However, Miller points out that "the feminist movement itself had not been exactly

congenial to lesbianism ever since feminist pioneer Betty Friedan had warned in the early days

of the movement of a 'lavender menace'" (374). Friedan's comments in 1969, which were

motivated by the movement's desire to become palatable to mainstream society by distancing

itself from the predominant stereotype of the man-hating lesbian, sparked heated debates that

lasted throughout the 1970s and even into the following decades. The simultaneous development

of queer and feminist movements and the discrimination queer women felt within each propelled

many to develop organizations that were more distinctly their own. The emergence of this

specific lesbian movement, which became known as lesbian feminism, is something D'Emilio

argues as a "critical feature of the post-Stonewall era" ("Gay Politics…" 466).

 In 1970, Friedan's comment was countered by one of the first groups of lesbian

feminists. This group, headed by author Rita Mae Brown, hijacked a meeting during the second

annual Congress to Unite Women. After surprising the meeting by extinguishing the room's

lights for several seconds, a group of women encompassed the perimeter of the room wearing

shirts upon which the phrase "The Lavender Menace" was emblazoned. They proceeded to hold

a forum discussion with the women present, after which a resolution was passed regarding the

homophobia The Lavender Menace felt they faced within the larger feminist movement (Miller

374).

    Later that same year, after renaming themselves Radicalesbians, several of the women

involved in the Lavender Menace action (including Brown) issued the article "Woman-Identified

Woman." In this piece, the group defined lesbians as "the rage of all women condensed to the

point of explosion" (17). They also drew connections between sexuality and a heteropatriarchal

society. In the most controversial of their feminist movement critiques, they argued that women

involved in heterosexual relationships cannot fully remove themselves from the bonds of

patriarchy because heterosexual relationships help maintain patriarchy's power. They stated:

> Our energies must flow toward our sisters not backwards towards our oppressors.
> As long as women's liberation tries to free women without facing the basic
> heterosexual structure that binds us in one-to-one relationship with a man…. This
> obviously splits our energies and commitments, leaving us unable to be
> committed to the construction of the new patterns which will liberate us. (21)

This article started a wave of published critiques regarding the internalized homophobia of the

women's movement. Included in this group are: The Revolutionary Lesbians' "How to Stop

Choking to Death or: Separatism" (1971), Charlotte Bunch's "Lesbians in Revolt" (1972), Jill

Johnston's book *Lesbian Nation* (1973), and Ginny Berson's "The Furies" (1972), which

actually served as a statement of purpose for the prominent living collective and publication of

the same name.

These texts all worked from the ideas developed by the Radicalesbians, but they also took

them further by advocating separatism and arguing that lesbianism was not only a sexual

identity, but also a political choice. In other words, they believed that heterosexual women could

and should leave their male relationships in order to best benefit the women's movement and that

they should live separatist lives within alternative communities established with other lesbian

feminists. Faderman explains: "they wanted to create entirely new institutions and to shape a

women's culture that would embody all the best values that were not male. …These women

believed that such a culture could only be formed if women stepped away from the hopelessly

corrupt patriarchy and established their own self-sufficient, 'woman-identified-women' communities into which male values could not infiltrate" (216-17).

In addition to the tensions lesbian feminists created with heterosexual women in the feminist movement, they also found that not all queer women wished to embrace their new movement. Older and often working-class women who had come into their identities through the 1950s bar culture of butch and femme, argued that this new political movement exhibited disrespect for and challenges to their identities. The new lesbian feminist movement, which was largely comprised of young middle-class college-educated women, critiqued the butch and femme identity presentations as an outdated imitation of heteropatriarchal structures. However, many of those who practiced them argued they were intrinsic to their lesbian identity and that younger women did not understand or respect the critical role butch and femme presentations had played in establishing membership in early lesbian subculture. As a result, many of these older and often working-class women became resentful of the younger generation that seemed to disrespect others and flaunt their own sexualities (Faderman 169, 186-7).

Regardless of these disputes, lesbian feminism became one of the most dominant and public voices of the feminist movement during the 1970s. This may have been due to its popularity, but was also likely a result of its radical and militant activism. Its extremism tended to garner the attention of the media, and therefore became the face most often associated with feminism in the public consciousness.

It cannot be denied, however, that they also had a positive impact. After all, they were strong enough to challenge not one, but two existing social movements in order to carve out a space for themselves. And as Faderman points out, their very publicly militant politics, while startling to much of mainstream society, actually helped mainstream activists achieve their goals.

She explains: "They played a kind of 'bad cop' in a social drama, which then permitted more moderate activist lesbians to play the 'good cop.' …Functioning as foils, lesbian-feminists made agitation for simple justice (which was considered outrageously radical in other times) seem tame" (245). Much like what Malcolm X offered to the politics of Dr. Martin Luther King during the Civil Rights Movement, lesbian feminists made more moderate feminist and queer activists suddenly appear completely reasonable.

In terms of popular culture, their separatist politics enabled lesbian feminists to radically alter the way in which queer women considered the popular culture they consumed. By advocating a separation from the larger society, they forced themselves to produce much of what they needed or wanted from within the movement group. As a result, they created their own culture, which included a wealth of new popular culture and institutions. This included, but was by no means limited to: art, music, literature, bookstores, film, comics, festivals, restaurants, and food co-ops. Of these, Faderman labels music as "perhaps the most effective of all the enterprises undertaken by the lesbian-feminist community in the 1970s" (220).

Women's music[x] was a term developed to refer to music that was being produced by, for, and about women's and largely lesbian women's experiences during this time period. "The term 'women's music' was an organically developing term, which enabled people to identify that this music spoke about women and to women…It was really speaking from a woman's point of view about women's lives" explains Olivia Records founder Judy Dlugacz (qtd. in Gaar 113). For the most part, the music labeled as women's music fell within the genre of folk music. Folk music's history of being associated with not only community-building, but also leftist politics, made it an attractive choice for the feminist movement. However, as women's music expanded, it began to encompass other styles as well, such as rock, blues, and soul.

In addition to creating the music itself, the women's music movement seized upon the means of distribution through establishing record labels, (Olivia Records, Women's Wax Works, and Redwood Records), music festivals (National Women's Music Festival and the Michigan Women's Music Festival), coffee houses, and bookstores. This was both a political statement of independence and a matter of practicality when dealing with a mainstream music industry that was not interested in what women were doing in music. Dlugacz explains, "I think small business is the way to go, because trying to advance in the corporate world—there's just no way they're ever going to let you play with the big boys" (qtd. in Gaar 113).

The first woman to perform as a self-declared lesbian feminist and write lesbian-themed music was Maxine Feldman (Gardner 377). Her song "Angry Atthis" spoke to queer women like no song had before when as she sang the words:

> I hate not being able
>
> To hold my lover's hand
>
> 'Cept under some dimly lit table
>
> Afraid of being who I am
>
> I hate to tell lies
>
> Live in the shadow of fear
>
> We've run half our lives
>
> From the damn word queer. (qtd. in Morgan 10)

In a 1972 review of her work in the popular lesbian publication *Lesbian Tide*, Stacey Morgan excitedly proclaimed her as follows: "She's a sister. A gay sister. And an openly gay sister. Our very own version of showbusiness…" (10).

Feldman was followed by numerous other women, such as Alix Dobkin and her band Lavender Jane, Meg Christian, Holly Near, and the band Sweet Honey in the Rock. The latter of these was one of the few artists of color within this movement, a point to which I will return shortly. Cris Williamson was also one of the most prominent artists of the genre. In fact, she recorded the largest selling women's music album of the time, *The Changer and the Changed*, which sold over a quarter of a million copies (Garr 115). *Lesbian Tide* writer Susan Kuhner described Williamson's music: "There's nothing much political about her music except what is inherent in its woman-loving-woman lyrics. That's enough for some of us at all times, enough for all of us sometimes" (9). This quote indicates the excitement that queer women felt over being able to hear music that reflected their experiences; and despite the fact that this music was not always heavily political in other ways, it was often simply enough that it included lesbian content.

Performer Jamie Anderson describes a similar reaction in her first experience with women's music: "I thought, 'Whoa, these women are singing about my life.' I had never heard lesbian music before, and I was just blown away" (383). And writer Judith Niemi describes her experiences with music in a 1976 review of a women's music festival: "The singers spoke for us. …I had a permanent relationship with these singers who were celebrating who we are and asking tough political questions" (10).

For many women, the aspect of community-building through the music was just as important as the visibility and voice it provided. Faderman quotes one woman's reaction to being at a women's-only space concert: "To be in Zellerbach Hall and know that everyone in that room would be spending the night with her female lover! And the variety of people! There was no way you could stereotype who lesbians were. It made me really feel for the first time that

there were millions of us in this world. It was powerful" (223). Musician Sue Fink describes a similar impact: "in women's music we have basically an audience of women, each one wanting to be at an event where women somehow are performing and speaking to *her*, and she gets to be in her community and have a night out in the company of other women…" (qtd. in Carson, Lewis, and Shaw 98).

Women's music provided several things for queer women of the 1970s, many of whom were involved in the lesbian feminist movement. The self-production aspect, which reflected the separatist politics of lesbian feminism, provided women with a sense of empowerment. Meanwhile, others enjoyed the sense of recognition, visibility, and representation they were finally feeling through the music. And finally, for some women, the concerts and festivals that provided safety and community-building experiences were the important component. "Through the self-affirming lyrics women were made to feel good about love between women. The music reached out even to lesbians who were not a part of the radical community, communicating to them that they were not alone and that lesbianism was a noble choice," sums up Faderman (222-3).

Women's music has also left a lasting legacy on today's music. As the 1970s became the 1980s, some women who had been a part of women's music moved into the mainstream. Many did so with the hope of reaching a larger audience; however, some did so out of practicality, since they were making barely enough money to survive on women's music record labels. The women's music movement also illustrated to mainstream record labels that there was profit to be made from and an audience for female performers. As a result, the 1980s saw artists such as Tracy Chapman, Melissa Etheridge, Suzanne Vega, k.d. lang, Madonna, Cyndi Lauper, and Annie Lennox enter the scene. Additionally, older artists were repackaged and sold anew during

the 1980s. These included: Tina Turner, Aretha Franklin, Patti LaBelle, and Cher. Arguably never before had there been this many (or this diversity of styles from) female performers within mainstream music. Additionally, the women's movement of the 1970s most likely helped inspire and pave the way for later independent women's music, such as Riot Grrrl music, Ani Difranco, Bitch (Bitch and Animal), Alix Olsen, Lesbians on Ecstasy, Le Tigre, and Toshi Reagon (daughter of Bernice Johnson Reagon of Sweet Honey in the Rock). Many of these women, while touring widely and now aiming towards a multi-gendered audience, still perform at women's music festivals and create music with queer themes.

<div align="center">The 1980s and 1990s: Backlash, AIDS, and Renewal</div>

Whereas the 1960s and 1970s had been filled with progressive change and hope, the 1980s once again shifted drastically back to an era of conservative politics. This time was not quite as oppressive to homosexuals as McCarthy's 1950s, but it still became a difficult period for all marginalized people and their social movements.

Simultaneously, the women's movement, which remained where most queer women were politically active, began to face its own internal challenges. The continual march towards a more radical politics had started to wear down some members, who were angered by the tendency of more zealous lesbian feminists to critique those who were less vigilant in their politics. Additionally, other groups of women argued that the feminist movement had become too centered upon the issues of middle-class, white women and did not validate the diversity of women who faced oppressions. Faderman bleakly summarizes the struggles:

> Old lesbian-feminists as well as teenage lesbian-feminists complained that they were being patronized; lesbian separatists as well as lesbians of color complained that they were being compromised; radical socialist lesbian-feminists complained

> that they were being co-opted; fat lesbian-feminists, working class lesbian-
>
> feminists, disabled lesbian-feminists, all complained that they were being
>
> oppressed by their sister lesbian-feminists. (236)

The most severe of these conflicts came at the hands of women of color who leveled scathing accusations of racism within the larger feminist movement.

In 1981, Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua produced an anthology of writing by women of color. This anthology, called *This Bridge Called My Back*, not only critiqued other leftist groups, but also brought to light the specific issues that women faced when their multiple identities (gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, etc.) all intertwined. The introduction states:

> We want to express to all women – especially to white middle-class women – the
>
> experiences which divide us as feminists; we want to examine incidents of
>
> intolerance, prejudice and denial of differences within the feminist movement.
>
> We intend to explore the causes and sources of, and solutions to these divisions.
>
> We want to create a definition that expands what "feminist" means to us. (xxiii)

While other women had made critiques of feminism regarding exclusion and racism long before this period, the changing climate facing feminism allowed for the anthology to finally garner the attention women of color had long desired. It was followed by other essential texts by Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, Angela Davis, bell hooks, and Patricia Hill Collins, among many others, and set the stage for Third Wave Feminism.

In an article originally published in *MS* magazine, Rebecca Walker responded to the Clarence Thomas Supreme Court confirmation by calling for a Third Wave of the women's movement (Walker). Third Wave Feminism has since been articulated by numerous writers and speakers as being a movement that hopes to incorporate multiple viewpoints, identities,

approaches, and ideologies. In the anthology *Catching a Wave*, Rory Dicker and Alison

Piepmeier explain that "[t]he third wave thus recognizes that the differences among women are

as substantial as the differences between women and men: the category of 'woman' is no longer

the only identity worth examining" (10).

At the same time that ideologies were shifting within the feminist movement, politics

were also changing in the gay liberation movement. Many gay men had actually moved away

from political involvement in the 1980s; however, the enormous death toll wrought by AIDS

brought them back. And, while some separatist lesbians maintained that this was not their

problem, they were in the minority, and many queer women came to the aid of gay men by

raising money, donating blood, and creating awareness (Faderman 293). These somber times in

combination with the shift away from separatism in the women's movement allowed gay men

and lesbians to come together politically in ways they had not for several years. This new sense

of unity was dramatically evident in the 1987 National March on Washington for Gay and

Lesbian Rights, which included 650,000 participants. It was not only the largest gay and lesbian

rights demonstration up to that date, but also the largest march by any social movement group,

including the Civil Rights and anti-war demonstrations of the 1960s (Faderman 295).

The events and coalitions formed during the 1980s also energized gay liberation politics

in new ways. In 1990, the organization Queer Nation, which developed out of a chapter of the

AIDS activist group ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), was formed in New York.

Queer Nation was a radical activist group that sought to raise awareness towards queer men and

women's politics. Much of their activist tactics centered on civil disobedience and media

reclamation methods, such as kiss-ins, confrontational T-shirt slogans, and the organizing of

"Pink Panther" groups (taken from the Black Panthers) (Faderman 301). One of their most

lasting legacies was their attempt to reclaim the term *queer*, which was argued to be a superior descriptor since it denoted persons of multiple different sexual and gender based differences. It has since gone on to be a term of strength and solidarity for much of the GLBT community. George Haggerty explains, "[q]ueer has become a watchword of today because of its explicit statement of identity politics that is at once a challenge to the boundaries of the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy and is, at the same time, representative of a move toward greater inclusiveness of all nonheterosexual persons and categories" (724).

It is therefore somewhat ironic that by the mid-1990s Queer Nation was drawing controversy from the larger gay community and was accused of elitism, sexism, and racism amongst their members and within their practices. In fact Faderman's text, published in 1991, already describes the issues facing Queer Nation:

> Although Queer Nation realizes that it is to the organization's benefit to involve women and people of color, they have already been accused by members of both groups as having too narrow a focus, one that appeals primarily to white, middle class gay men and is oblivious to the special problems of lesbians, the working class, and racial and ethnic minorities…The divisiveness that plagued militant groups in the preceding decades may be repeated in the 1990s. (301)

By 1995, only the Seattle chapter of Queer Nation remained and one year later it closed its doors as well (Stein 480).

The Lesbian Avengers is another group that employs similar direct action tactics, but focuses these specifically upon the issues of queer women. The group was started in 1993 by Sarah Schulman, Ana Maria Simo, Anne-Christine D'Adesky, Maxine Wolfe, Marie Honan, and Ann MaGuire, all of whom were activists involved in a variety of other movements, including

ACT UP. The group was initially based in New York, but quickly expanded to include chapters in other major cities, as well.

Hoping to inspire women to join their group or start their own, they published *The Lesbian Avenger Handbook: A Handy Guide to Homemade Revolution*. In this text, they describe their organization as "a direct action group using grass-roots activism to fight for lesbian survival and visibility. Our purpose is to identify and promote lesbian issues and perspectives while empowering lesbians to become experienced organizers who can participate in political rebellion. Learning skills and strategizing together are at the core of our existence" (Shulman 290). One of their most well-known actions included the organizing of the first Dyke March on Washington, which still occurs annually. Chapters even remain today in several large cities, but are often loosely organized with sporadic meetings and no larger national organization. While they still focus upon queer women's issues, they have also found it important to emphasize their desire to "work with and for women of all colors and classes; bisexual, heterosexual, and queer women; and trans and intersex folks" (Lesbian Avengers par. 1).

Despite what may have come to pass for any of these queer activist groups, it is clear that things were changing for queer individuals and their popular culture in the 1990s. While they did still face high levels of discrimination in many regards, other signs pointed to a much more inclusive culture. In the case of women, they were appearing as out public figures, receiving positive mainstream press coverage, and even turning up within the popular culture of mainstream society. Of course, often these depictions were still problematic, but they had come a long way from the days of *The Well of Loneliness*. Additionally, queer women were continuing to produce their own popular culture including, but not limited to publications,

literature, music, comic books, and art. However, one of the more significant popular culture

venues of the 1990s for queer women and queer culture as a whole was film.

Homosexuality had been depicted in film since its beginning; however, it was not always

explicitly named. Instead, it was depicted through coded behaviors and storylines that audiences

were able to interpret as insinuating aberrant sexualities. For example, there was the comical

"sissy" male character, the plotline of mistaken sexual identity, or the evil, asexual woman (Witt,

Thomas, and Marcus 73). So, while there have virtually always been images available of

queerness, they have often been obscured and/or negative.

It is more difficult to pinpoint any particular moment in which queer individuals began to

produce their own images. Since throughout much of film's history (and sometimes even still

today) queer men and women were fearful to declare their homosexuality, we cannot be certain

of a filmmaker's orientation. On the other hand, there are certainly historical moments in which

we do see publically queer individuals taking representation into their own hands. For example,

there are the hundreds of queer films produced during the underground film boom of the 1940s-

1960s (Dyer *Now You See It* 102). In the 1960s and 1970s, there was also a significant amount

of experimental film produced by lesbian feminists and cultural feminists (Dyer *Now You See It*

175).

However, in the 1980s and 1990s, there was a striking shift in queer-themed and queer-

produced film. As Richard Dyer remarks, "[s]ince 1980 there has been an enormous growth in

the amount of lesbian/gay films…" (*Now You See It* 2). In addition to a numerical increase in

films, more queer cinema began to be produced by actual film companies. While these were

generally limited to the independent variety, as opposed to large Hollywood film corporations,

they still marked a significant shift from the alternative, underground, and experimental films of

earlier decades. Among the more successful of these are: *Desert Hearts* (1985), *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1986), and *Parting Glances* (1986) (Witt, Thomas, and Marcus 76). Mainstream Hollywood cinema of the 1980s may have continued to depict queer folks negatively and stereotypically (or ignore them completely) through films like *Cruising*, *Windows*, and *American Gigolo* (all 1980), but the independent film industry was illustrating that the queer community possessed a growing interest in film as a venue for political voice, if not social change.

What began in the 1980s picked up significantly in the 1990s, when queer film continued to expand, if not flourish. This trend was identified by B. Ruby Rich in an article for *Sight and Sound* magazine, in which she describes her experiences witnessing the sudden surge of queer-themed films at various film festivals. In the now immortalized essay, she labels this moment as New Queer Cinema. She attempted to define what she saw as specific to this group of films:

> Of course, the new queer films and videos aren't all the same, and don't share a single aesthetic vocabulary or strategy or concern. Yet they are nonetheless united by a common style. Call it 'Homo Pomo': there are traces in all of them of appropriation and pastiche, irony, as well as a reworking of history with social constructionism very much in mind. …Above all, they're full of pleasure. They're here, they're queer, get hip to them. (16)

Included in New Queer Cinema were films such as *Swoon* (1991), *Poison* (1991), *Paris is Burning* (1990), *Tongues Untied* (1990), *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), *The Hours and Times* (1991), and *Khush* (1991). However by the mid to late 1990s, New Queer Cinema is argued to have lost its radical edge and shifted towards a niche market with the saturation of films that included *Bar Girls* (1994), *Jeffrey* (1995), *The Incredibly True Adventures of Two Girls in Love* (1995), *When Night is Falling* (1995), and *High Art* (1998), among many others (Aaron 3-8). By

this point in time, it appeared as if New Queer Cinema had become, at least for some filmmakers, about selling queer identities and content to a viable niche market, as well as representing queer social or political issues.

In a recent anthology on New Queer Cinema, Michele Aaron attempted to summarize not only Rich's findings, but the immense amount of discussions that have surrounded the genre since her article. She defines New Queer Cinema as "the name given to a wave of queer films that gained critical acclaim on the festival circuit in the early 1990s. …No longer burdened by the approval-seeking sackcloth of positive imagery, or the relative obscurity of marginal production, films could be both radical and popular, stylish and economically viable" (3). She follows this definition by describing what she sees as the commonalities in these films. Number one on her list is that they "give voice to the marginalized not simply in terms of focusing on the lesbian and gay community, but on the sub-groups contained within it" (3-4).

While scholars have since argued at length over the impact and value of New Queer Cinema, I contend that it is Aaron's above point that is critical. New Queer Cinema, like many popular culture forms before it, gave voice to queer folks in a new and exciting way. Whether or not all its associated films had radical political content is irrelevant when considering that they allowed their queer filmmakers to speak in ways previously unavailable. And it is their stories marking the cultural landscape that leave it forever changed. Aaron later confirms this by stating that "there is evidence to suggest that [New Queer Cinema] triggered significant cultural and critical (and small-p political) gains. Its real impact, and value, are not to be measured by the quantity or quirkiness of potential members, but by the queerer culture it ushered in. As Rich asked of [New Queer Cinema] ten years on: 'Did it disappear, or is it everywhere?'"

Just as New Queer Cinema most likely required the radical visibility politics of ACT-UP and Queer Nation in order to exist, the success of New Queer Cinema has undeniably made possible what has followed it within the last ten years. In other words, without New Queer Cinema's success, television series and films, such as *Queer as Folk*, *Noah's Arc*, *Ellen, Will and Grace, Brokeback Mountain*, *Imagine Me and You,* and even *The L Word* may not have ever come to pass.

Looking Towards Today

While there certainly has been both movement and popular culture activity since the 1990s, it is at this point difficult to identify large themes. More historical distance is needed in order to highlight what has happened "in the 2000s." However, there are some things that can and should be mentioned. First of all, there has never been a political moment in which it was so easy to be visibly queer. And while it is impossible to know for sure, it is likely that most queer folks are out at least to some degree. Many homosexuals have also continued to label themselves together under the once-derogatory word *queer*, preferring its encompassing spirit to other terminology. Since transgender folks have also begun to align themselves with the queer movement, inclusivity has become especially important (although sometimes also controversial) to the movement. As for queer women, they continue to find themselves at the intersection of multiple movements; however, the greater emphasis on overall human rights and cross-movement organizing has lessened the strain of this somewhat.

As for popular culture, nearly all of the types discussed now flourish. Queer individuals consume novels, magazines, newspapers, films, art, comics, festivals, music, and even sporting events and travel packages, among other things, all of which are produced both by queer communities and the larger mainstream culture. Their increased inclusion within mainstream

culture has also enabled queer folks to be involved for the first time in an emerging form of popular culture, as opposed to having to play "catch up," for the first time. For example, new media and the Internet have become an unprecedented space for culture creation and interaction. An openness regarding sexuality has allowed queer people to move through virtual spaces, as well. In fact, as will be discussed later in this dissertation, often the Internet has actually made some social interactions easier.

This chapter has outlined by decade a history of U.S. queer women and the social or political climate that has been a part of their world. I have highlighted the social movements in which they have participated; the types of political action that have been utilized within those movements; and social aspects such as identity formation and community creation. But more importantly, in each of these tasks, I have also elaborated how popular culture has been an important reflection of or instrument within these events. This chapter has demonstrated queer folks' history from their initial emergence as a subcultural identity group all the way to their constitution as a new cultural consumer.

However, queer folks' newly discovered consumer identity has also forced them to take their place within the larger mainstream consumer market. This has often been a challenging and controversial process. Queers have become such a prominent facet in consumer society that they now have their own niche market, which is often referred to as the gay market. The immense degree, particularly within the contemporary cultural landscape, to which consumerism is linked with popular culture necessitates that this dissertation address the phenomenon of the gay market; this will be the focus of the next chapter.

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[i] In this case, I use the term *popular culture* to refer to any aspect or item of culture used, produced, or consumed by part or all of that culture and which is not necessarily essential to survival, but often considered to be part of leisure, entertainment, or community-building practices. In the case of queer communities, this refers to any aspect or item used, produced, or consumed within those respective communities. This may include, but is not limited to,

television shows, films, periodicals or publications, music, performances, literature, events (i.e. festivals, cruises), and places (i.e. bookstores, bars).

[ii] The history and featured popular culture of this chapter will largely be of a Western (and even more specifically, U.S.) context. This is certainly not an attempt at saying this is the only relevant history to *The L Word*'s creation or reception. However, it remains that *The L Word* is a U.S.-based television series. It is created within, about, and, at least originally, for a U.S. context. In terms of reception, while several of my respondents were from outside the U.S., most were still operating with a U.S. or Western perspective. Additionally, for the most part, the social movements that queer women are a part of have gained more ground within the West than most others; therefore, while some viewer's immediate history may not be Western, they are most likely aware of the history of Western queer women. Finally, I believe the study of how *The L Word* has disseminated through and been used within other Non-Western contexts is large enough for a whole other dissertation project, and is, therefore, not this project.

[iii] A historical note on terminology: *Lesbian* is used here because it is Faderman's terminology. As will be illustrated, women and men most likely would have referred to themselves as *invert*, which was the accepted term of the time, until around the 1930s. At this point, *gay* and *lesbian* became used, as did *homophile* in terms of a larger movement. This movement terminology then changed again after The Stonewall Rebellion when the movement became known as the Gay Liberation Movement. This was maintained until the early 1990s, when Queer Nation attempted to reclaim the word *queer*. Ever since, the movement and its participants are most often referred to as queer.

[iv] Lisa Ben is a pseudonym, which she chose because it rearranges the letters of *lesbian*.

[v] The number of copies of each issue varies depending upon sources researched. The figures within this sentence are collectively taken from Streitmatter's research; however, in Ben's own contribution to Marcus's *Making History*, she calculates the runs to be ten in number.

[vi] *Third sex* is a term widely used by sexologists for homosexuals at this time.

[vii] This was another term commonly used to refer to homosexuals during this time period.

[viii] Of this 7,000, *ONE* had the largest distribution at 5,000; *Mattacine Review* had 1,000; and *The Ladder* had around 700 readers (Streitmatter 28).

[ix] It was well-known that The Stonewall Inn was run by mafia money, as were many other gay and lesbian clubs. Because these individuals had few options available to them at this time, their social institutions were easy to exploit.

[x] Women's music is also sometimes referred to as *womyn*'s or *wimmin*'s music. These all refer to the same product, but the latter spellings highlight the separatist political practice of changing language to be more women-centered.

CHAPTER TWO: SEX(UALITY) SELLS!: THE GAY MARKET FROM ESTABLISHMENT
TO IMPLICATIONS

Scenario One: June 2007

A woman goes to her mailbox and discovers that she has received a new issue of the popular lesbian publication *Curve.* She opens the cover to find an advertisement that spreads over the first two glossy pages of her new magazine. It features a group of five people posing alongside a text box that offers the phrase: "pride is a reflection of who we are." The ad is not for a community center, a queer rights organization, or even a queer-centered event. Instead, it proudly features the logo of the billion dollar retail chain Macy's.

She continues to read the ad's remaining text, "It's our commitment to community, and respect for our diverse network of employees. It's the acknowledgment of each individual that makes us strong. It's how we encourage everyone to value themselves for exactly who they are." What Macy's means by diversity is also discernable to the woman through the ad. Of the five people pictured, two are male. One appears Asian and the other Black and both are well-groomed and sharply-dressed. She wonders if this is perhaps intended to signal the stereotypically fashionable gay male. She notices that the three women are all fairly light-skinned in appearance; however, they do range in age from perhaps their 30s to 50s and the somewhat masculine dress of one, she guesses, is intended to indicate the possibility of female queerness.

Scenario Two: June 2007

A lesbian couple from a small Midwest town arrives at the 2007 Motor City Pride in Detroit, MI. Since there is not a large queer community in their home town, they are excited by the prospect of spending the day among other queer folks. They pay their admission and enter

the main thoroughfare where they are immediately bombarded by images and logos from a variety of companies. Making their way down the street, they pass booths for several local organizations. But mixed among these, they find representatives from Fifth Third Bank, Verizon Wireless, Samesexloans.com, Whole Foods, and a major Detroit radio station.

The couple turns the corner to find a marketplace filled with goods for sale. As they shop, they encounter queer-themed clothing, music, movies, art, and novelty items. The women wonder aloud as to whether there is any item left in existence that has never been crafted with a rainbow emblazoned upon it. They snicker together as they pass a booth comprised entirely of these types of items. Reaching the last booth, one of them suggests that they get something to drink. So, they make their way over to beverage tent that is covered in a repeating pattern of logos for Bud Light, Stoli Vodka, and Glaceau Vitamin Water.

Scenario Three: October 2007:

A gay man is watching television, and he flips on his local FOX station, which is in a commercial break. An ad comes on that features an attractive man, who apparently has just purchased a new pair of Levi's Jeans. This man begins to put them on, but when he reaches down to pull them up, they appear stuck. He continues to tug, and when they finally budge, he has apparently exerted enough force to cause the street below to come crashing up through his apartment floor. He looks over to discover that part of this street scene is a beautiful blonde woman in a phone booth. They smile at each other, he lowers his pants back down, and she recedes back through the floor. The camera returns to his expression, which now changes to a sly smile. He pulls up his "magic" pants once again, but this time he has used such force that he obliterates his apartment and finds himself on the street. The blond is still there. He buttons his

new jeans. They exchange glances once more and walk off down the street together as the

Levi's logo pops up to end the commercial.

The man watching this ad thinks nothing of it and decides to change the channel in hopes

of finding something else. He flips to the queer-themed network LOGO, which is also in a

commercial break. He decides to give the station a moment to interest him, and what should

come on next, but the same Levi's ad? Or is it? It features the same attractive man in the white

t-shirt. He again pulls up the powerful jeans, and the same street from below comes crashing

into his apartment. But this time when he looks over at the phone booth, he finds a gorgeous

blonde male, for whom he again promptly devastates his apartment so they may proceed down

the street together.

<div align="center">-----</div>

Each of these scenarios exemplifies the current entanglement of queer identity and the

economic marketplace. In fact, this relationship has become so notable it has been assigned its

own name: the gay[i] market. This term was initially coined by marketing research firms, who in

the late 1980s/early 1990s, became increasingly invested in niche marketing as a method to

expand client sales. Queer folks became one of the many "new" target markets, and much

money and effort was spent on the research and development of their allegedly profitable group

(Chasin 30).

Whereas the last chapter constructed a historical narrative of queer women's politics and

popular culture to be a foundation of comparison, this chapter intends to focus on the particular

and fairly recent trend of the gay market. I believe its complex connections to and influences

upon queer politics make it worthy of a more exclusive analysis than could be provided in the

previous chapter. Furthermore, *The L Word* is television, and television is a commodity (albeit a complex one) participating within many aspects of the gay market.

This chapter will begin with a brief history of the gay market, which will include explanations of how queer identity has been historically associated with economic factors. This will then be followed by a review of the major literature addressing the gay market topic. Compared to many other subjects, there are relatively few scholars dealing with the gay market; however, this does not mean I intend to meticulously dissect each text. Instead I will address large themes and arguments within each, illustrating how they advance as a body of work. The chapter will then conclude with a consideration of how the specific cultural productions of television and *The L Word* function within the gay market. As part of this, I will highlight several concepts from earlier in the chapter that are particularly useful with regards to the following chapters' analyses of audience interactions with *The L Word*.

<center>Bringing Queerness to the Marketplace</center>

The gay market is by no means the first moment of connection between queerness and economics. In fact, queer communities have been entangled with economic forces since homosexuality emerged as an identity category at the turn of the twentieth century. Returning once again to the queer historians of the last chapter, several pointed to the late 19th century/early 20th century shift from an agricultural, family-centered economic system to one based upon free market labor as opening up the possibility for queer community formation. Perhaps John D'Emilio presents this idea most succinctly when stating, "Only when individuals began to make their living through wage labor, instead of as parts of an interdependent family unit, was it possible for homosexual desire to coalesce into a personal identity – an identity based on the

ability to remain outside the heterosexual family and to construct a personal life based on

attraction to one's own sex" ("Capitalism and Gay Identity" 51).

Lillian Faderman also finds significance in this economic shift for many women, who

were allowed to obtain educations and enter the workforce for the first time. This provided

women the occasion and space to create previously unavailable connections with other women

and the means of sustaining an existence outside of traditional heterosexual pairings or familial

structures. In fact, many middle- and upper-class women were even unable to settle into

traditional familial roles after college and found female companionship much more logical.

Faderman explains:

> Undoubtedly some of them [female college graduates] never married because
>
> most men in that era feared educated females and would not dare take them as
>
> wives. …Many of those women paired with other female college graduates to
>
> establish same-sex households... . Such same-sex relationships were far more
>
> preferable and even practical for many women than any form of heterosexuality
>
> would have been. (15)

In other words, it was the entrance of women into the public sphere brought on by economic

shifts that enabled women to form early queer female identities and communities.

Included in the economic changes of the early twentieth century was the mass production

of goods, which advanced hand in hand with the advertising industry. Companies could produce

a wide range of products much quicker than ever before; however, they also needed an ever-

increasing customer base to continue to grow, and advertising answered this challenge. What's

more, advertising was accomplishing its task in new and exciting ways through innovations in

photography (Chasin 102). In *Selling Out: The Gay and Lesbian Movement Goes to Market*,

Alexandra Chasin explains, "Whereas nineteenth-century advertisements had been informational, almost exclusively composed of words, the rise of photography and then cinematographic technologies enabled a shift to images in the early twentieth century" (103).

Interestingly, this new emphasis on visuality emerged almost simultaneously with an identity group whose existence was strongly obscured. While the Western world became enamored with the new technologies of the *visible*, such as advertising, photography, and cinema, queer individuals found it increasingly necessary to make their own identities *invisible*. The modern economic system may have produced the ability for homosexuals to establish their identities as distinct from the rest of society; however, it did not intend to recognize them as participants in its new routine of mass consumption.

As a result, queer folks were forced to create their own commodity culture, and as the last chapter addressed, they often did so through items of popular culture, such as magazines, novels, music, and bars. This practice once again linked queer identity with the economy as queerness became something one illustrated through practices of consumption. Chasin concurs:

> It has been demonstrated that a sense of community is established through
> participation in institutions, so that gay community, in particular, or the belief in
> it, would be established through participation in gay institutions. For decades that
> participation took such forms as attending house parties, drag balls, bathhouses, or
> bars, buying physique magazines, and/or reading certain literature… . Note that
> all of these acts constitute or imply some form of consumption; each one is
> imbricated in consumer culture. (23)

The connection of identity and consumption was then enhanced in later decades of the twentieth century when companies began to market specifically to LGBT consumers.

This trend was largely facilitated by a number of market research firms who reported that there was a significant amount of money to be made from the gay community. Firms such as Overlooked Opinions and Simmons reported that there were over 20-25 million gay consumers, who earned significantly more than their heterosexual counterparts (Sender 39). In addition to numbers and income levels, reports indicated that queer folks were more educated, rabid spenders (with higher than average spending money since they often didn't have children), and highly brand loyal (Penaloza 25-6). In the mid-1990s, these reports were largely disputed by other firms that offered much more conservative figures; however, by this time, companies were already heavily invested in selling to this apparent "dream market" (Penaloza 10).

The most common medium used by any company to reach consumers has been advertising, and this has been no different with queer consumers. However, while companies have been hungry to obtain queer customers, they have also feared losing straight customers that might be offended by a company's courting of LGBT communities. As a result, advertising has employed several approaches that range in their level of conspicuousness regarding homosexuality.

The first and least visible use of sexuality is to create ambiguous ads that cater to both gay and straight viewers. One of the first companies to employ this approach was Calvin Klein, whose series of ads in the 1990s featuring Marky Mark (Mark Wahlberg) have become a classic example. Grant Lukenbill argues that these ads intended to sell male underwear to two main individuals: the girlfriends of straight men, who actually account for a significant portion of male underwear sales, and gay men (16). While it is possible that Calvin Klein may have hoped to sell underwear to straight men that fantasized about being as young and popular as Wahlberg, Lukenbill feels it is highly unlikely that they intended to attract heterosexual men with his

sculpted physique (16). New York advertising design consultant Patrick Lehman, who worked

for Calvin Klein at the time of the campaign confirms the ambiguous nature of the ads: "[Marky

Mark] was a perfect universal object of desire. He was a fantasy for many gay men because he

presented the unattainable man (being straight), yet for women he was young and cuddly; the

adorable boylike man you want to hug" (qtd. in Lukenbill 17). In other words, these ads,

through their veiled approach, attempted to sell underwear to both gay and straight customers,

while maintaining the latter's ignorance to the former.

Companies have also created ads that were aimed directly at queer individuals. These

sometimes, but not always, include explicitly queer content. Advertisers can avoid alienating

straight customers by presenting these ads exclusively through queer media. For example,

companies have created ads for direct mailings (catalogs, flyers), queer publications, queer

events, and more recently, queer television networks or Internet sites. Both the Levi's Jeans and

Macy's advertisements described at the beginning of this chapter are examples of this approach.

One contains specifically queer content and the other is more ambiguous, but both attempt to

reach an exclusively queer audience by advertising within media outlets specifically aimed at an

LGBT demographic.

As the gay market evolved and companies began to realize that they were not actually

experiencing the expected backlash from straight consumers for attempting to attract a queer

demographic, their marketing became more aggressive, and two new approaches became

prolific. First, corporations began to lend sponsorship to LGBT events and/or donate money to

queer causes. An obvious example of this is the multitude of ways that companies have become

involved in Gay Pride or queer charity events.

Sponsorship occurred almost simultaneously with what can be called the commodification of queerness, which refers to what happens when companies create products that are specifically aimed at a queer consumer. Businesses were no longer exclusively interested in selling their existing goods, but were also hoping to create products and services specific to the LGBT customer. The wealth of rainbow-colored goods available at events and through retailers is the most obvious example of this; however, more recently this has also included gay travel companies, same-sex financial planning, and queer medical/health centers.

Of course, it would be absurd to envision the gay market as a one-way street where queer consumers are ignorant dupes simply waiting to have products and services sold to them. As Chasin states, "capitalism contributes to the formation of individual identity, which in turn contributes to the formation of identity-based social movements. For the most part, identity-based protest movements focus on the rights of the individual, the expansion of which reforms the capitalist market as a site of representation and enfranchisement" (16). Reforming the market as a "site of representation and enfranchisement" has often made it a contested space where queer individuals have both tapped into its power and struggled with the consequences of corporate recognition.

For instance, marketing has brought the queer community a level of visibility unimaginable to older generations, and corporate sponsorship of events and fundraising causes have provided a much-needed influx of capital into these sites. Queer entrepreneurs that have produced goods and services for their respective communities for decades have also benefitted from the gay consumer boom by constructing themselves as competition for mainstream corporations. Furthermore, when companies have revealed themselves to be anti-queer in their employment or other wider corporate policies, the market also allows queer individuals to

communicate to businesses the unacceptability of these practices in a language corporations understand: purchasing power and boycotts.

On the other hand, some queer folks argue that these benefits have too often come at a price. Representations of gay, lesbian, and transgender individuals are often palatable and desexualized images at best, if not still caricaturized stereotypes. Corporate sponsorship, despite its advantages, sometimes dilutes political content and forces more radical activists to compromise their principles for wider visibility and more cash. And some small queer businesses have struggled with the wider range of choices available to their consumers, finding it difficult to compete with national corporations that provide similar goods and services.

In other words, the economic forces that first brought queer identity the means to form communities and then the acknowledgement of their consumer identity now often threatens their ability to maintain themselves as a radical social movement. These difficult questions regarding the benefits of a queer consumer identity and marketplace has facilitated a number of discourses on the part of scholars, to which I now turn.

The existing academic research available on the gay market generally falls into one of two categories: those that are grounded in a marketing perspective and those that are more interdisciplinary in focus, which I will refer to as a cultural studies perspective. Since the gay market is an economic trend, marketing scholars were the first to publish on the topic. In fact, the marketing texts span the years 1995-1999 and virtually cease after the first major cultural studies text is published in 2000.

It is difficult to speculate as to why this is the case. Maybe the interdisciplinarity of cultural studies consumed the ideas of the marketers in order to take them in new directions. Or a more practical reason might be at hand. Perhaps the excitement over the "newness" of the gay

market simply wore off and became a commonplace activity for businesses, and as a result, fewer marketing authors felt a need to publish on the topic. Whatever the reason, their publication moment appears brief and they are, therefore, confinable to four major texts: Grant Lukenbill's *Untold Millions: Secret Truths About Marketing to Gay and Lesbian Consumers* (1999), Daniel L. Wardlow's (Ed.) *Gays, Lesbians, and Consumer Behavior: Theory, Practice, and Research Issues in Marketing[ii]* (1996), Amy Gluckman and Betsy Reed's (Eds.) *Homo Economics: Capitalism, Community, and Lesbian and Gay Life* (1997), and Steven M. Kates' *Twenty Million New Customers: Understanding Gay Men's Consumer Behavior* (1998).

Each of these books hoped to become the definitive gay market guide, as they each amassed a wealth of information on marketing approaches and statistical information (it is also interesting to note that Lukenbill, Wardlow, and Gluckman and Reed each promote their respective works as the first to address the topic). For the most part, they all ultimately take a "how to" approach to the gay market. While some scholars may debate the viability of conceptualizing LGBT communities as a market segment or compare queer consumptive practices with other target market groups, the results of both of these lines of interrogation are then considered in terms of how they impact a company's ability to sell to queer customers.

Lukenbill's text was originally published in 1995 under the name *Untold Millions: Positioning your Business for the Gay and Lesbian Consumer Revolution*, which locates his work as the first in the field. The text's scope is quite wide, covering a range of history, terminology, and examples related to the gay market. In the more recent edition, he explains that there has always been a market payoff behind representing images of homosexuality. It simply used to be more profitable to present these individuals negatively, but can now be highly profitable for a company to court the dollars this demographic. He explains, "[u]ntold millions

of dollars in industry profits are now at stake for American businesses that position themselves to appeal to these highly specialized consumer market segments. By the turn of the century gross sales in products and services aimed directly at gay and lesbian consumers will be measured in the billions" (6).

Lukenbill likely imagines an audience for his book that includes consumers as well as corporations, but the latter is likely to gain the most from his research approach. He does appear, however, to firmly believe his work is breaking down social stigmas or creating positive change for queer folks and encourages his corporate readers to follow suit. For example, he emphasizes:

> The time for heavily coded gay and lesbian imagery is nearing its end. Directly communicating in the mainstream marketplace to gay and lesbian consumers is where the market trend is now. And companies that are willing to update their nondiscrimination policy statements, implement full domestic partnership benefits for their gay and lesbian employees, and then proceed to be more direct about who it is that they are targeting in the marketplace will be the ones to benefit not only first, but in the long haul. (22)

While he does connect "good business" with concrete social or political changes for queer individuals, he clearly still finds a discourse of driving sales and profit to be the best way to reach corporations with this idea.

This type of reasoning marks Lukenbill's work as a prime example of the connections between visibility politics and the marketplace. The previous chapter discussed theories of visibility as a prime focus of the mainstream queer movement. Visibility is envisioned to create awareness of queer issues and eventually filter into an increase in queer social and political power. In the marketplace, visibility is equated with corporate recognition, which in turn is

believed to bring similar increases in power. Lukenbill spends his second chapter, "Visibility: the New Politics of Profit," outlining this equation in detail and explains how corporations can employ this connection as a way to tap into queer spending.

Conversely, Lukenbill does challenge some of the commonly held ideas surrounding the gay market. For example, he tackles the often exaggerated demographic data of the queer community and explains that queer consumers are often fully aware, if not skeptical, of corporate involvement in their lives and communities. Ultimately though, title phrases such as "A Marketer's View of Modern Gay and Lesbian Culture," "Promoting Products and Services to Gay and Lesbian Consumers," and "Emerging Opportunities for Business" point to the fact that Lukenbill is more interested in expanding business opportunities than altering social or political forces.

Wardlow's collection, *Gays, Lesbians, and Consumer Behavior*, follows closely on the heels of Lukenbill's original edition. In fact, since the volume does not cite Lukenbill and even promotes itself to be "the first academic research compilation to explore the topic," it is likely the two texts were in publication simultaneously. While the majority of the collection's contributions reside within the field of marketing, work by scholars of communications, psychology, and social work intend to give the text a slightly diversified, though still largely academic, audience base. Wardlow also states in the introduction that "[w]hile many of the articles offer explicit advice to managers, all implicitly lend a greater understanding of lesbians', gays', and bisexuals' consumer behavior" (8). This quote simultaneously indicates Wardlow's desire for a wider audience and recognizes the text's contribution to marketing managers and their strategies.

Wardlow organizes the text into four sections: consumption rituals, presentation through consumption, discrimination and tolerance, and application and accommodation. This breakdown does expand the text beyond simply considering corporate marketing strategies. Contributions in the first three sections address topics such as the existence and impact of discrimination on LGBT consumers, gift-giving practices within queer communities, and queer style and self-presentation practices. Some of these studies even incorporate ethnographic fieldwork that seeks to give voice to the actual queer individuals being discussed. The volume also attempts to debunk many stereotypes and misconceptions of the queer consumer, such as spending power, brand loyalty, and the implicit universality of the affluent, gay, white male. However, the text does conclude with the "application and accommodation" section, as if to finally envision each of the initial three parts within this context. In other words, Wardlow may have initially envisioned the text to have a wider appeal, but ultimately his marketing background is what is most evident.

Kates' text is narrower in focus than either Lukenbill's or Wardlow's contribution, in that he performs a concise ethnography of forty-four gay men. Through both participant observation and interviews, he investigates gay male consumption and the ways in which it impacts identity formation, community creation, coming out, and political protest. While Kates' text does give voice to gay male consumers and attempts to complicate the simple visibility equals political power dynamic, his background is in business administration and advertising. As a result, he clearly envisions his audience to be largely from those disciplines. "There is the potential for various entrepreneurial individuals and organizations, using some of the findings of this report, to make a whole lotta money," explains Kates. "Given the results of this study, I believe that the important issue is not so much whether an organization will profit from targeting the gay men's

market segment..., but rather how to do it ethically and responsibly…" (181). In other words, Kates imagines his task to be very similar to Lukenbill's. He acknowledges that corporations stand to make a lot of money from queer populations and argues that scholars, such as himself, are obligated to illustrate how that might be done ethically to advance queer social and political power.

Kates spends his final chapters wrestling with this duty and outlines what he sees as the most appropriate ways for corporations to engage with queer populations. For example, he suggests that "the best approach to targeting the gay and lesbian communities is to cultivate long-term, mutually beneficial, commercial relationships with gay consumers. These relationships should be built upon trust, fairness, and an understanding of the special issues, conditions, and problems which gays and lesbians experience" (181). Thus, while Kates' study may begin with a wider and more queer-centered approach to the gay market, it also eventually becomes a "how to" approach for corporations, as well.

The last of the marketing-approach texts is Gluckman and Reed's *Homo Economics*. This collection of articles not only draws from a wider range of academic disciplines than the previous examples, but is also more concerned with the impact of the gay market on queer individuals and their politics. They even place their study within a historical context by recognizing the previously discussed connections between homosexuality and economic factors, and point to the paradox caused by this association: "Open homosexuals face occupational segregation and discrimination, but they also owe much of their newfound freedom to economic trends" (xiii).

The text is also the first to give any significant consideration to a possible disconnect between the marketing campaigns of corporations and political motivation. "[I]t is not as if

liberation has suddenly become the bottom line for many of those peddling glamorous pictures of lesbians, bisexuals, and gay men," state Gluckman and Reed. "Marketers, who make it a rule to tolerate their markets, have had a revelation. The profits to be reaped from treating gay men and lesbians as a trend-setting consumer group finally outweigh the financial risks of inflaming right-wing hate," (3). Here, a much more pessimistic image is portrayed of companies who merely "tolerate" LGBT consumers. This is a striking contrast to Lukenbill and Kates' rather idealistic portrayals of fairness, understanding, and trust.

Gluckman and Reed appear much less inclined to tacitly buy into the perceived direct relationship between economic recognition and social or political clout. In fact, the first section of the text is entitled "A Community Divided," and its essays address the ways in which corporate recognition has been both praised and condemned by queer communities. Scholars discuss histories of the gay market, issues of visibility, myths of queer economic status, and the identities that remain ignored by the market. Questions of the gay market's promises of power are pushed even further in the text's final section, "Arguments and Activism," which examines the political and activist possibilities either produced or limited by the gay market. Some scholars in this section believe the market has increased queer power by presenting new activist opportunities, such as boycotting, while others argue that market recognition has caused queer complacency and a loss of radical queer politics in favor of these more acceptable methodologies.

However, while Gluckman and Reed present a more critical examination of the gay market than previous scholars, they also promote the benefits outlined by their anthology's contributors. "[T]he new gay visibility has distinct advantages," they explain. "The very presence of gay men and lesbians in the media…is a long-sought triumph, while being respected

as a market often translates into political clout. …Certainly, the gay and lesbian community can wield its newly recognized market power wisely by rewarding social responsibility and by punishing capitulation to the Right" (5). Here, Gluckman and Reed acknowledge positive changes brought on by market recognition and suggest that the market provides a viable location for battles over queer social and political issues.

The significantly more complex dissection of the gay market presented within *Homo Economics* may in many ways mark the text as cultural studies; however, it also contains several contributions that remain focused upon queer consumer demographics, marketing and advertising approaches, and analyses of queer consumption. The simultaneous inclusion of these "how to" essays and those focusing upon implications of the gay market for queer communities illustrate a scholarly shift. Therefore, Gluckman and Reed's text might be envisioned as a bridge between the marketing and cultural studies camps. Marketing scholars have clearly provided the initial terminology, data, and studies, and cultural studies now seeks to focus upon the daily impact for and responses of a marginalized group.

The scholarship produced from within the cultural studies segment is generally more interdisciplinary, complex in analyses, and focused upon social and political implications. Since research addressing the topic of the gay market intersects with many topics, it is also more difficult to pin down every text that mentions the subject. As a result, I have chosen three noteworthy and often cited examples that address the gay market from this perspective. Of these, two are full books: Alexandra Chasin's *Selling Out: The Gay and Lesbian Movement Goes to Market* (2000) and Katherine Sender's *Business, Not Politics: The Making of the Gay Market* (2004). The other addresses the broader topic of LGBT visibility and includes a significant

section covering the gay market: Suzanna Danuta Walters' *All the Rage: the Story of Gay Visibility in America* (2001).

Chasin's *Selling Out* is firmly grounded within a cultural studies approach to examining the gay market. It has had both academic and popular press appeal and is still regarded as one of the definitive works on the topic. Her research pushes Gluckman and Reed's perspectives further by maintaining a consideration of the marginalized subject group and examining how the gay market impacts their lives and efforts towards social and political change. Also similar to *Homo Economics*, the text initially puts the gay market in a historical perspective, but Chasin chooses to first draw upon the economic theories of John Locke and Adam Smith in order to explain the ways in which citizenship and the economy have been tied to each other for centuries. This is then extended into a discussion of the historical connections between queer identity and the economic marketplace. Moving through the book, her chapters address the surge of discourses on the gay market, the role of the gay and lesbian press in the gay market, how queer identity has been tied to a national identity through advertising, and queer struggles to claim agency in the marketplace through boycotting.

For the most part, she is fairly pessimistic regarding the alleged benefits of the gay market. While she acknowledges that identity politics and the gay market have created some positive change, she contends that they also dilute radical politics and exclude more people than they empower. This is argued to be a result of the queer movement's emphasis upon a liberal identity politics, which may have outlasted its usefulness. Ultimately, Chasin argues for "political alliance, for a multi-issue, multi-constituency coalition focused on economic justice" (27).

Whereas marketers have largely been responsible for seeing (and initiating others to see) the gay market in a positive light, work like Chasin's that criticizes the gay market for fostering deradicalized politics, compromised beliefs, and assimilated identities has often caused cultural studies scholars to be viewed as significantly more distrustful of the phenomenon. However, others, such as Walters and Sender, have worked to distance themselves from an entirely cynical viewpoint.

Walters brings a personal perspective to the struggles for visibility and economic recognition and finds a purely pessimistic analysis towards these to be problematic. She explains, "Indeed, it is hard for me – a child of a different time – to avoid the celebratory glee. To finally see oneself and be *seen* publicly is exhilarating. My heart *does* leap with the joy that public recognition brings" (12 emphasis in original). Her objects of study are varied but generally center on television, film, and advertising. She believes that there is value for queer communities in being recognized within these cultural productions, but she also realizes that it "does not erase stereotypes nor guarantee liberation" (13).

Walters labels the debates over the powers or problems of visibility as the "assimilation/ghetto paradigm" (24). On one hand, queer folks who praise and enjoy the visibility brought on by mainstream popular culture and the gay market are viewed as being assimilated into the larger culture and stripped of their politically radical queer identity. The other option implied within this dichotomy is that queer folks remain invisible or marginalized. Walters believes there to be another alternative, which she calls a "third way" (24). She explains:

> This third way depends upon an analysis of gay identity as never singular (e.g.
> '*The* gay experience') but as also never separate from the vicissitudes of

commercialization and heterosexual, mainstream culture. The 'third

way'…[moves] towards what I would call a kind of conscious, conscientious

integration, where lesbians and gays are full citizens in a society that is

fundamentally altered by their inclusion. The third way facilitates the

introduction and analysis of new (gay-inspired) ideas and constructs about

fundamental social structures and intimate relationships, to rethink and reimagine

marriage, family, partnerships, sexual and gender identity, friendships, [and] love

relationships. (24)

Walters' approach hopes to challenge cultural norms by including queer perspectives in all

aspects of society. Here, queer inclusion in popular culture and the marketplace are not only

accepted, but employed to radically alter dominant mainstream perspectives. With regards to

scholars of queer visibility and marketing, Walters seeks to uncover new methods of analysis

that stress this third way and, like Chasin, create a more extensively inclusive politics.

Sender also feels that a purely negative approach to economic recognition is too

simplistic. In *Business, Not Politics*, she elaborates, "I join the critics of gay assimilation in

some of their concerns over the normalizing tendencies within gay marketing. However, their

critiques sometimes obscure more than they clarify; the relationships between gay subcultures

and the putatively heterosexual mainstream are far more complex and contradictory than the

charge of assimilation can accommodate" (230). She compares the assimilation argument to the

classic dichotomy of high versus mass culture and, just like that debate, gay assimilation

erroneously assumes there to have been (at least at some point) a distinct and uncompromised

line between the mainstream gay market (mass culture) and an uncorrupted gay subculture (high

culture) (230).

Instead, she contends that this relationship is more complex and interconnected and that the real threat of the gay market is actually how it "promotes particular kinds of distinction" (236). In other words, the market necessitates that homosexuals retain a distinct identity from straight culture in order to continue utilizing them as a niche market; however, the way in which that identity is configured is problematic. "Gay marketing not only promotes a minoritized view of gayness," explains Sender, "but, with other media practices, further differentiates privileged, sexually discreet, gender-normative gays from everyone else. This limited view of the ideal gay consumer is in part a product of the norms of marketing in which…less privileged sectors of society are underrepresented or invisible" (237). Sender is once again highlighting the gay market's tendency to only address a specific queer identity: gay, white, affluent, and male.

Sender's work examines a wide range of cultural texts (television, film, advertising, publications), and uses these to address many of the same topics as the previous cultural studies texts. For example, she also traces a historical trajectory of the gay market, discusses the inaccuracy of demographic information, and considers the implications of stereotypes. However, there is one particular area that stands out as distinct to her study. She devotes her sixth chapter to the unique relationship of lesbians to the gay market. Even though many of the gay market scholars that came before her critiqued the gay market for only hailing affluent, gay, white males, she is the first to give any real consideration to why this is the case.

She explains that lesbians present a particular puzzle for corporations, because they represent "neither 'fish' of heterosexual women, nor the 'fowl' of gay men," in that they are not representative of either of these ideal consumers (174). She continues, "The marketing routines that shape new markets have not proven successful in organizing a dispersed and elusive group of lesbian consumers, and lesbian feminist critiques of consumer culture have not offered

marketers a receptive environment for their appeals" (174). While her argument may be based on generalizations about queer women and their political affiliations or anti-capitalist beliefs, she makes a valid connection between the social and political histories already discussed in this dissertation, such as lesbian feminism, and the ways in which those might impact consumption or reception of cultural productions.

The chapter continues to examine the topic through interrogations of queer women's income levels, lesbian versus gay male advertising, and creating acceptable images through the "lipstick lesbian." She concludes by offering that by remaining a difficult market segment, queer women are also uncommodified, and this may "come as a relief to some lesbians who would prefer to remain unnoticed by advertising's judgmental, conformist gaze." However, it also means that queer women are not allowed to participate in any of the benefits brought on by pop culture and market visibility (199).

Ironically, this is the same "assimilationist/ghetto" paradigm that Walters argued against in *All the Rage*. It appears that while there are cultural studies scholars offering insight into the complex positive and negative aspects to the gay market, no one yet has a viable solution. What they do share, however, is a desire to see each market scenario within its own context and to eschew simplistic evaluations in favor of complex nuanced analyses. Since *The L Word* is one of the first times a queer female consumer has been hailed by the gay market, it will no doubt provide interesting aspects for examination. Keeping in line with the suggestions of these scholars, I will attempt to provide a nuanced and complicated investigation of audience use in the following chapters.

Television, *The L Word*, and The Gay Market

Thus far, I have attempted to provide a broad look at the history and existing published material on the gay market, and while it does not include an overwhelmingly long list of texts, it would be difficult to exhaust every detail of every contribution. Therefore, this chapter's final section intends to fine-tune the preceding information for use within this project. First, I will spend some time considering how the specific cultural production of television functions as a commodity within the gay market. I will address profit production, marketing strategies, audience acquisition, and consumption. Following this, I will conclude by highlighting several earlier points made about the gay market in order to briefly point to their particular relevance with regards to *The L Word* and this project.

The technology of television has been available since the late 1800s/early 1900s; however, it did not become a feasible and widespread cultural product until after its promotion at the 1939 New York World's Fair. Since then, television's broadcast has spread into over 98 percent of American homes, more than half of which currently contain multiple television sets (Dominick, Sherman, and Messere 97). The television itself is a product, but its greater cultural impact lies within how it is utilized as a means of distribution. To audiences, it delivers news and entertainment in the form of television shows, and to corporations and production companies, it delivers audiences for their advertising and programming.

Commercial television networks profit from their programming by selling air time to companies, who are promised that a certain number of viewers will see their commercials. In the 1970s, this relationship was altered by cable television networks that also began charging audiences a subscriber fee to receive their programming. Cable networks made these fees appear reasonable by offering customers unique programming, such as theatrical movies and special

entertainment events. This pay television concept was pushed even further by premium cable networks, which for an additional fee offered its viewers commercial free films and other programming. Home Box Office Network (HBO) was the first, and remains the largest, of the premium networks. It was soon followed by networks like Showtime, Cinemax, The Movie Channel, and Starz.

Cable and premium networks changed the way television profits were made. No longer was advertising the sole source of income. In fact, for premium channels, this was barely a source at all. These networks are funded first by their parent company. In the case of Showtime, this is the CBS Corporation, who provides a portion of its revenue to Showtime for its programming. Second, funding comes from subscriber fees, and third from affiliated products, such as DVDs, clothing, games, and other merchandise. With this in mind, a series like *The L Word* provides Showtime with profits largely through subscriber fees and affiliated products. Thus, it needs to foster a strong enough connection with its viewers in order to encourage them to spend their money on these products. This, of course, is where gay marketing comes into play.

In order to consider television (and *The L Word*) in terms of the gay market, I would like to first return to the previously discussed ways in which market recognition has both benefitted and troubled queer identities. Whereas the last chapter provided examples of popular culture trends important to queer women and how those interacted with political activism, this chapter prompts us to remember that popular culture is also often a commodity, which may make it subject to an economic framework.

Both Showtime and *The L Word* are attempting to participate within the niche marketing trend that is the gay market. *The L Word* obviously aims itself initially at a queer female

demographic through its content, and since it is the first series to hail these viewers in such a way, it exists virtually without competition. Showtime has also attempted to address its intended audience in other ways that go beyond series content. For example, the network began linking itself to a queer demographic in 2000 when it started airing *Queer as Folk*. Part of the promotion campaign for Showtime at this time was to refer to itself as "No Limits" television that "Dared to be Different." These slogans appeared in both print and visual ads, particularly those that prominently featured *Queer as Folk* imagery.

Showtime has also branded itself for a queer market by associating itself with organizations or charities that support queer-centered causes, such as AIDS research, human rights, and queer youth. The network has participated in fundraising events, held promotions, provided airtime, and connected show products with these groups. An example of the latter of these would be how Showtime and *The L Word* raise money and increase memberships for the Human Rights Campaign when it sponsors the series' premier night viewer parties in major cities across the country. This, of course, raises money for a cause, while simultaneously increasing Showtime's viewers and profits. These examples indicate the complicated relationships between television, identity, politics, and profits.

As it will be illustrated more fully in the following chapters, *The L Word* has certainly heightened queer visibility, helped raise funds for queer causes, and created buzz over other queer entrepreneurs of popular culture (musicians, publications, events, etc.). On the other hand, it has had to function within the mainstream world of cable television, forcing it to cater to both queer and straight viewers. As a result, it has had to often present a very normative view of homosexuality that has often been critiqued by viewers.

However, the viewpoints of the audiences discussed in the following chapters will also complicate this fairly simplistic analysis by pointing out *The L Word*'s rather unique characteristic with regards to popular culture and marketing forces. As has been illustrated, queer-content popular culture has been produced both from within (by and for) and outside (about) queer communities. This has had negative and positive outcomes for queer communities. On one hand, popular culture produced by and for queer women (i.e. early queer publications, women's music) appears more focused upon social/political forces than economic ones; therefore, these cultural productions are less inclined to commodify their audiences. On the other hand, cultural forms produced by the mainstream market (i.e. lesbian pulp fiction, queer film, rainbow-colored goods) may be less interested in social/political forces, more focused upon profits, and thus, likely to visualize their audiences in terms of dollars. In the case of *The L Word*, it is produced largely by and for queer women, but also must function within the discussed economic structures of mainstream television. Therefore, it is also necessary to consider this rather unique gay market space in order to fully understand the multiple ways in which queer audiences have benefitted, struggled, and contended with *The L Word*.

Another feature of the gay market that will be important to this project is one not only addressed, but also agreed upon by virtually every scholar within the discipline. When referring to the gay market, businesses are really addressing affluent, gay, white males. As Sender explains, "For although marketers and journalists refer to 'the gay market' and, more recently, 'the GLBT market' to encompass all members of this 'class' of non-heterosexual people, their interest and investment are mainly focused on affluent gay men" (11). Consequently, the working class, lesbians, people of color, transgender individuals, and other queer-identified people are not given the same (or any) visibility through the economy. It is not unusual for the

economy to focus upon white men and leave out minority voices; however, when dealing with an

already marginalized group, it further complicates the claim that liberation will be found through

economic validation.

This oversight is largely the result of the initial demographic information's concentration

on white male populations, which became viewed as a universal for the entire queer community.

Sender's text addresses the most likely causes of lesbian exclusions form the market, in that they

are often viewed as "neither fish, nor fowl" (174). This places *The L Word* within an important

role as one of the first mainstream cultural productions to attempt marketing specifically to a

queer female demographic. It will, therefore, be important to see how the series and network

connect with audiences, how they make queer women palatable and profitable, and how

audiences are effected by and respond to these.

The historical tension between the simultaneous emergence of a cultural emphasis on

visuality and the identification of a subcultural group forced into invisibility forms the basis of

another point of note regarding the gay market and this project. Walters explains that "visibility,

and 'coming out' are centrally and inextricable linked to the process of acquiring civil rights, in a

way I think quite different from other minority groups for who *mis*representation has often been

a more driving concern than simple *re*presentation. The closet is a very specific metaphor, and

defines the crisis of a community for whom simply being *visible* can be an act of rebellion" (28-9

emphasis in original). This statement is very similar to Sedgwick's theories presented in the

Introduction, through which I contend that invisibility and the closet increase the enthusiasm

over inclusion in imagery/representation when it finally occurs. This is perhaps even further

heightened when those images are located within the mainstream and can be interpreted as an

acknowledgement of existence. I argue that this theory is further augmented by the historical connections between the visual and invisibility.

This chapter has discussed how advertising shifted from a textual to image-based emphasis around the turn of the twentieth century. In Chapter Three, I will illustrate that the visual medium of film similarly emerged within this timeframe, and television's technology, while failing to reach widespread use until the 1940s, also developed around the same period. All of these visual mediums coincide historically with the naming, and subsequent shunning, of homosexuality addressed in Chapter One. I believe it is significant that the mainstream culture became increasingly focused upon a culture of the visual, while simultaneously pushing a marginalized group into invisibility. This connection can only increase the investment and excitement experienced by queer individuals when visual representation eventually occurs within mainstream media.

Another point made about the gay market that is worth highlighting for later use within this project is the idea that identity can be created or conceived of through commodities. This concept has been long present within subcultural theory, such as Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, in which he states, "subculture is concerned first and foremost with consumption. It operates exclusively in the leisure sphere. …It communicates through commodities even if the meanings attached to those commodities are purposefully distorted or overthrown" (94-5). Several gay market authors also invoke these ideas to discuss how commodities often play a part in queer identity creation and the practice of coming out. For example, Kates states that "[coming out] usually entails some form of exploration of gay consumption venues and meeting other gay men" (15-6). Here, Kates links commodities to not only identity creation, but also community formation.

Both the historical information contained in the previous chapter and numerous viewer examples specific to this study indicated a strong connection between popular culture and community formation. In fact, community will be shown to be one of the popular reasons cited for audience enjoyment of *The L Word*. Viewers form both real world and online communities that interact with each other in numerous ways, including several specific to queer identity. *The L Word* and its communities are often discussed as a support mechanism for viewers who seek to come out to friends and family.

However, what makes *The L Word* an interesting (and complicated) case study for exploring identity through consumption is the aforementioned unique gay market space occupied by *The L Word*. The series is created within the mainstream (by queer women, but simultaneously for queer and straight consumers), but it maintains an interest, at least on some level, in the social/political factors of popular culture. It will be demonstrated that series creators have worked to encourage viewers to form communities by developing several fairly unique venues for audience interaction (i.e. OurChart, *The L Word* Wiki, SecondLife) and have even displayed a significant investment in these groups' reactions to the show by incorporating or responding to feedback. These types of interactions may have initially allowed creators to foster the viewer connection desired for optimum profitability, but ironically, they have also enabled viewers to exert a level of control over the series unthinkable to previous consumers of popular culture. These tensions will be addressed in much greater detail in Chapter Four.

Finally, I would like to once again emphasize the contributions of cultural studies scholars to gay market research. In particular, I believe it is necessary to be mindful of the respective ideas of Sender and Walters, who both warn of settling for simplistic analyses regarding the gay market. The following chapters will illustrate that this is also dangerous when

considering popular culture, such as *The L Word*. Audiences will be depicted as fully aware of

the complex nature of and space occupied by *The L Word*, and their varied reactions are the

obvious result. Many believe that it is neither acceptable to settle for the argument that *The L

Word* is simply positive, because it brings visibility, which filters into political clout; nor to

accept that it is purely negative because it promotes assimilation into the dominant culture.

Similar to Sender and Walter's analyses of the gay market, I will illustrate *The L Word*'s

relationship to social, political, and economic factors as complex and multi-dimensional.

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[i] *Gay* is used within *gay market* because it is the term originally employed by marketers (who claimed to be addressing the whole queer community) and since utilized by scholars. As will be discussed later, the gay market does tend to favor gay men, so perhaps its use is not all that inaccurate. However, throughout the chapter I continue to refer to individuals and communities with the more inclusive terms of *queer* or *LGBT*, unless I am using the term *gay market*.

[ii] This text was released simultaneously as a book and a special journal issue of the *Journal of Homosexuality*, both through Haworth Press.

CHAPTER THREE: TALKING, LAUGHING, LOVING, FIGHTING, HATING, THINKING, DREAMING: AUDIENCE COMMUNITIES' REACTIONS TO AND USES OF *THE L WORD*

In *Textual Poachers* Henry Jenkins states, "I write *both* as an academic (who has access to certain theories of popular culture, certain bodies of critical and ethnographic literature) and as a fan (who has access to the particular knowledge and traditions of that community). My account exists in a constant movement between these two levels of understanding which are not necessarily in conflict but are also not necessarily in perfect alignment" (5, emphasis in original). This participatory ethnographic methodology, in which scholars are themselves fans of their object of study, has become both generally accepted and fairly widely practiced within the field of audience studies, and more specifically, fandom studies. With regards to this project, it is also the most obvious methodological choice. *The L Word* is not only an object of my study, but also my fandom. Since the series began in 2004, I have observed, and to varying degrees participated within, viewing groups, online communities, promotional events, and affiliated product consumption. In fact, as discussed more thoroughly within the Introduction, it was through my interest in *The L Word* and witnessing its impact within lesbian communities that I initially began to consider the series as an academic object of study.

Over the course of the past three years I have contemplated *The L Word* and its communities of viewers from the point of view of both academic and fellow viewer. Since the Internet has been a vast system of disseminating content related to the series, it became an obvious site of intrigue. In addition to the show's official sites (sho.com/lword and OurChart), the web is alive with audience-created sites, blogs, live journals, discussion boards, and file sharing. For this project, I administered an online survey about queer popular culture and *The L Word* to 110 respondents. Additionally, I spent seemingly endless hours scouring message

boards, blogs, wikis, online articles, live journals, and show reviews for viewer responses to the

show that might compliment this survey data[i]. This and the next chapter are largely the fruits of

this endeavor.

With regards to the survey, I administered seventeen questions (see Appendix A) and left

each one open-ended, allowing for the greatest amount of respondent control. Not all individuals

answered every question; however, every question was answered by more than half of the

respondents. On average, questions were answered 84% of the time. As for respondent

demographics, ages ranged from 18-59, with the highest number from the 20-29 year range.

Most people identified as a woman or female, and there were 5 responses that indicated either a

transgender or genderqueer identity. Approximately 70-75% of respondents indicated some type

of sexual orientation that would be encompassed by the term *queer*, while only 25-30%

identified as straight or heterosexual. All but one respondent had heard of *The L Word*, 85% had

actually watched the show, and 67% had viewed one season's worth of episodes or more. The

majority of the respondents considered themselves politically active and engaged within a wide

range of causes; stated that they interacted with a range of popular culture (around half

specifically mentioned the Internet or new media); and believed popular culture to be important

in both community formation and social or political change. Considering this data very broadly,

I found it to be very similar to or representative of the information found within other audience

communities discussed throughout this study.

While the press response to the series has been largely positive, often discussing the

series as a landmark breakthrough in mainstream television, the audience response through the

above mentioned venues has been much more varied. Some viewers argue that the show is

amazing, a favorite, and even responsible for their continued existence, while other viewers react

much more virulently by labeling it as garbage, a horrendous depiction of queer life, and just plain lousy television.

Returning to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's argument that the oppressive nature of "the closet" holds something specific for queer individuals whose oppression is not immediately visible, I have contended that this leads to a unique investment for queer folks in the visible representation of themselves. In other words, queer individuals who have been historically relegated to virtual invisibility may have particularly strong investments in visually witnessing representations of their existence within popular culture mediums such as film and television. These representations may be interpreted as essentially rendering them visible and into existence within the mainstream society. As will be illustrated, the vast majority of reasons cited for both enjoying and disliking *The L Word* centered on visibility and representation, which further supports this contention. Additionally, the historical connections that the queer movement has had with utilizing visibility as a political tactic has fostered a belief that representations like *The L Word* can cause significant impact, both positive and negative.

This leads to the question of what forms this positive and negative impact might take, and the answer to this lies within the reasons given by viewers for why they either take pleasure in or are averse to *The L Word*. Furthermore, it is important to remember that these responses are also often influenced by other political theories and tactics that have been somehow important to queer women's politics, such as community building, identity construction, struggles over the commodification of politics and identities, and the recognition of how oppressions intersect for many women through race, class, sexuality, gender, etc.. In other words, the queer rights movement and visibility are not the only influential political models at play here.

After providing a brief televisual history of *The L Word*, I will address the ways in which audiences have responded to the series. While it may initially appear rudimentary, I have begun by breaking down reactions into two groups: one which is largely positive and the other which is largely negative. This is purely a convenient way to organize the analysis and not intended to imply a simplistic binary. Nor are the examples contained within these sections meant to be comprehensive lists of reasons viewers use to explain their reactions. Instead, they represent large trends within the research. The section that follows will complicate these responses and return to the theoretical framework of this project in order to offer further insights into how and why audiences make meaning from *The L Word* in the ways they do. Furthermore, the discussions of queer women's political and social histories from the previous chapters will consistently form the backdrop to studying the current audience reception and uses of *The L Word*.

<u>Lesbians make their way to the Small Screen</u>

The technologies used for television were developed during the same turn of the century time period as the Western world's conceptions of and language for homosexuality. As a result, when television finally became more widespread through major network broadcasting in the 1940s, conceptions of homosexuality already existed. In fact, "images" of homosexuals were even present within television's predecessor radio (Capsuto 3). However, the topic was still considered taboo, and as has already been addressed, queer individuals were forced into a world of denial and invisibility. So while these depictions may have existed, they remained rare, strongly obscured, and consistently derogatory. In fact, the topic was so reviled within the public consciousness during these early years that even antigay discussions were sometimes banned from the airwaves (Capsuto 3). When queer content was finally allowed on the air during the

1940s and McCarthy-era 1950s, it was only within a nonfictional format. Fictional character depictions were strongly avoided or forced into heavily coded stereotypes in order to avoid censorship.

It wasn't until the 1960s that gay and lesbian characters appeared on television with any actual acknowledgment that they were queer. In fact, it was the progressive political atmosphere of the late 1960s that caused television studios, who desired the viewership of young audiences, to consider producing edgier and more political programming. However, while this did allow some queer images to turn up on television screens, the characters were still limited. At the time, the most common roles or scenarios for gay male characters were limited to the genre of comedy. For example, shows like *The Monkees*, *The Munsters*, *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, and *Get Smart* all aired episodes that included implicit references to gay men (Capsuto 48-9). These generally included random characters that appeared overly effeminate and a main character's one-liner about their unusual behavior. Other popular gags included stories of mistaken gender identity and cross-dressing hijinks.

Another common character or plot device included using homosexuals as villainous murderers, child molesters, and tormented souls who committed suicide or were otherwise killed. These scenarios were very popular within the motion picture industry (*The Children's Hour*, *The Killing of Sister George*, *The Detective*) and were echoed on the smaller screen in series like *The Bold Ones* and *N.Y.P.D.*, who both aired murderous homosexual plotlines in 1960 (Capsuto 57).

In the early 1970s, another stereotypical role was finally added to this roster when the "coming out/polite tolerance" narrative developed. In this plotline, characters on a television series would suddenly discover the sexuality of a newly introduced relative or friend, and by the end of the show, learn to tolerate those who are "different." Episodes of *All in the Family*, in

which Archie Bunker learns one of his long-time buddies is a gay man, and *Room 222*, in which

the show's main characters are confronted by a new student at school they are convinced is gay,

are both classic examples of this plot device.

By the late 1970s, the queer rights movement was a significant social and political force,

and as a result, sections of the movement were able to focus on media depictions. Organizations

such as The Gay Media Task Force began lobbying and protesting the television industry with

the hopes of expanding and/or improving depictions. Their tactics worked, and by 1975, all the

major networks were running their scripts through gay consultants before heading into

production. The ironic outcome of this practice was that the previously devious murderers,

molesters, and buffoons were now replaced by "characters so uniformly squeaky-clean they were

scarcely believable" (Capsuto 5).

The 1980s brought dark times for queer communities and their representations, both

related to the AIDS epidemic. AIDS brought homosexuality much more prominently into the

public consciousness as the "gay cancer." Queer folks were now seen as diseased and

dangerous. Networks did not want to take chances with many scripts involving such a polarizing

or frightening figure. Additionally, the epidemic devastated queer activists' time and resources,

which now had to be allocated to fighting the disease rather than confronting images of popular

culture.

However in 1985, The Gay and Lesbians Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) was

formed and it has since obtained widespread public attention and support for its fight to promote

and ensure "fair, accurate and inclusive representation of people and events in the media as a

means of eliminating homophobia and discrimination based on gender identity and sexual

orientation" (GLAAD "Our Mission"). It has also not limited itself strictly to shaking a finger at

media corporations that do not want to play by its rules. GLAAD also rewards those that have

played positive roles for queer communities through the media at its annual awards ceremony,

The GLAAD Media Awards.

GLAAD's influence was highly evident during the 1990s, which contained a sudden

growth in positive queer image visibility. This has even been retrospectively referred to as the

"gayest decade." Steven Capsuto elaborates in *Alternate Channels*:

> Some fifty network series in the 1990s had gay or bisexual recurring roles.
>
> …Gay news stories and openly gay celebrities also held the TV cameras'
>
> attention at the end of the twentieth century. It was the decade of Queer Nation,
>
> "outing," *Rosanne*, "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," k.d. lang, Melissa Etheridge, the
>
> 1993 March on Washington, "lesbian chic," *The Real World*, *Northern Exposure*,
>
> RuPaul, Greg Louganis, *Friends*, *Ellen*, and *Will and Grace*. (248)

Without a doubt, the 1990s witnessed an unprecedented number of achievements in media and

cultural issues regarding queer individuals.

For lesbian depictions on television, the most significant of these was the coming out of

Ellen Morgan (Ellen DeGeneres) on the ABC television series, *Ellen*. While the decade saw

several televisual events labeled as groundbreaking (*thirtysomething*'s in bed discussion, *L.A.

Law*'s lesbian kiss, and *Friends*' longstanding lesbian family), nothing like this had truly ever

happened before. Capsuto explains,

> *Ellen* became the first primetime series with an openly gay leading character and
>
> the first American network comedy or drama with a vocal, openly gay star – in a
>
> title role, no less. With its voluminous news coverage, DeGenereres's and *Ellen*'s
>
> coming out rocked American culture, setting off pervasive debates about

> homosexuality and gay visibility. In its last season, *Ellen* became the most gay-centric major series up to that date, and the first to develop a same-sex romance as its central story line over the course of the season.

(379)

Add to this the episode's celebrity-filled guest cast, the national advertising support it managed to maintain[ii], and the fact that it was ABC's highest rated show for the season after the Academy Awards, and you have a recipe for television history. In fact, Capsuto's text devotes two chapters to the series and spends the last chapter discussing television "post-Ellen"[iii] (405).

The L Word developed on the foundations of this 1990s queer explosion and has similarly been hailed as groundbreaking television. Of course, the preceding narrative indicates that it is not the first show to have lesbian characters, lesbian relationships, or lesbian kisses. However, what does set *The L Word* apart from the television before it is not only the fact that the majority of its large cast of main characters are queer women, but also that these characters' lives, relationships, and political or social issues are the *focus* of the series. Additionally, the placement of the series on the premium cable network Showtime has allowed it to depict lesbian lives in a much more forthright, and sometimes explicit, way.

Creator Ilene Chaiken pitched the project (then called *Earthlings*), loosely based on her own life experiences, to an uninterested Showtime in the late 1990s (Rosenduft 20). Shortly thereafter, however, Showtime scored a big hit with *Queer as Folk* and HBO had high ratings with *Sex in the City*. These shows proved that there were significant audiences for both all queer and all female character lineups. In 2001, Showtime went back to Chaiken to see if she was still interested in combining the two (Rosenduft 23).

The L Word became an overnight sensation for Chaiken and Showtime. It debuted in January 2004 to mostly positive media reviews, has since reached millions of viewers (Cole "Season 3 Ratings Up" par. 2), and became the most quickly renewed series in Showtime's history (Rosenduft 23). It was renewed for a second season after only two episodes and for a third season before the premier episode of Season Two even aired (McDermott 26). It is currently in its fifth season. *The L Word*'s success has also been felt in the second market of DVD sales, which according to Chaiken "are through the roof" (quoted in Stockwell 48).

The series has spawned a plethora of affiliated products, as well. Although *The L Word* signals one of the first times the gay market has hailed a queer female consumer, as opposed to affluent gay white men, that has not slowed down the economic machine. Viewers can purchase almost anything with *The L Word*'s logo, popular phrases, or character likenesses emblazoned upon it. For example Showtime's web store offers DVDs, CDs, posters, books, magnets, calendars, t-shirts, jewelry, games, and mugs. Leading up to and during its fourth season, the show also promoted its *L'ements of Style* program[iv], which was a line of clothing and accessories both inspired by and as worn on *The L Word*. However, these products, particularly the latter fashion-oriented examples, do signal that Showtime intends to use the gay market to speak to a very specific queer female. As will become more evident as this chapter progresses, this consumer is generally affluent, white, young, conventionally attractive (or at least femme), and fashionable.

On the other hand, ten percent of the proceeds for the *L'ements of Style* program were reportedly donated to breast cancer research via the Susan G. Komen Foundation and the Dr. Susan Love Research Foundation, which also indicates the creators' desire to utilize the show's presence in the gay market for social and political causes (Dr. Susan Love Research Foundation).

Not only has the show created some of the first mainstream visibility for queer women, it also has attempted to increase awareness around queer women's issues. For example, it has partnered with the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) for several fundraisers and membership drives; given airtime within its narratives to queer organizations and businesses such as *Curve*, *Velvet Park*, Oliva Cruises, and Rigged OUT/fitters; and it has provided valuable exposure to numerous independent artists, musicians, and filmmakers.

As mentioned, *The L Word* has also had a strong presence within cyberspace. "Enthusiastic fans trade show secrets and leak spoilers or plot lines through weblogs, unofficial websites, and gossip circles" (Rosenduft 19). In fact, online audience communities began appearing before the pilot episode even aired. Most notable of these are located at l-word.com and thelwordonline.com. The former has over 30,000 members and around 150,000 visitors per month (Jacky) and the latter averages around 11,000 visitors a day (Sitemeter.com). These major viewer sites also have several international versions, such as thelword.altervista.org (Italy), thelword-downbelow.com (Australia), thelword-fr.net (France), and l-word.org (Germany). Blogs, live journals, fan sites for specific actors, and other queer-themed sites, such as AfterEllen.com and PlanetOut.com, have also become popular sites for audience-created content related to *The L Word*.

By no means has Showtime allowed the viewers to be the only creators of the show's Internet presence. Initially, they launched a microsite (sho.com/lword) to their own main site sho.com that coincided with the show's 2004 premier. In 2006, they created an island within the popular virtual reality networking site SecondLife, and the next year they started another complementary site to the main Showtime site, this one a wiki. Also in 2006, they launched

OurChart.com, which is one of the more unique Internet tie-ins produced by a television company.

Within *The L Word*'s narrative, "the chart" is laboriously created by the character Alice (played by Leisha Hailey). Introduced to viewers already within Season One, the chart is a diagram displayed on Alice's apartment wall that illustrates all the connections between people within their community. "Connections" are generally defined within the show's narrative as having some sort of romantic or sexual tie to another person. By Season Four, this wall diagram evolved into the website OurChart.com, which was an expansion of Alice's radio show. The networking site included written, video, and discussion formats that addressed aspects related to the lives of queer women in their community.

Playing on the old adage that life imitates art, Showtime created OurChart.com as an official real world networking site tie-in to the show. Showtime's OurChart is essentially the same type of site as Alice's. In fact, when Alice's OurChart was displayed on screen during the show in Season Five, screen shots of the real OurChart (including screen caps and profiles of real users) were visible. The real website describes itself:

> Until now, there's never been a central meeting place just for us -- lesbians, dykes, queer girls, gay women, high femmes, butches, drag kings, bois, transwomen and transmen -- however we define ourselves. On OurChart, you can connect yourself via friendships and relationships to the wide world encompassing all these people and more. You can invite your friends, make new ones, and share your favorite stuff, your innermost thoughts, and your most superficial leanings. That's pretty standard. But on OurChart, your network of connections will also form a visual

"chart" a lot like Alice's -- only this one is dynamic and interactive. And it's

yours. (OurChart "About the Chart")

The site has become another popular space for viewers to discuss things both related and

unrelated to the series. Showtime reports that the site has 400,000 users and has greatly

increased the show's audience (OurChart "Press Release…").

Anne Ramsay (who plays Robin), a guest actor on *The L Word*, attempted the following

explanation for the overwhelming audience response and involvement with the series: "I think

[the lesbian community] is starving, and has been for years" (qtd. in McDermott 27). It is to the

nature of those responses and involvements that I now turn.

<p align="center">I Love *The L Word*, It's Just Good Politics</p>

Of my 110 survey respondents, 89 responded to a question that asked how they felt about

The L Word. Of these, approximately half of them responded positively and around 30

respondents used the term "love," or some variation thereof, when describing their feelings.

These responses also included phrases like: "favorite show," "addictive," "fun," "great"

"important," "groundbreaking," and "transformative." My respondents' intensely positive

reactions are by no means unique when coupled with viewer remarks from other sources, such as

the woman described in this dissertation's Introduction, who praises Chaiken for "saving

[people's] lives" with *The L Word*. Or, as another viewer on a message board explains, "[a]s

someone who grew up in the 60's, I've just got to say, watching this show each week is becoming

almost a spiritual experience for me. Needless to say, I didn't see any lesbian role models on TV

when I was growing up. …[I]t almost brings a tear to this middle-aged dyke's eye"

(Tenderwolf). These types of personal and often moving stories related to *The L Word* can be

found in numerous venues related to the series. This section seeks to address several of the

dominant reasons cited by viewers for why they feel these types of intensely affirming sentiments regarding *The L Word*.

Some of the ways in which audiences of *The L Word* discuss their attraction is not all that different from viewers of other examples of media, in that it is simply valued as a source of entertainment. For example, one respondent described it as "a glossy, fun show to watch." Often this is attributed to a love for the genre of drama, or more specifically soap operas. Other respondents described the series as having strong cinematic elements such as writing, directing, acting, or being "well shot." More than one also used the term "eye candy" when describing this entertainment factor. This term is also commonly used within message board threads and posts. Sometimes, it appears to be employed as a way to describe an overall quality to the show, which is similar to the above comment of being well shot; however, it is also often used to refer to aesthetic qualities of the actors themselves. In fact, a significant number of discussion board threads are about how "hot" or "sexy" certain characters or specific scenes are and there are numerous threads that carry titles such as, "Poll: Hottest Sex Scene," "Let's Play *The L Word* Dating Game," "Poll: Best Lover in the Show," and "Who Would you Do and Why?".

While many queer female viewers would likely be appalled by a heterosexual male viewer's objectification of the show's characters or actors, in the context of these viewer communities, there appears to be little criticism for the practice. From time to time, there are posts on message boards that ask others to limit talk of sex or other explicit material to certain threads, but they are not admonished for the practice itself. While this discrepancy may be criticized as problematic, I believe that it is linked to a larger, and perhaps more political, theme of escapism.

The L Word strays from many other queer depictions in that it has shown relatively little homophobia or violence against its characters. It could even be described as depicting a rather utopian environment for queer women. Joy Press of *The Village Voice* describes this aspect by stating, "Everywhere they go resembles a hermetically sealed world of lesbian loveliness" (par. 7). While this could be used as a way to critique the show as unrealistic, it also serves as a very necessary counterpoint to a wealth of other films and television programs dealing with serious, and often depressing, topics related to queer life. In other words, for viewers who deal with discrimination on a daily basis, sometimes it can be important to escape, and *The L Word* fulfills this need. One respondent confirmed this idea by stating that "watching TV is about escapism, not about documentaries."

Viewers outside of the survey appear to feel similarly, such as one who explains in a letter reprinted from l-word.com in the "bonus features" section of the Season Two DVD set: "The show was my only source of comfort, an escape from my own reality" (Colenickel). Another fan confirms, "We [are] able to find women in a homonormative environment . . . if I wanted to see real life I would look in the mirror" (Angelak).

While these statements were compiled, and likely edited, by the show's creators for the DVD set's official release, message boards also contain such sentiments. One poster declares, "Whenever I feel sad of my situation I keep watching *The L Word* and somehow it makes my heart feel light. …I may never be outed but this show makes me feel welcome [in] the world" (Stillinside). Another poster also alludes to escapist emotions when responding to a thread entitled "You know you're an L addict when…" by replying, "When you suddenly realize, 'Hey I can't live in the same TV world as the L, but I sure as HELL [would] love too!'" (Willintoadmit).

When using escapism as a way of conceptualizing the previously mentioned objectification of characters/actors and explicit discussions of sex, certain interpretations become possible. The virtual and physical environments that emerge regarding *The L Word* are unlike many spaces that queer women are able to experience as they move through the larger world. On theses fan sites, message boards, and at events related to the show (which are often held at queer venues or private homes), queer women are able to express themselves in ways they are unable to within other spaces. Attraction to other women and the desire to have sexual relations with them is not only acceptable in these venues, it is expected. These spaces become unique and freeing environments for women who may not be able to express their sexuality elsewhere.

This environment is also not all that dissimilar to the ones depicted within the narrative of *The L Word*, and viewers may hope to extend the spaces of *The L Word* beyond its fictional world. Many of the sexual/explicit threads on message boards or blogs deal with characters, scenes, or story arcs of the series. Others deal with newly created scenarios that include *The L Word*'s existing characters, such as the "Dating Game" thread. It is not inconceivable that these types of discussions are in fact ways in which audience members attempt to further immerse themselves within the show's text, as opposed to simply objectifying the show's actors. Jenkins explains that the "mode of [fan] interpretation draws them far beyond the information explicitly present and toward the construction of a meta-text that is larger, richer, more complex and interesting than the original series. The meta-text is a collaborative enterprise; its construction effaces the distinction between reader and writer, opening the program to appropriation by its audience" (278). In other words, the behavior displayed by audiences of *The L Word* can be interpreted as an attempt to create a larger "meta-text" that accounts for insufficiencies in the original text and more fully includes its audience.

It may also be useful to consider these theories of escapism through popular culture in conjunction with several historical examples from Chapter One. For example, what *The L Word* provides its viewers today is not all that different from what lesbian pulp fiction provided its readers during the 1950s. Both offer rare story worlds, only truly limited by the reader's imagination where groups of queer women exist and interact together. Furthermore, pulp fiction also inspired audiences to extend the story world beyond its initial narratives and several queer women made their own contributions to pulp novel publishing. However, even though these women were being empowered to some extent by being allowed to make small cracks the veneer of invisibility, their works were still subject to the same codes of censorship as were other authors. As a result, even their characters were rarely allowed much happiness. *The L Word*, on the other hand, holds happiness and glamour as prominent features.

Comparisons to the theme of escapism can also be made to historical spaces, such as Harlem of the 1920s, lesbian bars of the 1950s, or women's music festivals of the 1970s. These all provided a place for queer women to act upon their identities with less threat of consequences, something unavailable to them within the rest of their lives. However, the physical nature of these spaces also sets them apart from the virtual nature of most of *The L Word*'s escapist spaces. Perhaps these are actually more applicable to the second thematic explanation viewers allude to as being responsible for their positive reactions to the series, community or community building. When asked whether or not they thought popular culture (in general, not *The L Word* specifically) was important in the formation of communities, only four of my respondents replied negatively.

Community-building also has a long history with queer women's politics and was cited numerous times in the historical descriptions of Chapter Two. For example, the bar culture of

the 1950s and Lisa Ben's creation of *Vice/Versa* magazine were both attempts to connect with other lesbians in order that they might feel less isolated. Nearly every early queer organization was also founded with similar goals in mind, such as The Daughters of Bilitis, The Mattachine Society, and ONE, Inc. After Stonewall, community-building became an even more defined theme within queer politics as numerous organizations, events, businesses, and publications were founded. It has even been employed as a way for subgroups of the queer movement, such as Separatist Feminists and Third World Feminists, to garner support and define their politics.

Performance artist Tim Miller's and theater scholar David Roman's work on queer performance spaces helps illuminate the importance of community spaces, particularly those occupied by popular culture, to queer communities. They begin by discussing how queer performance is often written off by mainstream culture as "preaching to the converted" (172). In a predominantly homophobic culture that consistently discriminates against and further limits the rights and voices of its homosexual members, however, these performances can be important, if not critical, for the community they represent (172). Survey respondents often cited similar sentiments. For example, a viewer stated the show "makes [her] feel included" and more than one used the phrase that *The L Word* is one of the only shows they could "relate to."

For a few respondents, who mentioned watching the series with friends or other groups, these *L Word* communities have taken on a physical form. One viewer explains, "I watch it regularly with friends – and we all enjoy chatting about it, discussing what we like and hate about the show." This quotation also indicates that an overall positive feeling for the series is by no means necessary in order to participate within some of these communities. Perhaps another respondent makes this point best when stating, "I can't deny that it makes me feel more a part of the lesbian community to be hating on [*The L Word*] with everyone else when the new episodes

are airing." It appears as if some groups of women who dislike the show still interact with it because it is currently such a prominent feature of lesbian communities. However, rather than accepting it outright, they critique it while maintaining the ability to connect with other viewers.

One of the most common forms of community building surrounding *The L Word* is that which happens on the Internet. Since the survey used for this study was distributed through the Internet, the responses may be slanted towards those who are Internet-savvy; however, of the total respondents, nearly half of them responded that they interact with the Internet on a regular basis and around 50% of these listed the Internet as a favorite type of popular culture. About two-thirds of the total surveys also replied that they have visited web sites related to *The L Word*; of these, approximately 20-25% indicated they use these sites for networking with others.

At one point, *The L Word* Online site actually ran a discussion board thread that asked users to name reasons why they participated within the communities of the site. Unfortunately, it was not a thread that received many replies, but a few posters stated that they enjoyed the people, while others explained that discussing things with a group helped fill a void left by the show when they were unable to watch it. Another poster stated that the boards gave her "a sense of such a large community which I miss" (TinaMania). A sense of humor was also present on this thread, as one user replied that they visited the online community because it "was cheaper than therapy" (GreenEyed818). Overall, the message boards and other websites appear to provide a valued opportunity to meet and discuss important or fun topics with other queer or queer-friendly individuals. One survey respondent explains, "*The L word* and these sites have expanded the community and its ability to network."

Miller and Roman also highlight that one of the ways in which queer spaces are both identified and made exciting is through the use of "subcultural codes, vernaculars, and customs

[that] could be articulated and shared, negotiated and contested . . ." (173-4). This also seems to be an aspect related to community that viewers of *The L Word* enjoy. For example, one respondent described the show as "fun to watch (especially when they do include some dyke inside jokes)." Another viewer speaks more broadly, but is perhaps asserting a similar sentiment by stating, "I loved the politicized dialogue, the banter, the jokes… ."

The L Word has placed a significant amount of effort upon representing or drawing upon icons, discourses, and popular culture of queer female culture. For example, episodes have referenced, if not represented, The Dinah Shore Open, Olivia Cruises, The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, *Curve* and *Velvet Park* magazines, and crossing the Canadian border for a lesbian wedding. Numerous queer or queer-friendly independent musical acts have also been given exposure via inclusion on the soundtrack or guest performance spots, such as Bitch, Peaches, Sleater-Kinney, and Goldfrapp. The show also often makes reference to queer women's lexicons through phrases like "U-Haulin' It," "Hasbian," and "Every girl is straight, until she's not"[v]. These are all phrases and concepts that many queer folks would immediately recognize, but straight viewers might not have the knowledge base to do the same. In other words, *The L Word* may present a mainstream view of queer women in some ways, but in other ways, it attempts to please its queer viewers by making inside references to their culture.

It is clear that communities of *The L Word*'s viewers are not always occupying physical spaces, but they are experiencing similar benefits from their interactions to those more traditional communities. And while the series may not be a live performance like the ones Miller and Roman discuss, it is still a visual item of popular culture, and it depicts the *performance* of queer identities. The web sites with their assorted networking features and various live events provide both virtual and physical spaces of community for *The L Word*'s audiences. These spaces have

become a safe venue for individuals to voice opinions, express desires, make friends, obtain

opinions, find support, and even acknowledge or accept their sexuality.

In fact, the latter two of these are fairly common occurrences and one of the most

emotional aspects to these virtual communities. Numerous users have discussed the show as

helping them come to terms with, accept, or discover their sexuality and/or come out to others.

Meanwhile, other posters have been quick to offer support in these difficult processes. The

following posts provide several illustrations:

> **lezmom3**: The show has also confirmed that I am without a doubt a lesbian and
>
> could never be with another man.
>
> **ilovebette**: Without this show, I probably wouldn't have realized that I like
>
> women.
>
> **lilWannaB3 ROcK$t@R**: *The L Word* has definitely helped me feel much better
>
> about myself and my sexuality.
>
> **H**: Has the show affected me?? - yes. I came out to three of my friends the other
>
> week, telling them I think I'm bisexual. I've known for a while that I might be.
>
> The show has helped me see [that] it's just as normal as being straight.
>
> **Malou**: The show has also given me an enormous amount of courage to sometime
>
> (soon hopefully) come out; I'm no longer denying what I am. I can thank the show
>
> for that, and along with the show...this message board and the people who use it.

This use of popular culture or commodity culture as a way to create identity during the process

of coming out is also similar to ideas presented by some gay market scholars. For example,

Steven Kates argued that individuals often use some type of gay consumption venue during the

coming out process and that this leads to connections with other queer folks (15-16). For these

individuals, *The L Word* and its online communities are serving as this "gay consumption venue," and in a sense the show has helped expand the community by bringing in new voices.

The many different communities of viewers that have developed around *The L Word* are definitely reminiscent of Miller and Roman's queer performance spaces. On one hand, they are used to discuss and have fun with aspects of the show; however, they have also been a way to "be absorbed into a critical mass of subcultural resistance to the heteronormative muscle [they] must encounter continually in [their] daily lives" (Miller and Roman 176).

While escape and community are both important to some viewers of *The L Word*, the most often cited assertions as to why viewers feel positively about the series are its prospects towards visibility. Visibility politics have long been a valued political approach for some segments of the queer rights movement. Since queer oppression has historically been linked to the dominant culture's ability to deny the existence of homosexuals and even force them into denying their own identities, becoming visible and coming out have often been considered a critical practice for movement success. Not only does it force society to witness their existence, but it also enables queer folks to identify each other for community formation and mobilization. As social movement scholars Della Porta and Mario Diani explain, "The construction of identity is an essential component in collective action. This enables actors engaged in conflict to see themselves as people linked by interests, values, common histories – or else as divided by these same factors" (109). Visibility politics have been particularly prominent within the post-Stonewall movement; however, there have been traces of visibility theory much longer.

As illustrated in Chapter One, the idea of creating visibility through popular culture goes back at least as far as Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, through which she attempted "to bring [homosexuality] to the attention of a wide public" (R. Hall par. 2). Other pre-Stonewall

popular culture, such as the blues performers of 1920s Harlem and early queer publications, might also be seen as visibility politics, or at least attempts at creating awareness and education, which are closely related to visibility.

In a post-Stonewall context, the gay market has also fostered an investment in visibility as a valid political tactic. In an anthology on queer television images, James R. Keller and Leslie Stratyner discuss the "abundant benefits of greater visibility" by explaining that "in American culture, nobody gets respect as quickly as those with money… . The recognition of gay and lesbian financial power may (from a Marxist point of view) resemble (or even be) exploitation, but it is also a very powerful facilitator of civil rights in a culture that values nothing more than materialism and consumerism" (4). In other words, those images with the potential to make money will be encouraged, and when queer consumers are recognized as having money, more representations aimed at their demographic will become available. In turn, it is argued, this will lead to an increasing number of images, which will normalize queerness within the larger culture.

Numerous viewers of *The L Word* cite similar beliefs in the power of visibility as reasons for their enjoyment of the series. In fact, when discussing the political possibilities of popular culture like *The L Word*, over half of the survey respondents discussed ideas related to these types of political action, and many of these argued that they greatly benefit queer culture. "It's a very important show," states one respondent, "both politically and in terms of visibility but also I think personally – to see aspects of our lives reflected on television and a group of women who are living open, happy, successful lives… ." Several other respondents replied similarly, as the following examples illustrate:

Survey 25: More visibility [will] reduce the fear that people have which will lead to the end of discrimination.

Survey 71: Visibility is the most important aspect to changing popular opinion, and I think that the more visibility a show offers is wonderful.

Survey70: I think [visibility] is very important because it places a marginalized group into the mainstream popular culture. Anytime we (lesbians specifically, gays in general) can get exposure on a broader scale like this, I believe it helps "normalize" us in a world that fears what they do not understand or have not experienced.

These viewers not only believe that *The L Word* creates visibility, but also that this visibility will bring political and social change for queer individuals.

Generally, audience members believe this change will occur because they see the series as educating and raising awareness about specifically queer issues. "The show helps raise awareness to gay issues and shows the gay point of view to people who aren't usually aware," states one respondent. Another describes *The L Word* as "a good show that hits on a lot of issues concerning lesbians." And yet another explains, "It's great for lesbians because it encourages acceptance from straight people who watch it, and it's important to see gay relationship issues dealt with. We are not alone."

Several respondents stated that the series was important given the history of queer female images, which are described by one particular survey respondent as "popular representations of lesbians as totally fucked up murderers, sociopaths, or suicidal depressives." Another respondent conveys a similar sentiment when explaining that she is "happy that there is a show in which lesbian characters are the focus and being lesbian is not seen as deviant or strange." In

other words, the images on *The L Word* are seen as depicting queer women in more positive

ways and their proliferation will "normalize" queerness.

Many other respondents appeared to believe that visibility was important, but they either

did not know how to or wish to articulate why. The following are examples of these types of

responses:

> **Survey 21:** It's an incredible step forward for lesbian/bi women…
>
> **Survey 60:** I like how it is creating visibility for lesbians…
>
> **Survey 65:** [I]t's good to have something that portrays the gay community in
>
> everyday life.

On the other hand, some individuals were very specific as to what they believed or at least hoped

The L Word could do. "[It] is nice to actually have a TV show with mainly lesbian characters,"

states a respondent, "hopefully it will lead to more appearances of gay women in more

mainstream TV (the way gay men have greater mainstream visibility)."

Whether or not the show is actually able to create this kind of cultural change is a topic

for another project entirely; however, what is important to this study is that for many of the

viewers that enjoy the series, it is clearly accompanied by a belief in its power for political or

social change. On the other hand, others believe the series has a level of power, but that its

impact will not necessarily be a positive one.

<div align="center">I Hate The L Word, It's Just Bad Politics</div>

Negative reactions to *The L Word* were also quite common within the survey results.

While a wealth of positive responses were present, almost as many statements of displeasure

with the show existed as well. Of the 89 responses that discussed reactions to the show, nearly

40% contained some type of criticism. These generally fell into one of two categories and were

easily confirmed within other audience forums, such as message boards, blogs, and audience

reviews.

Similar to the optimistic responses, the first type of negative reaction addressed cinematic

elements. One such example stated, "sometimes I find the writing and/or editing of the show [to

be] lacking and I can't always understand the motive behind the different characters' behavior"

(sic). With regards to these filmic aspects, writing and acting tended to receive the most

criticism. However, some viewers even expressed their unhappiness over specific storylines,

such as a few who discussed their displeasure over the writing decision to have the well-liked

character Dana (played by Erin Daniels) die of breast cancer during Season Three[vi].

For more than one viewer, it was obvious that formal elements were quite important, and

their harsh statements about them reflected this. For example, one described the show as "an

enormous waste of potential," and went on to complain, "the writing is often terrible, the

performances uneven, the storylines ridiculous, and the characters poorly defined, despite the

fact that the show draws a lot of interest and participation by talented women." Another

expressed similar feelings by labeling it as "bloody awful. The writing is horrible, the characters

[are] often very one dimensional/caricatures of themselves, and the storylines are even worse,

often playing to what is trendy rather than what is more often real" (sic). While this last

statement begins by addressing formal elements, the respondent's desire for something "real"

employs cinematic aspects as a way to enter into discussions pertaining to visual representations.

Just as the majority of positive responses centered on an investment in visibility politics,

the close relative, visual representation, was the most addressed basis for disliking the series.

Approaching popular culture by analyzing its representational qualities has become a prevalent

course for both academics and the larger public. As Richard Dyer explains, work on

representation "is 'images of' analysis of the kind that has burgeoned in the past twenty years" (*The Matter of Images* 1). These analyses seek to discuss an item of popular culture with regards to how its images 'represent' certain generally marginalized groups or individuals.

Media activist organizations, such as GLADD, have also encouraged queer viewers to consider popular culture with representations in mind. They discuss their impact upon media images:

> Less than 20 years ago, before the formation of the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), representations of lesbians and gay men tended to fall into one of two categories: defamatory or non-existent. Since its inception, GLAAD's impact on our community's visibility has been far-reaching. Not only have GLAAD staff and volunteers changed the way lesbians and gay men are portrayed on the screen and in the news, we've also become a major source of resources and information for entertainment and news media decision makers.
> (GLAAD "Our History")

Survey respondents and other viewers who critique *The L Word* for its representations also believe visibility to have power; however, they see this power manifesting negatively and the show's representations as creating poor, inaccurate, or damaging stereotypes.

So even though theorists of New Queer Cinema have long been arguing that we should no longer be devoted to the creation of solely positive imagery, and that it should be questioned as to whether or not there is such a thing as an "accurate depiction," it does not appear that these sentiments have consistently filtered down into the wider queer public opinion. Many viewers are clearly still deeply invested in finding positive imagery (whatever that may be) that reflects their lives.

Perhaps a more applicable influential queer theory is Peggy Phelan's *Unmarked*. Phelan asserts that representations hold no political hope for marginalized groups because they only seek to further define or fix minority identities (10). Viewers come close to employing this theory as a reason for viewing displeasure when arguing that poor depictions have a negative impact because they create erroneous impressions of queer culture in the larger society. However, as with New Queer Cinema, Phelan's ideas are not wholly adhered to, in that these viewers generally remain invested in the idea that representations *can* create positive political or social change. It is simply that these particular images within *The L Word* are flawed, inaccurate, or damaging.

Of several commonly mentioned issues with representation, one of the first to gain attention was the cast's appearance. While some audiences of the show felt that it should be commended for not depicting stereotypical lesbians, instead showing lesbians as accomplished and fashionable, others felt the characters were too glamorous and exoticized. These types of critiques have also argued that the cast does not look like "real" lesbians, but rather Hollywood's commodified version of lesbians. Show writer and actor Guinevere Turner discusses the audience concerns:

> One of the biggest complaints I hear from lesbians about the television show . . . is that the women on the show are all so girly and un-gay-looking. "Where's the big old truck-driving tattooed dyke?" one woman stood up and asked at a panel discussion with the creative team of the show. "I don't know any women who look like those women!" (par. 2)

In other words, viewers are concerned with the show's tendency to present only one type of lesbian identity, the femme.

In early reviews of the show, journalists also discussed the look of the show's characters as "cute and shiny" (Theobald 5), "beautiful" (Hensley 48), and "smart, successful, impossibly thin women with perfect, choppy haircuts" (Press par. 3). For the most part, these reviewers are hard to argue with. The main cast members are almost all very thin, conventionally attractive, well groomed, heavily made up, and highly fashionable. The presentations have widened a bit as the show has progressed (an aspect that will be returned to in the following chapter); however, even after five seasons, the femme remains the show's dominant queer female depiction.

Several survey respondents leveled similar criticisms about appearance. More than one identified the series as too "glamorous." Another response equates the women on *The L Word* with "runway models, which…is not representative of the lesbian community." Replies also discussed this glamorized image in terms of what it meant for butch and femme identities, "I do wonder why the characters are so glamorized in terms of being very appearance-oriented. With the exception of Shane [played by Kate Moennig], there doesn't seem to be a lot of butch and femme blending."

Interestingly, for some viewers this glamorous image connected to a politics of class. "I like watching beautiful women, but I dislike the fact that they really only show femme women, no butch women, and class isn't dealt with hardly at all. These are only white, upper middle class women…and butch women are spoken about with disrespect (re: the 100-footers[vii]). Other respondents also tied the show's image to class politics by labeling it simply as "classist," pointing out the characters "way-too-skinny-bodies and super-privileged lives," or taking a more humorous route by responding, "BLAH. Boring, rich, rich, white ladies. I don't know dykes like that."

Discussion boards are also alive with threads about this issue. One entitled "Where are the butch women, where is the diversity?" begins with a post containing the following: "I am disappointed that it would focus in so squarely on feminine lesbians. I love femmes but I would love to see butches [(aka: studs, ags, doms)] being represented as well" (carameladye). Much of this post was met with affirming responses, such as one that states, "*The L Word* needs to bring a true butch onto the show. Out of all the lesbians I know, even the femmest of femme are more butch than the girls on the show. I love the girls, but I'd like to see something true to life" (YouAreSoAnalog).

While representations of butch women have been rare, the show has had two main characters that challenge traditional gender categories in other ways. The characters Ivan and Max have both either explicitly or implicitly identified as transgender, and both have also become another cause for concern regarding representation for many viewers.

The first of these to appear in the show is Ivan (played by Kelly Lynch), who is introduced near the end of Season One as a love interest for the heterosexual Kit (played by Pam Grier). However, shortly into the second season, Ivan is quickly and rather awkwardly removed from the plot. He gives Kit a key to his apartment, and she arrives there at one point unannounced. Ivan is in the shower, and Kit enters his bedroom. She sees his strap-on dildo on the dresser and then witnesses him emerge from the bathroom nearly nude. Ivan does not speak except to shake his head and utter "no." He then pushes Kit out of the room and yells at her to leave (2.1: Life, Loss, Leaving). Kit attempts to regain a relationship with Ivan throughout several more episodes, but he refuses and eventually disappears from the storyline. Ivan does reappear in a later episode at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting with Kit only to divulge that he

apparently had a whole separate life while he was dating her (2.9: Late, Later, Latent). He then disappears for the remainder of the series to date.

The second transgender main character within the series is Moira/Max (played by Daniella Sea), who is initially the show's first self-identifying and visibly butch character. However, shortly after being introduced, it is revealed that Moira actually wishes to become Max. His transition is one of the main plotlines of Season Three, and his struggle for inclusion within the show's lesbian community is a major theme of Seasons Four and Five. Unlike Ivan, Max has remained with the cast and attempts have been made to address a variety of issues related to transgender politics, such as the financial difficulties of transitioning, emotional strain, social repercussions, violence, and community backlash/exclusion.

Despite Max's evolution into a more substantial character and plotline, many survey responses labeled the series as "transphobic" or claimed that it does "not handle trans…issues well." Several of these do not go into much detail as to what exactly they found about the show that was upsetting or disappointing regarding transgender identities; however, a few do offer a bit more insight. One respondent clarifies, "I think having a transsexual person on *The L Word* is progressive; however, I think the creators could have explored the complexities of being trans more fully." This respondent also gives specific examples of plotlines that concerned them, such as the fact that Max takes street hormones early in his transition because he has no health insurance, and depictions of the transition process itself. This viewer argues that neither of these scenarios is given enough screen presence or explanation.

Another respondent also elaborated a bit on their claim that transgender depictions were problematic. "Last season [Four] had the tendency to get rather weird and manic," they explain, "especially with the transsexual character (whose sudden isolation was unnerving, frightening,

and depressing, especially in regard to the whole community/identity thing, and made it look like a gender war)…" (sic). While this respondent has given more information about their dissatisfaction, it remains unclear if they were unnerved by the "isolation" and "gender war" because they are transpositive and were unhappy with the portrayal or if they do not enjoy depictions of lesbian communities as unwelcoming, if not hostile, towards transgender folks.

This coincides with much of what is happening on message boards regarding discussions of transgender characters and their plotlines. When Ivan was abruptly removed from the plot, there was a lot of discussion as to why. Many posters did not understand his behavior, which often resulted in a general dislike for the character. Similarly, when Max began taking hormones as part of his transition, he became quite angry and even violent towards other characters. This also became a topic of confused discussion and deep dislike for Max. Additionally, other viewers voiced their unhappiness over the fact that the recently introduced Max was granted a major plotline during Season Three, and they felt this screen time could have been used for characters with which audiences were already more familiar.

Transgender and transpositive posters were offended by these types of reactions and often spent time and energy trying to defend these plotlines and characters. For example Realtransman stated, "I'm starting to get really ticked off at the people on the other 'Ivan's gender issues' thread, so I'm starting this one as sort of an intervention/information post." This poster went on to attempt to discuss transgender issues with other posters, some of whom were interested and others who became quite agitated.

Similarly, when Moira/Max was first introduced into the series many people did not like the character and used the threads officially dedicated to discussions of the character as a place to vent about this. Using the character thread for complaining is not unusual; however, transgender

and transpositive posters again took offense and started new threads such as "Defending and explaining Moira," "Why does everyone hate Max?," and "A few things you can to do be more tolerant to transpeople." Meanwhile, other posters simply expressed disappointment over Max's story, such as one who states, "Max is a sorry portrayal of an FTM. Very similar to my problems with Ivan Aycock, they still can't seem to get it right. While I like that they are trying to bring this very real subject to life through a show that touches so many viewers, I really think they defeated the purpose with Max" (YouAreSoAnalog).

Still other viewers saw their issues with Max as being less about transgender politics or representations and more about the depictions of butch identities. They found it offensive that Moira was the first self-identifying butch character, and rather than allow a space for that identity, the writers decided to make her a transgender character. The following posts from a thread entitled "Butches" illustrate this response:

> **Kw3rbaker:** Over the past few weeks while watching this season I have become quite annoyed. Why is [it] that we finally get a butch girl on the show and she wants to become a man? I'm not saying that this shouldn't be explored because it should. I'm just saying that I want a butch who loves her body, as it is.
>
> **BigBoiNow:** The part that bothers me most is I've spent most of my life defending the fact that I'm a Butch and trying to convince ignorant people (especially lesbians! I don't get it!) that I don't want to be a man. So the first real butch character on television walks onto the set and undoes all my preaching. …If the character was supposed to be ftm, then s/he should have been introduced that way from the beginning.

Many of these threads became sites of heated discussion and debate over the complex struggles currently happening between transgender and lesbian communities.

It is very difficult to offer any quick explanation for the controversies between lesbian and transgender individuals that have erupted over the last few decades. In fact, by itself, it is a topic for another dissertation. However in an attempt to offer a brief conception of the issue for the purposes of this study, much of this conflict lies within the historical ideas of radical lesbian feminist politics, which often centered its ideas on women's universal experiences. As Zachary I. Nataf states, "For cultural feminism the source of an authentic women's consciousness had its roots in the female body as testament and 'truth'" (441). Transgender politics have called this idea into question and sometimes resulted in confusion, mistrust, and exclusion of transgender individuals from lesbian and feminist communities.

On the other hand, some lesbians argue that transgender politics and/or identities have usurped older gender identities, such as the butch and stone butch, and that the experiences of those who still identify as such are considered invalid or outdated. *Curve* magazine author Allison Steinberg explains, "Many dykes have long since discarded butch-femme identity for a dizzying array of gender expression and many folks who share a gender expression with the stone butch now identify as genderqueer or transgender, leaving some to wonder if there's even a place for stone butch lesbians in today's post-*L Word* world" (53)[viii]. Steinberg's allusion to *The L Word* here not only illustrates the wide use of the show as a cultural reference, but also its presence within the political discourse of this particular issue. Since the show is quite illustrative of femme identities, some viewers would likely challenge her statement of discarding *both* butch and femme identities and perhaps even question if *The L Word* is a product of or contributor to this shift in queer women's identities.

All of these audience comments and discussions reflect an ongoing debate over lesbian and transgender identities within the queer community. While in many respects they do begin to touch more upon the ways in which *The L Word* and its audience communities are utilized politically (which will be more the focus of the following chapter), they most certainly also reflect aspects of the negative reactions viewers have regarding transgender representations with *The L Word.*

The final significant example of criticism regarding representation on the show is its lack of racial and ethnic diversity. Throughout the five seasons thus far, the majority of characters depicted have been white. In fact, within the first season the only people of color were the biracial character Bette (played by Jennifer Beals) and her African American half sister Kit. Perhaps what makes this even more problematic is that Kit is not a lesbian; she is one of the few heterosexual main characters (in fact, the only one that has remained through the entire series thus far). On the other hand, the writers have introduced other characters of color throughout subsequent seasons, such as Carmen (played by Sarah Shahi) in Season Two, Papi (played by Janina Gavankar) in Season Four, and Tasha (played by Rose Rollins) in Season Four.

As with transgender representational issues, several respondents stated that they felt the series was "racist," but did not elaborate much on specifically how or why. Although, one person did state that she "[worries] that the show was created by at least one women of color (Rose Troche)[ix] but that the huge issues of race and class don't seem to count in the show."

Early press for the series also created quite a buzz about the nearly all-white cast, as did similar discussions on the Internet. One poster explains, "We [black women] are as much a part of the lesbian culture as other ethnic/racial groups, and if the show truly wants to encompass the entire lesbian culture [then] a black woman or women should be included. And I know it would

help the show reach a much wider audience if black lesbians had a character on the show that

they could identify with" (MyWhatAGirl). Another user makes a similar statement, "I love Bette

and the fact that her presence has forced some discussions about biraciality. But I crave more

than that and wish there were more opportunities for diversity outside of some faces in a crowd

every once in a while..." (Arkaycee). Some discussion board posters have had even harsher

words for the series, such as this one from a thread entitled "So, we're not supposed to say

anything about the racism?":

> I'm **amazed** that anyone would suggest that network television doesn't
>
> represent EVERY minority so why bitch about how incredibly racist these
>
> representations are...that there are [seemingly] no PEOPLE of color, particularly
>
> lesbians, that are attractive to each other is patently offensive... . Showtime
>
> should consult with any critical thinking lesbian about diversity, race politics,
>
> relationships…this show REEKS! (Bigsmooches)

This quotation not only addresses the criticism of a lack of diversity, but also gets at the fact that

the few minority images that have been available have also been problematic to many viewers.

This viewer's offense over a lack of queer women of color shown in relationships with each

other is one such example. On a blog post pertaining to the show, another viewer explains,

> I also find myself wondering why does this show have to be like every other show
>
> on TV, i.e. why can't you ever have the minority females get with someone of
>
> their OWN background (and I say this as a minority female)? I don't care about it
>
> allegedly being Los Angeles...I doubt minorities – gay or straight – in LA are
>
> EXCLUSIVELY dating outside their race, and I would like to see Bette, for
>
> example, with a black female just ONCE… . (Nunya)

This blog post goes on to point out that anytime a woman of color has a romantic relationship on the show, it has been with someone outside her race[x]. She argues that this is because television has to make race palpatable and that the minorities that are on *The L Word* are simply there as ways to make the series appear diverse. Another similarly critical blog labels this practice as "multicultural placeholding" ("The White/Other Binary…" Nubian).

For other viewers, the show's few characters of color have represented other stereotypes. One viewer's message board post addresses this idea:

> [M]ost of the characters on the show are white. When you have one representative of a certain group (Hispanic, Black, Asian, etc.), and that character is the ONLY character representing a certain group, I personally believe that you need to be careful not to make that particular character portray the negative stereotypes that society has made for that group whether it be race/religion/sexual orientation, etc. For example, is there a reason why there are no educated, minority characters [that] weren't formerly drug addicts/alcoholics/from the ghetto, etc.? (Contra)

Another viewer discusses their similar unhappiness over stereotypical depictions through the character of Kit, "Kit is a recovering alcoholic who abandoned her son and is a mess. While I know people in recovery, they are not the norm. Again, not a good representative" (Storm).

Problems have also arisen for the show with its decision to cast actors in racial or ethnic roles that do not match their actual identity. Both Carmen and Papi were Latina characters, but Shahi is of Iranian and Spanish descent and Gavankar's heritage is Indian and Dutch. A viewer responds to the Shahi casting decision, "[An] Iranian girl playing Latina? Okay, okay, I love *The L Word*, but why is a girl from Iran playing a Latina? ...I would have preferred it would be a real

Latina playing Carmen" (Geezz2). While some viewers have argued that actors should be able

to play any part, others have found this highly offensive and even described it as a type of

modern day minstrelsy. As with the other examples of representational issues, all of these

critiques regarding race and ethnicity have also become fuel for heated discussions on message

boards and other Internet sites.

<p align="center">I (Love/Hate) The L Word, But…</p>

Thus far, I have addressed the different types of responses The L Word has garnered from

various types of viewers, both positive and negative. However, I have strategically failed to

highlight a particular aspect of these discussions. The previous responses, or at least these types

of responses, very often come from the same audience members. In other words, people who

proclaim to deeply enjoy the show are also some of its harshest critics and those who assert

distain for it, also often find some positive aspects to it or its existence.

Additionally, while I did point to patterns within the responses, the reasons that people

provided for why they loved or hated the show were also sometimes cited by others for the

opposite reaction. In other words, while there was a strong trend of positive answers in where

people believed The L Word provided a great amount of visibility, others felt that the only

visibility it provided was a new stereotype of queer women, or that it simply provided

pornographic images for men. Likewise, while an overwhelming number of the negative

responses felt the series provided poor representation of some kind, there were some positive

responses that felt the depictions were amazing progress and commended the creators' efforts.

I do not intend to present the impression that the last thirty-plus pages are either

erroneous or irrelevant. Rather, I seek to point out the complicated relationship viewers have

with this show. In other words, viewers find it difficult to enjoy or write off the series wholesale.

No doubt this is the result of the previously discussed investment and belief in the possibility of either positive or negative social and political impact.

Viewers are forced to participate in what José Esteban Muñoz calls disidentification. Again, disidentificatory practices are strategies in which marginalized members of a society must resist, ignore, or rework aspects of cultural commodities or practices produced within the dominant culture in order to receive any beneficial aspects they might also present (Muñoz 4). Muñoz's example of resisting racist and homophobic content in early punk rock in order to receive the positive elements of subculture and non-normative defiance is similar to the practices undertaken by *The L Word*'s viewers. Furthermore, these practices have become even more necessary (just as the investment has been heightened) for viewers who are marginalized by (or allied to) multiple identity markers, such as gender, race, ethnicity, ability, etc. As a result, several narratives of disidentification have emerged from these viewers.

The first of these narratives is the idea that "it's only entertainment." In this process, viewers attempt to disregard problems with the series by labeling it as a simple piece of commodity culture. Sometimes this also takes the form of genre, in that it is labeled as "only a soap opera." This happens on the part of both viewers who generally enjoy and generally dislike the series. The former uses entertainment as a type of justification for pleasure, while the latter uses it as a source of comfort and exoneration from problems.

Several respondents made statements that exemplify this concept. For example, one viewer states, "If you accept that it is mostly light entertainment, then it's great." Another explains that it "doesn't concern me if it seems contrived plot- or character-wise, because it is a TV show, after all." This process allows viewers to disempower the political tactics of negative

visibility and/or representation and either focus on their enjoyment or render the show politically

unimportant.

The "Hollywood" narrative, which is generally only employed by those who feel

positively about the series, is closely related to this. In this approach, viewers attempt to render

problematic issues with the show irrelevant because it has been produced by Hollywood for mass

consumption. In other words, "what did we expect?" A respondent confirms this approach, "I

don't like the reaction that it does not represent the real community because what show on TV is

not dramatized in some way?"

For other viewers part of this narrative is comparing it to "straight" television shows.

"It's very soapy and isn't a realistic portrayal of lesbians," explains one audience member, "but

neither is *Desperate Housewives* a realistic portrayal of the suburbs." Another viewer explains,

"It doesn't bother me that they do not directly reflect my life because…I don't expect my doctor

to be like the ones on *ER* or *Grey's Anatomy* either." And one other response makes this

comparison: "I think *The L Word* is to 'real' lesbians as *Friends* is to 'real' straight, single

people." In this scenario, viewers are able to focus upon the benefits they receive from watching

the series because they have essentially rendered problems with the show irrelevant by deploying

discourses of equality and inclusion. In other words, they argue that it is not necessary to work

against the show because queer folks have already won a battle of equality: queer-themed shows

are just like (or as bad as) straight-themed ones.

Also often included in the "Hollywood" narrative is the idea that *The L Word* needs to

appeal to a wide audience in order to survive and it is this wider audience that has forced creators

to include any undesirable or objectionable material. A strong example of this process at work is

how the show's critiques as being only heterosexual male pornography have been handled by viewers who enjoy the series. One message board user explains,

> Personally I'm totally comfortable with straight guys watching *TLW*, no matter what their reasons are for tuning in, and that includes sitting alone in a darkened room with a box of Kleenex in hand. I think for the show to have any chance of a successful long-term future it has to appeal to as broad a demographic as possible...[but] from reading some of the angry comments on various *L Word* boards not everyone feels the same as me. (Honeythief)

Another poster on the same thread agrees, "Some of my lesbian friends have had real trouble with the idea that straight men are watching the show. I don't see the problem. You knew that was going to happen. It's television and the whole purpose is to get as large an audience as possible, no matter what the reason" (Shelby). This poster also goes on to allude to the idea that straight men that watch the show might also be drawn into the story and actually become educated on queer women's issues. Both viewers are more concerned about *The L Word*'s survival than the possibility that it might be utilized by some as pornography. In other words, they seek to disempower a problematic aspect in order to focus on greater visibility and perhaps even wider awareness of queer issues.

The "it's only one show" approach, which argues that *The L Word* cannot possibly be everything to everyone because it is only one show, also focuses upon the show's survival. Here, viewers are asked to look to the future, in that if the series succeeds, then more representations will follow, and perhaps these will be "better." For example, one viewer states, "the last thing I want is for people to think [*The L Word*] is in any way representative of me, and the show handles political issues unbelievably poorly. More objectively though, queer-themed

pop culture is important because the more queer shows and characters we can get on TV and out in the open, the harder it is for people to demonize the GLBTQ community." This viewer dislikes much about the series, but sees the proliferation of queer images as very important. Another viewer also addresses the idea that one show cannot do everything by explaining that it is "important to have a show that represents some group of lesbian women. I don't think the show is trying to represent all of lesbian culture, but I think it is always nice to see people on TV that are 'like you' in some significant ways."

This narrative has also either been echoed or fostered by those involved with the series. Figuring out if the viewers or the creators initiated these statements would be much like the proverbial chicken and egg riddle. Actor Leisha Hailey explains, "There's so much pressure on this one show, the first of its kind, to represent every dyke or lesbian in the world" (qtd. in Champagne par. 14). Viewers that enjoy the show herald a politics of visibility, while temporarily postponing the confrontation with poor representations for a time when there are more representations. This disidentification method is also generally only used by those who wish to focus on an enjoyment of the series; however, it is conceivable that some who feel negatively may seek consolation through believing that the negative impact of only one show could not be that significant.

The fourth and final disidentificatory narrative employed by *The L Word*'s audiences is the "Benefit/Detriment Weigh-in." Through this process, viewers argue that the benefits of the series outweigh its problems. Here, all categories of positive involvement, but especially visibility, are valued above all others. This allows all types of viewers to disregard the difficult aspects of the show in order to advance a greater good. "I love it," proclaims one respondent, "because it gives me something to relate to, but other than that, it seems quite unrealistic at

times." Another reply explains that the series can "get a little ridiculous," but that "it's a good show that hits on a lot of issues concerning lesbians." Still one more viewer describes it as "very positive, even though I may not always like where the show is heading. That is life." All of these respondents take issue with aspects of *The L Word*, but overlook them because they feel there are more positive aspects than negative.

This method also has a counterpart, where enjoyment of or participation in the viewer culture of *The L Word* rests solely upon the fact that it is a rare representation of queer women within mainstream culture. This is very similar to "Benefit/Detriment;" however, it has a distinct sense of obligation to it. Some women alluded to the fact that they only watch the show because it has content about queer women. For example one response states, "It's one of the only shows by lesbians for lesbians so I'm willing to continue watching the show." Another response is even more explicit in their obligation, "I probably wouldn't have watched the show if it wasn't about lesbians." One other response highlights another angle related to these feelings of obligation when asking, "So why do I watch it? Because what other queer television do we really have? Not much." In other words, perhaps it is not that viewers feel obligated, but rather they unfortunately still have few other options available to them.

The above narratives illustrate the ways in which viewers attempt to use disidentification in order that they might still acquire the perceived benefits of interactions with *The L Word*. Some (perhaps many) viewers are able to reconcile the good and bad aspects of the series through disidentification, and their involvement with the show is generally concluded here. Escapism, community, and a level of increased media visibility are able to satisfy the social or political goals of these viewers. However, for others, who are either unable to receive these

benefits or are left unsatisfied by them, the relationship with the show does not end here. Instead it is used as the catalyst for more dialogue and action.

There are obviously historical narratives of political discourse that inform viewers' reasons for either enjoying or disliking *The L Word*. If we are to examine these broadly, a pattern begins to emerge. The most common grounds for enjoyment (visibility, community building) generally focus on theories or political tactics popularized by the queer movement. On the other hand, the majority of critiques (poor representations) center on groups that have been marginalized both outside and, more importantly, *within* mainstream queer political movements. Therefore, these critiques are representative of the ways in which common queer movement practices of visibility and community building have not consistently benefitted all members of the queer rights struggle. Those with multiple marginalized identities, such as race, ethnicity, gender, class, etc., have often been unaddressed. In Chapter One, these were illustrated through narratives such as Radical Lesbian Separatism, Third World Feminism, and now more recently, the Transgender movement.

Related to this has been the impact of gay market economic forces upon mainstream queer politics, such as visibility and community. As discussed in Chapter Two, most gay market scholars have been quick to point out that the economic marketplace has generally only hailed affluent, gay, white men. Until now, the stereotype of lesbians as separatist and anti-capitalist has dominated marketer's conceptions and limited the ability for queer women to receive much market attention or visibility.

The L Word has now ventured into this new frontier and its creators have not only sold queer and queer-positive viewers a television series, but also attempt to economically hail these audiences through a wide variety of associated products for the show. However despite a largely

queer team of creators and significant attempts to portray the series as fostering change, the creators appear to have also found it necessary to dilute radical aspects of queer women's culture in order to make the series palatable to a wide audience. As a result, only a very specific queer female image is actually recognized by the gay market. Judging by who has generally been the focus of criticisms regarding poor or limited representational visibility, this queer woman is affluent, white, femme, conventionally attractive, and fashionable. It seems the only thing that has changed from previous gay market conceptions is the masculine gender.

While the unsatisfied viewers of *The L Word* recognize the importance of visibility and community-building and what these have accomplished historically, their multiple identities or political alliances to those with these identities force them to strongly disidentify with *The L Word* in order to receive any benefit. For some, disidentification appears similar to the practice of "reading against the grain," which queer and other minorities have participated in for decades, and it is simply exhausting and insufficient.

When asked about the political relevance of a show like *The L Word*, one respondent explained, "I think, at the very least, that queer-themed popular culture provides a site for discussion and the potential for community action surrounding cultural commodities, such as *The L Word*; however, I'm not sure the show in and of itself is capable of affecting political change just by being on the air. [I]t is the actions and performances surrounding such acts of culture that hold political possibility." For the viewers left unsatisfied by *The L Word* and/or disidentification practices, there have been a variety of "actions and performances" as this viewer describes. Many of these have been inspired by the political possibilities of new media and the Internet. It is to these political possibilities being uncovered within popular culture and new media that the next chapter turns.

[i] When quoting viewers from my surveys or other sources, I have occasionally edited statements for grammar and/or readability. Some sources utilized shortcut, abbreviations, or slang common to Internet writing. However, I always did my best to maintain the intended meaning of these quotes.

[ii] While the regular sponsor Chrysler opted out of advertising during this episode, the expected high ratings had other advertisers clamoring for ad time. ABC ended up being able to sell air time for twice its usual rate and it all went to major national companies (Capsuto 393).

[iii] Capsuto's text, which is virtually the only comprehensive historical study of queer images on television, was published in 2000 immediately after *Ellen*'s outing and subsequent demise.

[iv] While this promotion was widely advertised before and during Season Four (2007), it is unclear whether or not it was still taking place at the writing of this dissertation. Several websites unaffiliated with Showtime still mention the clothing line and appear to be active; however, Showtime's official site no longer makes reference to the line.

[v] *U-Haulin' It* refers to the idea that queer women that enter into a relationship often move in with each other very rapidly. This also references an old popular joke: Q: What do lesbians bring to the second date? A: A U-Haul. *Hasbian* refers to a woman who had one or two collegiate affairs with women and who later references them when in the company of other lesbians, often as a way to show their "credentials."
Every girl is straight, until she's not refers to the idea that every woman that is now queer, has most likely claimed at one point that they were straight. Another popular variation is "I'm not a lesbian, I'm just really intrigued by one specific woman…etc."

[vi] This plot line was one of the show's most controversial moments. It received an enormous amount of criticism from viewers and many are clearly still angry. Viewers wrote petitions, letters, and even created t-shirts and other items that promoted slogans like "Bring Dana Back" and "Dana Lives." The character of Dana was one of the most well-liked characters and this was actually one of the factors in the writers' decision to have her die; arguing it would make the most impact regarding the issue of breast cancer. However, for viewers who had become invested in this character (and I would argue this investment is stronger in the case of these viewers because of the theories discussed throughout this project), this was seen as devastating, insulting, and outrageous. Throughout my work on the series, I have heard many stories of viewers who ceased to watch the show after Dana's death.

[vii] In the first season during an episode in which several characters attend The Dinah Shore Open, the character Alice labels "hundred-footers" as lesbians you can supposedly spot from 100 feet away. It is implied that this has something to do with gender presentation, because she adds that the ability to spot them may be linked to their hair styles or clothing. (Episode 1.11: "Looking Back").

[viii] For a much more thorough investigation of these issues and the historical struggles that inform them, please see the 2006 anthology *The Transgender Studies Reader* edited by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle.

[ix] Rose Troche has been credited as directing, writing, and producing for *The L Word*.

[x] This statement is true, with one possible exception. In Season Two, Kit very briefly dates another black man. However, he is married, and as a result the relationship is very short-lived.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONVERGING UPON THE FUTURE OF POPULAR CULTURE,
POLITICS, AND NEW MEDIA

Henry Jenkins has described fans as stereotype-laden outsiders that occupy the margins

of media audiences, if not society as a whole. In *Textual Poachers* he states that "the fan still

constitutes a scandalous category in contemporary culture, one alternately the target of ridicule

and anxiety, of dread and desire. …[T]he fan remains a 'fanatic' or false worshipper, whose

interests are fundamentally alien to the realm of 'normal' cultural experience and whose

mentality is dangerously out of touch with reality" (15). Later in the same text, he adds to this

sentiment, "To speak as a fan is to accept what has been labeled a subordinated position within

the cultural hierarchy, to accept an identity constantly belittled or criticized by institutional

authorities" (23). While *Textual Poachers* is Jenkins' initial offering to fandom studies, he

appears to remain somewhat invested in the idea of the outsider fan in a 2002 article entitled

"Interactive Audiences?: The 'Collective Intelligence' of Media Fans," in which he describes

fans as "a community used to speaking from the margins" (142).

Of course, on one hand, Jenkins' work must be placed within the historical context of

fandom studies. *Textual Poachers* emerged at a time when work on fandom was viewed as an

absurd topic for academics, and the acknowledgement of one's own fandom might be considered

nothing short of academic suicide. With this history in mind, it is difficult to argue with his

descriptions. After all, his work alone has done much for lessening the stigma of being "a fan."

Additionally, his most recent book *Convergence Culture* does depict fandom as being in a state

of transition. He explains that throughout his work he has "watched fans move from the

invisible margins of popular culture and into the center of current thinking about media

production and consumption" (12). On the other hand, it is hard not to recognize the similarity

between Jenkins' portrayal of media fans and the ways in which those occupying other marginalized identities, such as homosexuality, have been described.

Furthermore, while Jenkins' work on fandom is extensive and critical to the field, he gives a relatively small amount of consideration to media audiences that occupy marginal identities beyond simply their fandom. In fact, he even acknowledges that most of his fan communities are comprised of straight, white, middle-class, and fairly educated individuals[i]; these are hardly marginalized groups within the larger culture. He does discuss queer fans of *Star Trek* and their efforts to convince its writers to include queer content. He also analyzes the work of and motivations behind fans who write queer fan fiction (although he does point out that many of these are straight women). However, neither of these examples addresses audiences that come to their choice of media largely because of their sexuality. Perhaps Jenkins' omission is largely the result of a lack of relevant examples at the time of his research; but in both instances, the identity as a fan of specific media remains first in the equation and sexuality second.

The L Word's queer female audiences disrupt this tradition by bringing an additional aspect of marginality to the idea of fandom. While many of the ways in which these viewers interact with the series and each other are not all that different from other media fans, the continual occupation of a marginal identity and the validation of that identity by both the media object and the viewer communities do mark them as unique. Chapter Three has already provided examples of individuals who feel it is necessary to watch *The L Word*, despite their dislike for it, in order to feel connected to the larger queer female community. There were also cases of viewers who feel they are obligated to watch the show, regardless of its faults, because they believe it creates some larger political or social impact. Jenkins' fans of *Star Trek* may have found themselves inspired by its depiction of a utopian future that lacked discrimination, but they

did not *come to* the series in order to participate within queer communities or advance queer visibility. This marks *The L Word*'s audiences and their consumption of the series as distinctive example for fandom studies.

For some, if not many, of *The L Word*'s viewers, the use value found within the show often relates to a politics of pleasure. This pleasure may be about cinematic elements, the actors themselves, the ability to escape within the story world, connecting with fellow viewers for friendship, discussion, gossip, support, and even love, or finally witnessing visible images of oneself in mainstream media. While it is very difficult to theorize about pleasure, it is also important not to diminish its significance to these viewers. In fact, pleasure can be significantly political for a community that occupies the margins of the larger culture. Richard Dyer and Derek Cohen discuss pleasure's importance in "The Politics of Gay Culture" by stating, "We tend to ignore *pleasure* as part of the business of politics – to our peril. At a minimum, pleasure clearly allied to politics keeps us going, recharges our batteries. More positively, the pleasure of culture gives us a glimpse of where we are going and helps us to enjoy the struggle of getting there" (16, emphasis in original). In other words, we must be careful not to deny the importance of pleasure in popular culture.

Finding a way to enjoy aspects of *The L Word* and its communities may be the extent of interaction for some audiences, but by no means is it to be considered any less than the actions of other viewers, such as those that will be discussed later in this chapter. Escape, community, and visibility through popular culture are simply needs that these viewers are able to fulfill through *The L Word*. But for others, receiving pleasure from *The L Word* is complicated. The disidentification practices that must be employed in order to make use of the show's positive or empowering aspects have become tiring or too extensive. These audiences have grown weary or

angry over the tendency for the queer movement's politics of visibility and community building

to consistently ignore certain identities. I contend that these viewers of *The L Word* are

providing an entrance into a politics that merely begins with the more traditional identity politics,

brings an ever-widening diversity of voices to the table through a post-modern new media-driven

world, and in the end, may foster a more inclusive and stronger movement.

While I have already pointed to a way in which some of Jenkins' work has fallen short

for this project, I do hold an immense amount of respect for him and his efforts within fandom

studies. In fact, I believe that his most recent text regarding what he calls "convergence culture"

offers some of the most exciting and hopeful models to date regarding the intersections of

politics and popular culture. *Convergence Culture* incorporates fandom studies into much

broader theories of new media and the Internet. This chapter intends to simultaneously employ

the ideas of convergence in order to explain how some audiences are making use of *The L Word*

and utilize *The L Word*'s queer fandom as a way to provide new insight into what Jenkins calls

"grassroots convergence."

Thus, this chapter begins with a fairly detailed discussion of Jenkins' *Convergence*

Culture and what it means for fan/audience communities. I will address the collective

intelligence of knowledge communities, the changes convergence has caused regarding

marketing, the struggles convergence has posed concerning control of media, and how these all

might extend into a political arena. These concepts will then be applied within the viewer

communities of *The L Word*. Finally, I will address how these are and are not changing the face

of political activism and what opportunities and challenges they present for queer activists and

queer politics.

Convergence Culture and Politics

Convergence, which Jenkins stresses is a process and not an endpoint, is "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want" (2). The current culture of convergence arises in contrast to and arrives on the heels of the paradigm of the digital revolution. Advocates for the digital revolution argued that new media represented the future, and old media would fade into the annals of history. But as Jenkins points out, there is a difference between media and delivery technologies. Media refers to technology that facilitates communication and the social or cultural practices associated with that technology. Delivery technologies, on the other hand, are the devices that enable us to access certain media. The example Jenkins employs for this distinction is that recorded sound is a type of media, while delivery technologies for that media include albums, cassette tapes, CDs, and MP3s (13). With this in mind, delivery technologies may change, but old media never actually disappears. Instead, the two "interact in ever more complex ways" (6).

Conceptions of convergence also emerged along with what Jenkins labels the "Black Box Fallacy," which argued that eventually "all media content is going to flow through a single black box into our living rooms (or, in the mobile scenario, through black boxes we carry around with us everywhere we go)" (14). However, he believes this to be an erroneous assumption, as well. Media may be converging, but the delivery technologies are diverging. In other words, a medium such as recorded music may be widely available and may cross market itself within television, the Internet, film, and video games. But at the same time, there are an ever-increasing number of specialty delivery devices for that music (CD players, DVD players, satellite and

Internet radio, MP3 players, and even cell phones). Thus, it may be possible to consolidate

multiple mediums into one space, but the different aspects to our lives encourage companies to

produce diverging delivery technologies (15). In other words, convergence "involves both a

change in the way media is produced and a change in the way media is consumed" (16).

Jenkins' text is specifically interested in the relationships between this culture of convergence

and two other ideas: participatory culture and collective intelligence.

His work has always contended that audiences of media are active, as opposed to passive

consumers, and participatory culture builds upon this idea. Within a culture of convergence,

media producers and consumers begin to "interact with each other according to a new set of rules

that none of us fully understands" (3). However, what Jenkins does believe is evident is that

their roles are no longer as clearly defined as they once were, and their power within the dynamic

remains in constant flux. Media corporations generally hold more power than individuals;

however, they are no longer the sole producers of media. Additionally, consumers may have an

increasing voice in how they are addressed as consumers, but not all consumers have the same

levels of access.

Jenkins' final term, "collective intelligence," refers to what happens when consumers

work together in order to gather information and affect the media environments. He explains

that "none of us can know everything; each of us knows something; and we can put the pieces

together if we pool our resources and combine our skills" (4). When consumers work together

creating collective intelligence, they form "knowledge communities," a term he borrows from

Pierre Levy (20).

Jenkins believes a prime example of knowledge communities is what groups of fans have

been participating in for years. Fans gather together to collect, discuss, and process information

about their object of fandom, and the Internet has only exacerbated this process. Now, an increasing number of fans from a wider geographic distribution can discuss their interests immediately in virtual online venues. Again, no one in these communities knows everything about a certain topic, but together they form a collective intelligence that may bring them closer to that possibility. Additionally, these communities should not be seen as static depositories of information, but rather disorderly and exciting processes of continually gathering information (57).

Jenkins' case study for a fan community that operates as a knowledge community is the group of dedicated *Survivor* fans on the "*Survivor* Sucks" website. These viewers spend endless hours each season attempting to discover aspects of the popular reality show before they are officially revealed on air. They call this process "spoiling" and themselves "Survivor spoilers" (31). Every active participant has specific specialties that they bring to the hunt, such as professional connections, reasoning skills, geographical expertise, and/or historical knowledge. Together these fans discuss, argue, reason, and determine surprisingly accurate answers to their queries regarding the series' outcomes. None of these viewers could come remotely close to the same level of accuracy in predictions by themselves, but as a knowledge community, they are quite a force. In fact, Jenkins humorously asks readers to "imagine the kinds of information these fans could collect, if they sought to spoil the government rather than the networks" (29).

This leads to one of the more interesting aspects of knowledge communities for this project. Convergence is such an exciting concept for the interplay between politics and popular culture because it operates simultaneously from the top-down through media corporations and the bottom-up through media consumers (18). Knowledge communities are a key component to the consumer's bottom-up approach, which Jenkins describes as "grassroots convergence" (57).

Corporations may be able to market in new, exciting, and extensive ways, but consumers are also tapping into new media as a way to regain some control within this corporate/consumer struggle. As a result, convergence culture has had interesting impacts upon marketing and the marketplace.

Within the last ten to twenty years, advertising and the marketplace have changed drastically. Companies have historically sought to expose their advertisements and products to as many consumers as possible. As a result, large-scale advertisements through major media outlets like television, newspapers, radio, and billboards were seen as efficient ways to create a large consumer base. However, as the marketplace expanded, companies had to distinguish themselves from others and began to try to reach specific consumers through niche marketing, such as the gay market discussed in Chapter Two. This also began to change within the last several years with the introduction of new media.

One of the earliest signals that older advertising methods may be less effective within new media environments came when advertisers realized that consumers were not actually responding to their banner ads on websites. The Internet allowed advertisers to measure the effectiveness of these types of ads in a way old venues did not. For example, billboards may have been able to guarantee a company that one million cars might drive past their advertisement each week; however, there was no way of actually measuring how many of those cars interacted with that company as a result of this travel pattern. With the Internet, a user's "click through" could be measured, and companies were able to see that very few consumers that witnessed a banner ad on a website they visited were then encouraged to go to that company's site and purchase a product (Jenkins *Convergence Culture* 65).

So while advertising venues may have proliferated, consumers are in fact becoming harder to reach. Faced with more media options, customers are making it difficult for companies to maintain their attention. In addition to the Internet, there are more television stations (major network and cable network), a greater number of printed publications, email advertising, and a wider variety of home entertainment outlets (video games, DVDs, CDs, etc). Additionally, technological advances are making certain forms of advertising obsolete. For example, DVDs and the DVR are allowing buyers to watch movies and television without commercials; MP3s and satellite radio are diminishing the impact of radio advertisements; and software that blocks certain types of online advertising, such as pop-up ads, is already negating a portion of businesses' attempts within the world of the Internet and new media.

Interestingly, consumers are becoming increasing interactive while they simultaneously become more difficult for corporations to reach. For example, viewers no longer simply watch a show like *C.S.I: Crime Scene Investigation* on their television each week. Instead, they can watch the new episode on CBS on Thursday, watch previous seasons in syndication on the cable network Spike all week, look up exclusive online content for the series on the show's official website, buy the DVD set when it becomes available for the special features, play the video game version on their XBox, download the show's theme song into their iPod or cell phone ring tones, and read the affiliated novels published as mass paperbacks.

Hence, advertisers are struggling to determine the best way to reach these types of viewers, who are willing to locate media content across multiple venues. As a result, they are focusing more on what Jenkins calls "affective economies," which refers to a new type of marketing that "seeks to understand the emotional underpinnings of consumer decision-making as a driving force behind viewing and purchasing decisions" (62). In other words, companies are

interested in understanding audience emotions and attaching themselves to these emotional terrains.

A simplistic form of this type of marketing is product placement and brand recognition, but more complex endeavors have included companies creating ongoing campaigns with certain media that allow them to construct entire community identities around their products. Their hope is that consumers will then want to be a part of this community. An example of this given by Jenkins is Coca-Cola's ongoing relationship with *American Idol*, in where Coke "sees itself less as a soft drink bottler and more as an entertainment company that actively shapes as well as sponsors sporting events, concerts, movies, and television series" (69).

Another example of this would be the recent ways in which Stephen Colbert of *The Colbert Report* has connected aspects of his show with frequent sponsor Doritos. During his April broadcasts from the Pennsylvania Democratic Primary, he continually mentioned the company, ate their snack food on air, and incorporated them into his jokes. In the April 3, 2008 episode, Colbert even encouraged his audiences to print stickers, which stated "Peabody Award Winner," off the show's website and go to their local grocery stores to stick them on bags of Doritos. He argued that Doritos deserved to be recognized for helping him win his Peabody Award, and he couldn't possibly get to every bag in America by himself.

In these examples, companies connect with communities of viewers on a deeper level than just product placement. They are no longer simply interested in the quantity of viewers they reach, but rather the quality of viewers and the prime choice of these is what companies call "the loyalist." Interestingly, the loyalist strongly resembles the fan.

Jenkins argues that by attempting to reach loyal (or fan) audiences, corporations have simultaneously granted consumers new levels of power (63). Companies have to work much

harder to gain entrance into a customer's world, and they can also find themselves ousted from it quite easily. They must work to maintain an image that consistently attracts and never deters this potential buyer. Additionally, customers that now operate together within knowledge communities hold a high level of attraction to advertisers because of their large numbers. However, they also maintain a coinciding level of collective power to have their demands met. Jenkins warns, however, that this is not a dynamic that consistently favors of the consumer. Corporations are still interested in commodifying them, and "audiences have a long way to go if they are going to exploit the point of entry that affective economics offers them for collective action and grassroots criticism of corporate conduct" (92).

Convergence culture and knowledge communities have also posed new and unique problems within the market economy regarding the control of media. Media fans have always participated in processes of cultural production related to their fandom. Historically, they have created media as diverse as songs, artwork, fanzines, fan fiction, and amateur films. In the age of the Internet, these items have become much more widespread, visible, and accessible by the larger public. It is no longer necessary to be closely acquainted with a specific fan community in order to read fan fiction or purchase a piece of fan art; one only needs Internet access. Fan fiction is well-organized and archived on endless numbers of fan websites and these sites, as well as others like Ebay, frequently offer fan art for sale. Additionally, other new media outlets like YouTube and audio file-sharing sites have further complicated ideas of media authorship and rights. Jenkins explains:

> The Web has made visible the hidden compromises that enabled participatory
>
> culture and commercial culture to coexist throughout much of the twentieth
>
> century. …Corporations might know, abstractly, that such transactions [pirating,

fan fiction, etc.] were occurring all around them, every day, but they didn't know,

concretely, who was doing it. And even if they did, they weren't going to come

bursting into people's homes at night. But, as those transactions came out from

behind closed doors, they represented a visible, public threat to the absolute

control the culture industries asserted over their intellectual property. (137)

Jenkins also offers several examples of how fans have not only tapped into these outlets to pay

tribute, rework, and poach media, but also how their actions have sometimes come under close

scrutiny of media corporations.

Generally, these interactions between media corporations and consumers have taken one

of two paths: the prohibitionists and the collaborationists (134). The former occurs when

companies attempt to reign in audience participation and production. Sometimes this may take

the form of removing content from websites, but other times it takes a more serious route

through legal action, such as cease and desist orders and lawsuits. One of the most obvious

examples of this approach is the recording industries' current battle with downloading/illegal

file-sharing, which has led to fines, lawsuits, and the shutting down of several participating

websites.

Conversely, the collaborationist approach has been popular with new media companies,

such as those that create video games and cellular phones. Here, companies seek to work with

consumers to gather ideas and feedback on products and content, in order that their creations be

more exciting to consumers, and thus successful. While George Lucas and his *Star Wars*

franchise have occasionally had a prohibitionist relationship with fans, Jenkins provides them as

a strong example of collaborationism (139). Lucas and the films' official websites have

sponsored amateur filmmaking contests and even offered fans special content (sound files,

images, copyright prosecution-free franchise toys) to aid in the creation of such material. He has also publically acknowledged and encouraged writers of fan fiction. His only stipulation for them has been that their material must remain consistent with the franchise's family-friendly image (i.e., no erotic fan fiction).

Jenkins argues that these battles between consumers and media corporations over control have only just begun, and it is impossible to know yet how they will play out. Right now there appear to be just as many companies angered over consumer interaction as there are those that are attempting to encourage these types of relationships (166). This may be understandable since he suggests that "the media producers need fans just as much as fans need them" (168).

Finally, in his last two chapters, Jenkins attempts to extend what he has illuminated regarding media consumerism to political activism. The 2004 presidential race forms the backdrop for these discussions, in which he argues that political organizations are taking cues from fan communities in order to create "serious fun" (207). Serious fun employs entertainment resources to educate and mobilize people around political causes, and these are often colliding within the world of new media. Cartoons, videos, songs, and interactive games with a political message deployed through the Internet are all examples of this.

He further argues that one of the greatest shifts within the political landscape is the way in which new media is altering methods of deploying political communication. Old broadcast media employed a "one-to-many" approach verses new media's largely "peer-to-peer" method. Jenkins contends that this will allow for "a changed sense of community, a greater sense of participation, less dependence on official expertise and a greater trust in collaborative problem solving," all of which are currently taking place within media audience communities (209). Some organizations and campaigns have already tapped into these new possibilities, such as

Move On, the Howard Dean campaign, True Majority, and very recently, Barack Obama's campaign. All of these have found new ways to raise funds, educate voters, and rally support for their respective causes through new media and the Internet.

While new media has not changed power dynamics overnight, it is creating unique and interesting challenges, as well as opportunities. On one hand, corporate media is managed by an increasingly small number of parties with an increasing amount of control. On the other hand, convergence culture is forcing those outlets to now contend with other types of media that are much less centrally controlled. Co-optation of viewers and content is still a possibility, but media corporations have to keep up with public discourse and demands because "grassroots communication is not a momentary disruption of the corporate signal, but the routine way the new system operates" (Jenkins *Convergence Culture* 215).

A politics that looks like popular culture and vice versa (*The Daily Show*, *'Lil Bush*, *Saturday Night Live*, Rock the Vote, Move On, Vote for Change, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, etc.) has already proven to be a powerful tool towards shifts in the political landscape, and Jenkins believes it is only logical that these kinds of "play" areas will become models for more serious political matters for two reasons. One, the stakes are low in popular culture, and two, it is simply more fun than politics. However, I believe this is where *The L Word* and its viewers also present a new perspective. These communities already have a political nature based upon their marginalized identity. This identity is often the reason viewers find themselves within these communities, as opposed to the media item itself, and while *The L Word* may be "more fun" than traditional politics for these individuals, viewers seem to believe that the stakes are high even within this popular culture format. In other words, play may be fun, but it constantly crosses over into political territory.

The L Word as Convergence Culture

A top-down approach to convergence concerning *The L Word* and its network Showtime is easily discernable. The series is available on the premium cable channel, through DVD rentals and sales, and as an immediate download through Showtime's website (and others such as iTunes). It is also marketed through affiliated products, email newsletters, and instant messages. Exclusive series content is available to viewers through Showtime's website, on the DVD sets, and from OurChart. The last of these, and *The L Word*'s presence in SecondLife, also provide fairly unique venues for audience members to interact, not only with the show, but also the larger queer female community. All of these opportunities are promoted by Showtime to its viewers largely as a way to promote the series and increase its revenue. In contrast, viewers' bottom-up deployment of convergence is not only less transparent, but is also often more interested in reworking or engaging with series content and complicating Showtime's ability to easily profit from the queer female consumer.

The communities of viewers I have detailed within the previous chapters provide an obvious entrance into these viewer-centered aspects of convergence. *The L Word*'s audience interactions on message boards, blogs, live journals, and other fan-centered websites clearly qualify as Jenkins' knowledge communities. These viewers gather and process all types of information related to the series, and while their main goal may not be to "spoil" the show (although there are spaces where this takes place) like Jenkins' *Survivor* fans, the exchanging and pooling of information on these sites qualifies as collective intelligence. Also, just as with the *Survivor* spoilers, no one user on *The L Word*'s sites knows everything about or related to the series, but virtually anything can be discovered within these sites when the group acts collectively.

What does set *The L Word*'s viewer communities apart from other groups of media fans is that they are not limiting their discussions to the show itself. A significant number of the interactions found within these sites relate to more general queer issues, such as relationships, identity categories, oppression, coming out, and other queer popular culture. Additionally, critiques and praise for the series often concern concepts of identity and representation, and as a result, even conversations that begin about the series frequently evolve towards wider topics of queer culture. In other words, the collective intelligence being formed by these knowledge communities is not simply about *The L Word*, but rather is a collective intelligence of queer experience. This designates these groups as containing a distinctly political aspect that other media fan communities are unlikely to possess. Often the effect of this political component remains within the community as issues are raised, discussed between members, and a greater knowledge of movement objectives is gained. However, sometimes the collective intelligence's politics work their way into the series' text and thus, into the dominant culture. It is to this process and its implications that I now turn.

Chapter Three discussed how many concerns regarding visibility and representation in *The L Word* have been raised on message boards. For instance, when viewers initially had issues with the transgender depictions of both Ivan and Max, they took to the web as a venue to critique and converse about the characters and their stories. These posts were met by both praise and conflict from other users, and the number of threads proliferated in order to serve the topic's multitude of viewpoints.

However, as this progressed, these dialogues shifted dramatically from simply being about whether or not Ivan and Max were positive or negative representations towards larger discussions about transgender identity and the issues surrounding transgender and lesbian

communities. Threads entitled "What's up with Max?" eventually led to threads named "Things

you can do to be more tolerant to trans people," and discussions such as "I can't believe Ivan!"

brought on "Ivan's 'gender issues' from an FTM perspective." Posters in many of these threads

expressed a wide range of emotions from support, understanding, and interest to anger, despair,

and hostility. But regardless of any one thread's tone, they had become productive and exciting

spaces of community, education, and politics. Additionally, these threads exemplified what was

occurring within the larger communities and documented it within the space of collective

intelligence.

Discussions of racial representations followed similar patterns of fostering a collective

intelligence through knowledge communities. Early on, viewers addressed the show's lack of

racial and ethnic diversity. This eventually flowed into more extensive discussions of what

could even be considered a positive representation; whether or not the series' scenarios were

realistic; and how those of minority races and ethnicities still faced discrimination within the

larger queer community. While these types of interactions took place on discussion boards, I

turn to several blogs in order to provide examples. These will also illustrate that the collective

intelligence flowing throughout new media and the Internet is not limited to the more formal

configuration of the boards.

The popular blog entitled *Blac (k) ademic* by Nubian (aka: Kortney Ryan Ziegler) is

known for addressing a wide range of topics related to race, gender, feminism, academia, the

arts, and activism[ii]. It has also often addressed the media and popular culture, including two

entries regarding *The L Word*.

In Jan 2006, Nubian posted an entry titled "The White/Other Binary in *The L Word*" that

addressed many of the concerns she had over the series. Going beyond simple ideas of

representation, her post discusses "multicultural placeholding," interracial relationships, and the

"white/other binary" (from which the post took its title). Several of the blog's readers, some of

whom were regular visitors with their own blogs and linked entries, responded to this with

generally affirming comments that broadened the issues Nubian addressed into other media and

the larger culture. For example, respondents addressed the heterosexist and racist norms of

society, tokenism within the series and other popular culture, and provided personal stories as

support. Others also suggested different media resources that related to the issues being raised,

such as the comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*, the documentaries *The Butch Mystique* and *The

Butch Body Blues*, and the HBO series *Six Feet Under*.

Then in March of 2006, Nubian again posted about *The L Word*, but this time in a much

more distressed entry entitled "Fuck *The L-Word*." The post addressed an episode in Season

Three that includes a flashback sequence at a party. A black female performance artist (played

by Canadian model Shay Kingston) is part of the booked entertainment for this event and she is

depicted naked and behind some type of plexi-glass enclosure, on which she writes text in multi-

colored markers. Shortly after the audience sees her for the first time, a fully-dressed Shane

enters the space, they exchange smiles, and Shane begins to kiss and caress her nude body. The

scene is shot to emphasize that at least one (the character of Dana), if not several, of the other

mainly white party-goers are observing this take place. Nubian responds to the scene as such:

> Fuck you Ilene Chaiken. Fuck you for having the audacity to have a black
>
> woman used for sexual pleasure for whites. Fuck you for perpetuating the idea
>
> that the black female body is always ready and available for white sexual
>
> domination and consumption. Fuck you for having her in a fucking box–SHE
>
> WAS CAGED FOR GOD SAKES while naked for the (dis)pleasure of the white

gaze–wasn't black women on auction blocks during slavery enough? Do you

have to reproduce this image, this idea that we have no soul, no mind, only big

titties waiting for some stupid white bitch to come and kiss our backs? (par 3)

She ends the entry by asking for her readers to boycott the show in solidarity.

This post also received numerous replies, several of which began by agreeing with her

suggestion to boycott. But as with the other entry, their discussions evolved into larger dialogues

pertaining to racial representations in other media and racism within the wider culture. Some

respondents again offered personal stories and other media suggestions; while others discussed

the wider implications of the scene, such as stereotypes and the invisibility of race within the

mainstream queer community. A few did offer suggestions for what the scene may have been

attempting to say, and another raised a question regarding representations as a whole:

Just to play devil's advocate, under what circumstances is it ok to show a black

women (straight or gay) as an erotic performer/exhibitionist/whatever you want to

call it? Is it the black women in the glass cage that makes it bad or the fact that

she is doing it for white women? Is it the part where she is being fucked by white

women (in particular a lead character)? Under what circumstances could a

television show portray something like that as a personal choice and have it

appear not exploitive? Is it even possible? (Sarah S).

This entry was directly answered by Nubian by stating, "Sarah – that is a loaded question. It is

of course more nuanced than saying a black woman can never be shown as an agent of sexuality

– it is very complicated. I have to think about this some more." Once again, while the

discussion began about a particular scene within the show's narrative, it spawned a vibrant

discussion that covered much larger social/political issues and caused participants to consider multiple possibilities and viewpoints.

The impact of *Blac (k) ademic*'s discussions has not been limited to its specific web address either. For instance, the site was referenced on the blog *Racialicious: The Intersections of Race and Pop Culture* by author Carmen Van Kerckhove. She noted the latter of Nubian's above entries and recommended it to one of her own readers, who critiques Kerckhove's rather positive blog entry about the series (Storm). In other words, the members of knowledge communities are never to be considered insular or static; instead, they shift and flow over multiple spaces and throughout various interactions.

In an article for the Association for American Colleges and Universities, *Blac (k) ademic*'s Ziegler described the connections she gained through her blogging. She states,

> Through blogging, I interacted with women throughout the world, collaborating over issues relevant to young women of color, and specifically those of us working in academe. Our conversations repeatedly addressed topics such as navigating the academy, queer sexualities, race and racism, and artistic expression within our own local communities. Eventually, along with bloggers Brownfemipower, Fabulosamujer, and Mamitamala, I helped to create a digital hub for women of color: the Radical Women of Color Blog Carnival. This monthly "carnival" – a digest of themed entries by bloggers writing across the web – was the first virtual forum of its kind to highlight the lived experiences of women of color and their allies. (par. 7-8)

Although she does not use the same terminology, this group of bloggers clearly fits Jenkins' ideas of a knowledge community. Just as with the discussion board examples regarding

transgender representations, these women are fostering knowledge, encouraging political

discourse, and at the same time, creating collective intelligence.

Her statements also highlight the exciting and empowering, simultaneously local and

global, levels on which these communities are able to operate. The openness and accessibility of

the Internet allows for the inclusion of a diverse or widespread group of voices. Women from all

around the world can come together at any moment within cyberspace and bring new ideas and

perspectives for others to apply within their own lives, neighborhoods, or other virtual spaces. A

greater number of viewpoints and understanding can only strengthen the wider queer movement.

These new media community spaces may have the potential to supply not only a broader

diversity of discourses, but also a greater ability for networking and organizing than could ever

be assembled by older types of community.

Activists, however, must still proceed with caution. The Internet and new media are most

certainly not perfect. Despite expanding availability, they remain by no means universal, and

participation within these groups is time consuming, which also may result in limited access for

some. What's more, those on the Internet may still tend to congregate within groups with whom

they find similarities, negating the possibilities for diversity. Or perhaps information and ideas

will get lost or misinterpreted (like in the old game of telephone) as a result of the continuous

ebb and flow of numerous interactions. But for those knowledge communities that are

successfully forming, collective intelligence may even provide possibilities for change within the

larger culture.

In the case of *The L Word*'s audiences, it is evident that some intend for their interactions

to reach beyond their immediate community and find access to the show's creators. Around half

of my survey respondents indicated that they believed at least someone involved with the show

was likely to be reading viewer comments on websites. The desire to lobby producers of popular culture in order to change content or decisions related to the media item is by no means unique to *The L Word*'s audiences. For decades, fan communities have sought to critique their object of fandom in hopes that writers, actors, or producers might take their viewpoints to heart and provide fans with the text they desired. However, queer identities, their representations, and what these both might mean within the larger culture are almost always the focus of *The L Word*'s viewer criticisms. Other fan communities may be interested in changing a text, but rarely do they believe their desired changes to have political or social impact for their life experiences.

Additionally, whereas many fan communities have found their requests falling upon deaf ears, *The L Word*'s creators are considered to not only be interested, but also willing to incorporate feedback. Some survey respondents remained pessimistic about this possibility; however, many others believed this to be a very realistic scenario. The idea that the creators read and sometimes address viewer responses is widespread throughout audiences of the series. Message boards often mention this notion as an impetus behind certain discussion threads, and despite their tendency to be separate from the websites centered specifically on *The L Word*[iii], bloggers also often allude to their posts being noticed by Chaiken and others involved. For example, Nubian's initial post on *Blac (k) ademic* ended by mentioning, "[I]t is not enough to replay the argument that the show doesn't have women that 'look like us,' for in my case, that will probably never happen – unless Chaiken is reading this and wants to hire me (hey, she could be – and Chaiken, I am available!)" (par. 12). The extreme pervasiveness of and deep viewer belief in the idea that those involved with the show are listening and incorporating ideas indicates that this perception must have been cultivated by the creators on at least some level.

One obvious way in which Showtime and Chaiken have made this scenario a possibility is through the show's official websites (Showtime/lword and OurChart), which encourage audience comments and discussions by including the same types of content as the viewer-created sites. These official sites contain just as many message boards, fan fiction pieces, blogs, and other interactive features as the others. In fact, Showtime/lword even includes a *The L Word* Wiki, which is entirely created by the viewers. In some ways, a Wiki may be seen as a more formal method of attempting to generate an audience's collective intelligence; however, it is also much less fluid and more static. Showtime's site describes the wiki process as "a collaboratively written website created by the fans *for* the fans. That means YOU add the images, videos, and info about the *The L Word* episodes, *The L Word* cast, and characters that define this amazing original series" (emphasis and capitalization in original). Then again, encouraging viewers to communicate with each other does not always mean that anyone is paying attention to their conversations.

This possibility has been encouraged by Chaiken and cast members through interviews, in which they have indicated not only an awareness of, but also an interest in, the audience responses contained within these communities. For example, at an autograph signing with Chaiken and actor Pam Grier in Atlanta, GA, the two interviewed with *The L Word* Fan Site (www.l-word.com) and both admitted in the interview that they frequent and enjoy the website. Grier even proclaimed, "I belong to the site" (Cole "Chaiken and Grier Interview" par. 2). At a fan convention interview in the UK, cast member Laurel Holloman similarly mentioned both reading fan mail and visiting the fan websites. "I've been there [www.l-word.com]" she confirmed, "It's the biggest website we have . . . And I think the other girls visit it too. I know Leisha [Hailey] does and Kate [Moennig] does" (sic) (Watson "Exclusive Laurel Holloman…"

par. 62). Even actors who play more peripheral characters have discussed reading these sites. In

an interview with Meredith McGeachie (who plays Tonya) for *The L Word* Fan Site, she

confirmed, "I think the website is fantastic. Erin [Daniels] told me at one point that there was a

Tonya thing, so just to go and look and I did and I was like, 'wow'" (Watson "L-Word

Exclusive…" par. 11). These comments may initially only originate from Chaiken and three cast

members, but they implicate three others (Hailey, Moennig, and Daniels) as reading the sites, as

well.

Still, frequenting websites and reading fan mail does not necessarily confirm that anyone

is willing to let what they read influence their actual creative process. But Chaiken delivers this

possibility to audiences as well. She explains,

> I try to strike a balance when I read the message boards, which I do
>
> occasionally, and when I hear from fans and viewers. I'm interested and
>
> enlightened and probably subconsciously influenced. I care a lot about
>
> what the show's fans think. The writers and I ultimately will tell the
>
> stories that we believe are the right stories to tell, that are the truest stories,
>
> but it's significant to us what the people who have been watching the
>
> show think about the characters and their lives. (Chaiken "Chat
>
> Transcript" par. 6)

She does appear a bit hesitant to admit being influenced by comments; however, this is most

likely to protect herself and Showtime from accusations of plagiarism. In reality, the show has

made significant changes from season to season that in many ways reflect some of the more

widespread viewer comments.

Regarding gender representations, there has been a wider array of gender-variant secondary or peripheral characters since Season Two; Shane's androgynous aesthetic has been consistently presented as intensely attractive; and Rose Rollins has brought a more traditionally butch aesthetic to the cast through Tasha, who is a military police officer recently returned home from combat in Iraq.

Transgender depictions have also expanded through Max, who initially appeared to be a response from creators concerning the unhappiness on the part of audience members over the poor representation and eventual loss of the character Ivan. And while Max may have created new difficult questions, his story as a transman has been given a significant amount of screen time. This has moved beyond what other network programming has generally been willing to depict, which tends to be the "what is transgenderism/coming out transgender" story arc, and moved into the more complex issues of building new relationships, gender versus sexuality, and the previously mentioned tensions between transgender and lesbian communities.

In fact, Season Five presents storylines that evoke what has been happening on *The L Word*'s viewer discussion boards for several years. In the narrative, Max begins to provide technical support for Alice's OurChart site. Through this process, he realizes that Alice, as well as many of the women participating on her site, are ignorant to trans issues, if not transphobic. He asks Alice to look at a podcast, which addresses transgender identity and issues that he would like to post on the site, but she initially dismisses it as if she does not have time to consider his input. Max decides to take matters into his own hands and begins a blog on the site about his experiences. The blog causes an eruption of controversy on Alice's OurChart and results in the following dialogue between Alice and Max:

> **Alice**: Max, you invaded *my* space to put out your own agenda and it wasn't cool
>
> at all. But here's what I'll do, you can blog once a week. I'll put you in your own
>
> little box on the homepage – *not* with the Guestbians^{iv}…
>
> **Max:** Why not with the Guestbians?
>
> **Alice:** Because it's a lesbian site, Max, and I just don't want to get bombarded
>
> with a bunch of dykes, you know, flipping out about this transgender thing.
>
> **Max:** You can't segregate transgender people out of the lesbian community. I
>
> mean…
>
> **Alice:** I'm not saying that, you know, lesbians and transgender can't share the
>
> same spaces. It's just that…

At this point in the dialogue, Alice is interrupted, and the conversation ends. Max and Alice are

later shown interacting amicably, and thus it can be assumed that they have come to an

agreement (Episode 5.4: "Let's Get this Party Started"). Eventually in the season's ninth

episode, Alice uses OurChart to publically apologize to Max for her behavior and admits that

transgender individuals deserve inclusion in the lesbian community (Episode 5.9: "Liquid

Heat"). These tensions between Max and Alice clearly reference many similar kinds of

interactions taking place within the real queer communities and within *The L Word*'s audience

communities.

Generally, this plotline resulted in a much more positive response towards Max on

message boards. In a real OurChart blog, one viewer critiqued the character of Alice for her

initial exclusionary behavior. "Alice?! What the hell happened to your queer ethics, girl?" she

states, "I'm not talking about your de-gayification, I'm talking about not wanting Max to have

his own blog on OurChart. Here you are, running the biggest, gayest website for women and

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his own blog on OurChart. Here you are, running the biggest, gayest website for women and

their friends, and Max gets the shaft again. If it weren't for the fact that you read the right

magazine[v], I'd say you were becoming an assimilationist lesbian" (Moon par. 1). This blog post

led to a long string of responses about the character of Max, most of which were quite positive

regarding the inclusion of the character and the political questions he raises about queer

communities.

Another thread entitled "The Season Five Evolution of Max" similarly responded to

Max's new storylines: "In last night's episode [Episode 5.1: "LGB Tease"], there was some

really great and encouraging insight into Max's transition and existence as a whole. For once,

the character was treated with dignity [and] as a person with life struggles the same as anyone

else. I think it bodes well for Max this season and look forward to what his journey as a

transman will be" (Forever femme). These viewers appear to recognize the important and

difficult issue regarding tensions present within their own communities that Max's story reflects.

"Unfortunately the gay community is as splintered as it is splendored," states one viewer. "We

tend to be like the rest of culture (which I think really sucks) and have [or] practice prejudice...

even though we fight so hard ourselves to overcome it" (Svalentineking).

Representations of racial and ethnic minorities have changed, as well. For example, the

series has featured several women of color main characters since Season Two, such as Carmen

(Sarah Shahi) in Seasons Two and Three, Papi (Janina Gavankar) in Season Four, and Tasha

(Rose Rollins) in Seasons Four and Five. Issues related to being a queer person of color have

also been touched upon within the show's narrative, such as a story arc that had Carmen come

out to her close-knit Latino family and Bette and Tina's struggle to raise a biracial child.

Additionally, Season Five has provided self-reflexive moments regarding depictions of diversity

that can also be read as responses to criticism.

One of the main storylines of Seasons Four and Five revolves around the character Jenny (played by Mia Kirshner) securing a movie deal for her book *Lez Girls*, which is essentially the story of her arrival in Los Angeles and subsequent friendship with the other characters. Ironically, these are also the events contained within *The L Word*'s initial season, and thus, the audience witnesses Jenny recreating scenes from Season One within her movie in Season Five. One aspect to this is that the entire cast has been re-cast within the world of the film.

During the season's fifth episode ("Lookin' at You, Kid"), Jenny throws a party at her house, hoping her friends can all meet the people who are playing them within the movie. However, not all of Jenny's friends are very flattered by the version of events she provides in her story. Bette (played by Jennifer Beals) is one such person and fuel is added to the fire when she meets the woman who is intended to play her in the movie. Tina (played by Laurel Holloman) introduces Bette to Isabella Perkins (played by Wendy Glenn), whom Bette is initially honored to meet; however, when Bette is informed that Perkins will be playing her film counterpart, Bev, she is aghast. She explodes, "I am frankly fucking flabbergasted. I am flabbergasted that she cast such a *white* actress. She's white, okay? I mean, really, what the fuck can she possibly know about my life? What can she know?" Bette then walks away from the two of them, at which moment, a confused Isabella looks to Tina and asks, "Is she black?" (Episode 5.5: "Lookin' at You").

In this self-reflexive moment, not only do the creators refer back to a time in the show's history when there was even less diversity, but it also alludes to criticisms the show received for their initial casting of Beals as the sole queer woman of color in the first season. Some reviewers argued that she could generally be read as white. This scene throws this idea back at these critics by drawing attention to Beals' experiences. Through Bette/Beals' address, the actor and

character suddenly coalesce with each other, and those who view Beals as too white are reprimanded. In other words, it is one thing to criticize the show for failing to produce diverse depictions, but quite another to negate Beals' experiences of biraciality. She is the real biracial actor behind the character of Bette, and most likely, her life experiences do not reflect being "read as white."

At this point, I feel it is important to mention that I am by no means trying to make a claim as to the whether or not these changes have made *The L Word* a good or even improved representation of queer women's lives. Nor am I arguing that they do not bring up new difficulties and challenges with regards to representation. Instead, what I am attempting to illustrate is how these instances exemplify audience utilization of new media as a way to encourage interactions with the show's creators, and that in some ways, these discussions have proven productive.

For those viewers left unsatisfied by a disidentificatory consumption of the show, the knowledge communities forming on message boards, blogs, and other interactive websites provide an exciting new space for social and political activism related to popular culture, visibility, and representations. Queer audiences no longer need to tacitly accept problematic representations while reading against the grain. Instead, they are able to locate and join with those who feel similarly or perhaps even convince others to unite in their collective refusal of these images. Either way, these spaces produce discussions that may begin with *The L Word* but advance to the larger queer issues that inform these initial interactions. This process generates conversations and viewpoints that may not have converged otherwise. In some cases, these interactions even filter into the show's text, and thus into the wider culture as creators react to audience feedback and desires.

The changes that have happened within *The L Word*'s text as a result of viewer reactions exemplify the impact that Jenkins mentions convergence may have on the market economy. It may be possible to argue that perhaps *The L Word*'s creators have responded so well to audience praise and criticism because many of them also occupy positions within the wider queer community. Many of the show's creators, including Chaiken herself, are queer women. However, while it is possible that this might influence these women to have a unique investment that heterosexual directors or writers would lack, I also find this to be a somewhat naive assumption. After all, these women are also successful cinema and television artists, who are used to operating within the Hollywood entertainment system and are interested in participating in a successful venture within that system. Their paychecks and even future work depend on the achievements of this product, which, once you set aside the politics and hype, is what *The L Word* actually is. And Hollywood products need to make money, or they quickly disappear.

Since *The L Word* is on a premium cable channel, it does not rely on ad revenue the way that a major network series would. The majority of its profit-making capabilities come from products directly associated with the show (DVDs, affiliated merchandise, etc.) and subscriber fees for Showtime. As a result, it is particularly important for the creators that audiences connect with the show and wish to spend their money on a subscription to watch it or on its related products. Thus, creators have an especially strong investment in the opinions of knowledge communities, which represent at least a strong sampling of their core audience. After all, these viewers not only represent their own dollars, but also those of anyone they may come in contact with (online or otherwise) who could be convinced to either tune in or ignore the series. Consumer "buzz," either positive or negative, is widely believed to have a tremendous impact on a product's market performance.

But this marketing approach is nothing new for premium channels, so to some extent, these networks were more prepared than the major networks for a new media world. For instance, since premium cable networks never contained commercials, they are not now scrambling to understand how to function in a post-DVR culture where consumers are no longer obliged to watch ads. Additionally, since serial programming is still a fairly recent trend on these networks, they have barely any knowledge of marketing these types of shows to consumers before new media technologies. However, premium networks have not been entirely exempt from the recent marketing questions.

For example, the lack of commercials and addition of fees have likely made premium channels particularly subject to pirating. Consumers are apt to find it easier to record and copy a show from which they do not need to edit commercials, and in the age of digital cable, HD television, and DVD recorders, they can obtain a high quality copy of a show immediately after its broadcast. Some fan websites do prohibit pirating activity; however, many viewers still attempt to buy, sell, and trade these copies of shows online. While there are not a large number of posts related to this practice on *The L Word*'s sites, there have been some. In contrast, YouTube has made a significant impact regarding pirating practices within these communities.

Viewers upload show episodes to YouTube within hours of their initial airing. In fact, several of my survey respondents stated that they did not subscribe to Showtime, but instead watched the episodes on YouTube the following day. The site does ban copyrighted material and will remove it if a request is placed by the copyright holder, but this is difficult and time-consuming for media companies to monitor. Furthermore, audiences are persistent by posting and reposting episodes under new names and accounts. These pirating practices also relate to the issues raised by convergence related to the control of media.

Just like other media fans, *The L Word*'s viewers have participated in a variety of types of cultural production. Audience members have not only created more traditional productions, such as fan fiction and artwork, but also items influenced by new media, such as online episode recaps/reviews and amateur films. With regards to the latter of these, most appear on the aforementioned YouTube and include a variety of approaches to reworking the series. They create music videos that compile scenes from the show, film video response journals, and construct parodies of the series, its characters, or Chaiken herself. As with other media audience communities, these items are easily accessible on the Internet and no longer limited to circulation within small groups of viewers. However, what is different is that their cultural productions often relate to identity, representation, or other queer social and political issues.

For example, *Barbie L Word* recreates scenes from the show entirely through Barbie dolls, which have the character names written on stickers upon their chests. Barbie's history of critique for being an unobtainable standard of beauty invokes the similar critiques leveled at the show's highly fashionable and generally femme cast. Simultaneously, the name labels can be seen as raising the idea that the characters are indiscernible from each other (Pamcake96).

In *The L Word: Gaytorade*, scenes from the show are recreated by amateur filmmakers, but this time, the characters find ways to incorporate the fictional drink Gaytorade. This name clearly references the real world sports drink and claims to be a product "for the way you live." Here, the show's theme song, and perhaps the show as a whole, is parodied as nothing more than a commercial for a trendy queer life (Rizingstarr03).

One other video entitled *Shane/Alice's L Word Thoughts* created by amateur comedian Julia Stretch mocks scenes from Season Four, where Shane is forced to become an underwear model in order to pay for her stepbrother's emergency room visit. Stretch recreates the ad

campaign while addressing the audience directly. Her monologue takes shots at the show for things including the characters' unrealistic class standing, normative gender presentations, and Gavankar for playing a character not of her own ethnic background (JuliaStretch).

In all of these videos, the show is reworked and/or parodied in order to highlight both problems queer viewers find with the series and the social or political issues they believe inform them. Many appear to seek a more "accurate" presentation of queer life, believing that their own queer life might somehow be closer to "the way we live and love," as the theme song promotes. These videos also allow for commentary (similar to a discussion board) by other YouTube visitors, which again enables a dialogue about queer life, community, and issues. In other words, YouTube's medium also fosters a knowledge community and collective intelligence that bridges queer spaces into the larger culture.

As for how these different types of cultural production and reworking practices have been received by Showtime and *The L Word*'s creators, generally the response has been positive and along the lines of what Jenkins labels collaborationist. There have been very few instances of the show's creators and Showtime taking action against viewers that distribute the show illegally (even those who post the entire episodes on YouTube) or rework content from the show for their own ends[vi]. Furthermore, collaborationist tendencies are visible through not only the creators' inclination to work audience feedback and ideas from websites into the show's text, but also their employment of practices similar to those popular with George Lucas and the *Star Wars* franchise.

The L Word's creators have held more than one official web-based event for writers of fan fiction. In early 2006, they held what was called the "fanizode contest," which was a several part, audience-driven competition. Initially, viewers were polled as to what they would like to

see addressed by a fan fiction episode. The results showed an overwhelming interest in a plot

that explained the six month gap left between Season Two and Three. Fan fiction writers were

then asked to submit stories that addressed "scene missions" created by one of the show's main

writers, Ariel Schrag. Week by week, these scenes were voted on by other viewers through the

show's official fan fiction website. The winning scenes then moved on to be incorporated into

the final "fanizode." Eventually, what emerged was a fan fiction episode comprised of the

talents of eight main writers and the input of thousands of other audience members.

The eight fan fiction writers were awarded prizes, and in the summer of 2006, Showtime

partnered with FanLib, Inc. to publish *The L Word: A Fanizode, Special Commemorative EZine*.

This online publication included the completed episode, writer bios, reader script comments,

messages from Ilene Chaiken and Ariel Schrag, and excerpts from submissions that had not

made the final piece. Within the issue, the fanizode event was described as "the dawning of a

new age of mass media in which the masses help make the media" (FanLib, Inc. 8).

The fanizode is not the only opportunity Chaiken and Showtime have given viewers to

collaborate on the series. Since the second season, the creators have included audience content,

such as stories and comments, on the show's official DVD sets. *The L Word* in SecondLife has

allowed audiences to exist virtually in a world very similar to the one found on the show.

OurChart's tendency for art to imitate life enabled several viewers to witness their personal

screen identity icons being read from by Alice within one episode. And in 2007, Showtime

again sponsored a contest for amateur writers. This time, the contest called "You Write It" asked

viewers to author the "ultimate scene." The winning scene was entitled "Is She, or Isn't She"

written by Molly (aka: mfishy online) and was incorporated into the actual filming of Season

Five. The *Charlie's Angels*-inspired scene opened the season's third episode, "Lady of the Lake."

These interactive moments depict Chaiken and Showtime as more interested in forging a collaborationist relationship with audiences than prohibitionist. In her published comments for the fanizode E-Zine, Chaiken addressed the viewers by stating,

> It's almost impossible to overstate how important you are to this show. From the moment *The L Word* first premiered back in 2004, we, the writers, producers, and actors, became engaged in a great, fun, important conversation with you, the viewers. You came at us enthusiastically with your reactions, your objections, your ideas, passions, preferences and opinions as to whether or not we were adequately and authentically representing the way that we live. We welcome it. …We know how privileged we are to be the ones entrusted with the opportunity to put our stories forward before the world. ("A Word…" par 1-2)

Chaiken clearly recognizes the importance of *The L Word*'s knowledge communities to not only the series, but also the queer female community as a whole. She recognizes the mutually supporting relationship that Jenkins points out, in which the series needs the viewers and the viewers need the series, and she seems to be willing to grant these groups a collaborative role within the show in order to perhaps impact the larger culture.

<div align="center">Popular Culture Commodification vs Convergence Politics</div>

In many respects, it appears that Showtime and *The L Word*'s creators have managed to employ what Jenkins labeled the new "affective marketing" by successfully linking the series with queer female culture and outstandingly harnessing or fostering a large audience of "loyalists." Then again, while some of the creator/viewer interactions might be fairly unique, I

am not entirely convinced that they provide a particularly useful model for other popular culture

marketers. Instead, I believe that rather than any exceptionally successful marketing campaign,

the unique nature of the closet and queer visibility has caused these audience's devotions. In

other words, this audience was to some extent pre-primed to rabidly consume a show marketed

directly to them within mainstream media because there had been little to no previous such

occurrences. Perhaps even any Hollywood-produced show would have been consumed as *The L

Word* now is, regardless of its marketing strategy (barring one that was explicitly homophobic).

On the other hand, while the existing political history and decades of invisibility for

many of these audiences has moved them to become a vibrantly interactive knowledge

community, the fact that creators have been receptive to feedback has further encouraged these

audiences to continually discuss, demand, and reconfigure the show's content and

representations. Queer audiences who have been raised on a mainstream queer politics of

visibility and community are reworking those concepts to be more inclusive of the diverse voices

in their own communities within a new media-driven political and social landscape. For

example, this project has illustrated how new media, such as discussion boards, YouTube,

blogging communities, and fan fiction groups are all being used by viewers to create the spaces

of politics and popular culture that address or rework identity where *The L Word* has fallen short.

Responding to the criticism that those who reconfigure mainstream media into their own

political messages are participating in an activism that is less valuable than more traditional

forms, Jenkins states that these practices are:

> [N]o less an act of citizenship than writing a letter to the editor of a local
>
> newspaper that may or may not actually print it. For a growing number of young
>
> Americans, images…may represent as important a set of rhetorical resources as

texts. …What changes, however, is the degree to which amateurs are able to

insert their images and thoughts into the political process – and in at least some

cases, these images can circulate broadly and reach a large public. (*Convergence*

Culture 222)

If this idea of creating one's own images and circulating them into the larger public and political

process is considered with regards to a marginalized population that has been rendered invisible

for much of its existence, the implications are staggering. Queer individuals are not only finally

able to visually witness their existence within the larger culture; they are also becoming

empowered to create and recreate that image with their own hands.

These gains of control by queer media consumers, however, should not be seen as a

declaration that the ideas of the gay market presented in Chapter Two have been rendered

obsolete by this new media world. After all, the queer content of the show has caused the

majority of its marketing campaign to remain located within specifically queer female spaces.

Showtime does advertise *The L Word* to a mainstream demographic, but generally only within ad

campaigns for the network as a whole. Whereas the Showtime series *Dexter* may receive full-

page advertisements in a publication like *Entertainment Weekly*, rarely, if ever have there been

such ads within non-queer publications for *The L Word*.

The critiques administered by audiences illustrate that *The L Word* has also been subject

to the gay market's tendency to hail only a specific queer audience. As discussed in Chapter

Two, corporations who have sought to address a queer consumer are generally imagining that

individual to be an affluent gay, white, male. In fact, *The L Word* stands as one of the few

moments that a queer female audience has been hailed by mainstream corporations. But while

the gender may have changed, much of the marketing behind *The L Word* has remained in line

with this thinking. Particularly in the earlier seasons, the consumer generally addressed by the series can be assumed to be white, affluent, fashionable, and largely femme. Even now, much of the show's affiliated products reflect not only high fashion, but also an equally high income.

A final aspect of the gay market that is still relevant to *The L Word*'s convergence marketing is the tendency for mainstream marketing to commodify queer culture and often dilute its politics. As discussed in Chapter Two, companies who saw a niche market within the queer community began to advertise avidly to this demographic. They sponsored queer-friendly events, such as pride parades and organizational fundraisers, and created queer-centered products. *The L Word* is clearly another example of a corporation interested in tapping into this niche market.

Showtime branded itself several years ago as the cable network interested in representing queer culture through its "No Limits" campaign with the slogan "Daring to be Different" and production of the American version of *Queer As Folk* prior to *The L Word*. Showtime and *The L Word* have also sponsored queer events and fundraisers for organizations like the Human Rights Campaign; employed a range of queer female directors, producers, writers, and other film industry professionals; and heightened the exposure of other queer artists, musicians, and writers with exposure on the show.

All of these have enabled Showtime to present itself as what Alexandra Chasin described as a "site of representation and enfranchisement" for queer individuals (16). But these benefits did not all arrive upon the doorstep of queer female culture without a price. The many critiques the series has received from viewers of limited visibility, poor representations, watered-down politics, and sensationalist drama as opposed to realistic portrayals reflect the ways in which the gay market is more interested in commodifying than empowering an identity group.

However, cultural studies scholars of the gay market, such as Katherine Sender and Suzanna Danuta Walters, warn of a wholly critical analysis of a cultural production's impact. After all, the social and political landscape is certainly much different for queer women in a post-*L Word* world. Just as with Radclyffe Hall, women's music, and *Ellen*'s coming out before it, the culture is likely never to return to the way it was for queer women prior to *The L Word*. While this of course has both positive and negative implications, one of the most exciting changes is the way in which new media has been employed by the creators and audiences of the show. This dynamic of convergence marketing and consumption has set a precedent that other mainstream popular culture must now follow if it wishes to tap into the queer female demographic as successfully as *The L Word*. If queer female consumers continue to push their levels of agency through knowledge communities, collective intelligence, and new media grassroots convergence, they stand to find ways to radically alter their popular culture.

When Jenkins extends popular culture convergence into political arenas, he utilizes the idea of "serious fun," which refers to entertainment resources that are used to educate and mobilize people around political causes. He states, "[T]he skills we acquire through play may have implications for how we…participate in the political process" (*Convergence Culture* 23). As I have already argued, play and politics are already tightly intertwined for much of *The L Word*'s audiences, and therefore Jenkins' assumption that play precedes politics is difficult to envision for these viewers. Additionally, his vision of politics is very rooted in a traditional democratic governmental model. He generally addresses political campaigns and voter mobilization, but tends to stop short of the politics of social movements. However, I believe that the "play" of popular culture convergence within *The L Word* holds significance for queer women within this political arena. The consequences of "a changed sense of community, a

greater sense of participation, less dependence on official expertise and a greater trust in collaborative problem solving" that Jenkins sees in new media and convergence are all greatly relevant to social movements (209).

A sense of community that extends beyond traditional geographical borders may allow movements to not only incorporate new ideas and members, but also have a greater sense of mobilization numbers and potential impact. Increased and faster communication could enable more accurate and rapid action with regards to political issues. Less centralized leadership, more collaborative problem solving, and a greater sense of involvement fosters a movement that is likely to incorporate more viewpoints, and thus create a politics that benefits a wider number of individuals. We are now a global culture, and new media provides tools to truly act on a global level. It is up to movements, however, to take up and harness the power of those tools.

Jenkins ends his argument by suggesting that perhaps one of the most exciting things about popular culture knowledge communities is that they cause a vast number of people with widely differing viewpoints to come together. He argues, "[W]e may be able to talk across our differences if we find commonalities through our fantasies" (239). While Jenkins is intrigued by this idea for what it might mean on the level of individuals who hold widely differing political viewpoints, I am interested in what it might mean on the level of *groups* of individuals, which already hold large commonalities in their political viewpoints, but simply find different tactics to be most useful.

The L Word has brought groups of queer women and their allies together into communities that are highly unlikely to have existed otherwise. The majority of these individuals support queer rights, human rights, or some other leftist political cause (in fact, most of my survey respondents mentioned an alliance to some version of these politics); however,

they may not always agree on the most suitable tactics. When coming together over a mutual love or hate of *The L Word*, these groups may have begun discussing the show's politics, but left with a better understanding of their own and others' politics. In other words, this project has illuminated the importance of previously existing political ideologies on the reception of popular culture; however, the ways in which that popular culture has been received and used may also be illuminating a path for future social and political activism.

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[i] In his initial work on fandom, Jenkins noted that most fans were also female. But as fandom has moved into virtual spaces through the Internet, his later work has discussed it as much more male dominated.

[ii] *Black (k) ademic*'s Nubian ceased formally updating the blog in December 2006, although she still periodically updates it with links, events, and information regarding her work.

[iii] There are many different locations throughout the web for blogs. Many of the websites specifically related to *The L Word* do also contain the ability to blog; however, some of the blogs mentioned within this study are also often separate from these sites and located on general blogging sites, such as Blogspot.com.

[iv] "Guestbians" is insinuated to refer to regular guest bloggers on Alice's site.

[v] This is a reference to a scene from the same episode, in where Alice is shown to own a copy of *Velvet Park* magazine. *Velvet Park* is a popular and fairly progressive magazine for queer women.

[vi] In 2006, Showtime's parent company CBS filed a lawsuit against YouTube for its illegal file-sharing. As a way to rectify the situation, YouTube and CBS struck a deal to distribute unique and official content through the YouTube site. I have never found evidence of a lawsuit that was specifically started by creators of *The L Word* or aimed at its audiences.

CONCLUSION

In the summer of 2005, MTV Networks and their parent company, Viacom, launched the network Logo, which they envisioned as their contribution to the newest trend in queer-content television. Logo took its place in television history as one of the first of three networks devoted exclusively to LGBT content[i]. It continues today to provide the queer community with a wide variety of programming including movies, sitcoms, dramas, news programs, and special event broadcasts. While some of its material has been original, much has also been recycled from existing sources, such as the vast catalog of independent queer cinema and documentaries. Syndicated television shows have also been popular for Logo's lineup, such as *Xena: Warrior Princess* (UT), *Bad Girls* (UK's ITV), *TransGeneration* (Sundance), *Wonderfalls* (Fox), and *Queer as Folk* (Showtime). In September of 2007, Logo reported that it had negotiated the syndication rights for Showtime's *The L Word*, as well. As of the writing of this dissertation, the series is slated to begin airing in summer of 2008 (Nordyke).

In preparation, the network began promoting *The L Word*'s arrival via commercial break ad spots. This practice is common for all networks and was performed by Logo when it acquired *Queer as Folk* in 2006, as well. However, Logo also chose to address its acquisition in another, more unique, way. One of the network's original programs, *The Big Gay Sketch Show*, which is much like a queer-centered *Saturday Night Live* or *Mad TV*, created a parody advertisement sketch for *The L Word*'s debut on Logo (Lo). The sketch can be accessed from Logo's affiliated website AfterEllen, on YouTube, and within the extra features section of *The Big Gay Sketch Show*'s official DVD set.

The faux-ad begins much like one might expect. As the famous pink "L" of the series' title appears on the screen, an announcer proclaims, "This season *The L Word* comes to Logo."

However, it quickly takes a comedic turn as the voice adds that audiences can "fall in love all over again with the show you love to hate, and hate to love hating while you love it (with hatred)." Then, through a series of humorous recreated scenes, the sketch not only promotes the series' arrival on Logo, but also acknowledges viewer criticisms, such as poor acting, annoying characters, and of course, the death of the character Dana. The ad also states that audiences will be able to "go behind the scenes and see the making of the show you supposedly don't watch, but somehow know everything about," and it closes by stating, "This year *The L Word* comes to Logo. Finally lesbians will have something to complain about from April to January, too" ("The Big Gay *L Word…*").

This sketch and its use to promote *The L Word* on Logo illustrate many of the themes discussed throughout this dissertation. On a very basic level, it indicates the immense impact of the show. Sketch comedy generally relies on stereotypes and large cultural trends or phenomena to make their punch lines relevant to a wide audience. Therefore, the writers of *The Big Gay Sketch Show* must believe that *The L Word* ranks on par with the other queer historical and popular culture icons they pay tribute to, like Chastity Bono, Rosie O'Donnell, the women's music movement, PFLAG, Liza Minnelli, pride parades, Olivia Cruises, and *Brokeback Mountain*.

This sketch does not merely pay homage, though. It also references the complicated nature of audiences' consumption of the series. What's more, *The Big Gay Sketch Show* has mentioned *The L Word* in at least two other instances. In one, a character explained to another that her friends would not be attending a party because they hold their "pre-*L Word* recap meeting" on Saturday nights (Episode 2.6), and in another episode, a woman who calls a lesbian erotic hotline proclaims to the operator that what she "really wants" is for "*The L Word* to be

written better" (Episode 1.3). Just as with the commercial parody, these moments allude to viewers' complex and interactive relationships with the series. The former even hints at an audience community.

Interestingly, when Showtime's other queer flagship, *Queer as Folk*, was syndicated to Logo it did not receive the same type of treatment.   In fact, the ads instead described the show as the revolutionary drama that was finally "coming home" to Logo. Of course, *The Big Gay Sketch Show* did not yet exist when *Queer as Folk* debuted on Logo. However, even after two years of coexistence, the show has still refrained from parodying the popular series, and Logo continues to similarly advertise *Queer as Folk* by asking viewers to "watch the ground-breaking drama from the beginning" ("Series and Specials…").

The use of *The Big Gay Sketch Show* as a way to advertise *The L Word*'s debut feels as if Logo is experiencing a sense of responsibility towards its viewers to acknowledge their mixed emotions regarding the series. Furthermore, the ways in which audiences have interacted with and reworked the show have become so visible that it appears Logo must either acknowledge them or risk viewership. This once again supports the idea that *The L Word* and its audience communities may have forever changed the way queer-content media is consumed.

In order to fully understand how this viewer consumption came to pass, this project began by constructing a historical narrative that emphasized the interactions between the queer women's movement and popular culture. By no means was this intended to be absolute in nature regarding queer political or social history. Instead, I hoped to address several major examples of what was considered viable social/political activism in each historical timeframe and how those ideas filtered into the popular culture consumed and/or created by queer women.

Although we lack historical distance, it seems inevitable that *The L Word* will find a place within this narrative as time moves forward. Its immense popularity and avid consumption by queer women mark its significance as being similar to Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, 1950's lesbian pulp fiction, early queer women's publications, the women's music movement, independent queer film, or *Ellen*'s coming out episode. These icons of popular culture simultaneously connected queer women with each other, shifted social conceptions, raised political awareness, and irrefutably marked the queer popular culture landscape.

The social and political history of queer women's issues has also been a point of origin for my theoretical framework, which seeks to explain viewer investments in, reactions to, and interactions with *The L Word*. Using Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of the closet, which she describes as ever-present and unique in nature for queer individuals, I have argued that queer folks are likely to have a heightened interest in visual representations. For those often forced to deny their own existence and identity, visibility and representation become connected to the ability to exist at all.

Additionally, this project has illustrated how the historical emergence of visual media, such as cinema, television, and advertising coincided with the public's capability to name or conceive of homosexuality. Thus, as the larger culture became more enamored with the *visual* and the *visible* in their entertainment and daily lives, homosexuals conversely became stigmatized and forced into *invisibility*. This historical linkage, which points to queer individuals' inability to fully participate in the culture of images, has furthered the strong investment in queer visibility and representations when they are finally enabled.

Queer women's social and political histories have also caused me to employ specific language when studying *The L Word*'s communities. While other fandom scholars might refer to

these groups as "fans," I have opted for the more neutral "viewers" or "audiences." I have illustrated that a significant portion of these individuals are unlikely to self-identify as fans, and generally come to their relationship with the series and its communities as a result of their sexual identity rather than their interest in the show. Therefore, unlike the vast majority of other media consumers, these viewers may interact with the series out of a sense of political obligation or desire for connection to the larger queer female culture.

Likewise, rather than employing the term "poaching," popularized by Henry Jenkins, to describe the ways in which these audiences' make use of the series, I have opted for the more political and identity-focused "disidentification." This term, coined by José Esteban Muñoz, refers to the process of distancing or reconfiguring that queer folks must apply towards negative aspects of a cultural text in order to enjoy any positive or empowering facets of that text. Disidentification generally occurs when a person's multiple identity markers come into conflict with each other because some are validated by a cultural object, while others are derided. Chapter Three addressed four narratives that *The L Word*'s audiences have employed to aid in this process: "It's only entertainment," "Hollywood," "Only one Show," and the "Benefit/Detriment Weigh-In." These disidentification narratives allow some audience members to ignore or rework certain characteristics of the show, in order that they might still enjoy the visibility and representation the series provides queer female culture.

The reasons given for enjoyment of the show included cinematic or genre elements, entertainment, escape, community-building, and visibility, and the latter two were the most common of these. Finding pleasure or empowerment within these areas can be very significant to individuals who have been marginalized by the larger culture; therefore, their value can never be diminished or understated. Community-building and visibility have also long been revered

within the mainstream queer movement as formulating a successful political approach. The examples of movement history and popular culture presented in Chapter One often cited the goals of escape, community, and visibility, and in each case, these provided (and will no doubt continue to provide) valuable opportunities and advances for queer women.

For those who took issue with *The L Word*, their reasons generally fell within the categories of cinematic elements or representations. The latter of these was most often cited, and Chapter Three provided examples of viewers who raised issues regarding the show's depictions of gender, transgender, racial, and ethnic identities. For some of these audience members, it has been very difficult to make positive use of *The L Word*. Disidentification feels much like the unsatisfying "reading against the grain" that marginalized groups have practiced with mainstream media for decades, and while community and visibility may be important political goals, the mainstream queer movement has often failed to include a wide range of queer identities and experiences within this agenda.

For these individuals and their allies, new media, the Internet, and knowledge communities have provided interesting and exciting new spaces related to popular culture and social/political activism. They may connect with other queer and allied activists through the common medium of *The L Word*, but they move to address the wider issues that confront their worlds. These groups employ new media, like many who have been previously marginalized within the mainstream queer movement, as a way broaden traditional conceptions of visibility politics and community-building, in hopes of fostering a more inclusive and stronger queer movement.

In Chapter Four, Jenkins' model of convergence culture was applied to these communities and formed the final segment of this project's theoretical framework. Jenkins

believes that groups of media fans, who once supplied the example of a rare and extreme viewer, are now providing the template for how media production and consumption will work within a culture of convergence. He calls these groups knowledge communities and explains that their interactions create collective intelligence. New media has granted these consumers innovative sources of power that are altering the ways in which they interact with media corporations. The dynamic between producer and consumer is now in constant flux as the two vie for control of media within the marketplace.

In the case of *The L Word*, viewers are employing new media and the Internet as a way to communicate with the series' creators; impact the show's text; identify ways to hinder Showtime's ability to easily profit off their demographic; make the series accessible to audiences regardless of their financial capabilities; and produce new texts that rework the show's content to include their own narratives, communities, and representations. These knowledge communities are not creating only a collective intelligence of *The L Word*, but also one of queer culture and queer experiences. While Jenkins' examples of how popular culture convergence might extend into the political arena focus on the democratic process, *The L Word* provides a glimpse at how convergence culture might impact the politics of social movements. In other words, *The L Word*'s audience communities not only indicate historical narratives of queer women's politics, but they also may be illuminating the path of present and future movement tactics.

As a piece of academic scholarship, this project has drawn from a range of disciplines and hopes to contribute something to each of these. To fandom studies, I hope this project has provided exciting new examples of fandom that question the discipline's traditional definitions and boundaries. Those individuals who act like fans may not always be fans, and the identities and histories intersecting these media audiences are crucial to understanding their actions. To

queer studies, it seeks to not only shed light on a particular phenomenon of queer culture, but also provide an interesting account of how queer women's social and political histories become entangled with their popular culture. These intersections have been known to be both productive and compromising at different times. Finally with regards to popular culture and media studies, this project has hopefully demonstrated the complicated landscape that is cultural consumption. Scholars within these disciplines must not only continue the popular practice of textual analysis, but also be mindful of the audiences that consume and interact with these cultural texts. These viewers provide critical viewpoints regarding academic theories. When the two are placed in conversation, we stand to gain a better understanding of cultural significance.

I believe that audience media consumption has exciting elements, and when those are harnessed to intersect with social and political discourse, the results can be surprisingly inspiring. As scholars, we need to continue to forge a balance between academic and fan, so that we remain involved in the processes of knowledge communities and grassroots convergence that Jenkins describes. If convergence is our future, we must learn to incorporate convergence thinking into our scholarship of popular culture.

As this dissertation concluded, Showtime announced that it had renewed *The L Word* for a sixth and final season. An official press release regarding this decision stated that "the final season will be even more interactive, with fan input guiding the season to its climactic conclusion." Chaiken was additionally cited as explaining, "this is by no means the end of *The L Word*. The brand and the social network community, OurChart.com, will continue to live and be a destination for lesbians everywhere and a lasting tribute to what *The L Word* has accomplished" ("One *L* of a Finale!"). While it appears that this popular culture phenomenon

may finally see a conclusion, these statements also indicate that viewers and their communities have fostered a lasting impact upon queer culture.

Chaiken has never been known for her modesty regarding the series, and her statements might be viewed more as self-inflation; however, I am inclined to largely agree with her allusions to legacy and accomplishment. True, *The L Word* is a commodity that has often watered down its politics and sought to take a marginalized demographic to the proverbial bank. But this project has illustrated that it has also offered a wealth of connection, inspiration, hope, and pleasure to a large number of queer women. Even those who dislike the series have fostered connections and discourses they otherwise might not have. Social change is slow and rarely spectacular, but it is impossible to deny that *The L Word* has transformed the face of queer popular culture. Only time will tell what this truly means for queer women and their socio-political landscapes.

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[i] The other two networks are here! and Q Television, the latter of which is no longer broadcasting. here! remains a functioning network, but is only available through cable providers as a premium subscription channel, on-demand service, or through Internet television services.

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APPENDIX A: SURVEY QUESTIONS

Part I: Personal Information

1. Age:

2. Gender Identity/Identities:

3. Sexual Orientation/s and/or preference/s:

4. Where do you live geographically? (city, state, country)

5. Do you consider yourself politically active?

6. If yes, in what political or social movements?

Part II: Popular Culture

[Note: "popular culture" may refer to any aspect or item of culture used, produced, or consumed by part or all of that culture and which is not necessarily essential to survival, but often considered to be part of leisure, entertainment, or community-building practices. This may include, but is not limited to, television shows, films, periodicals or publications, music, performances, literature, events (i.e. festivals, cruises), and places (i.e. bookstores, bars).]

1. What types of popular culture do you interact with regularly?

2. What are your favorite types of popular culture?

3. How important do you think popular culture is in the formation of communities?

Part III: *The L Word*

1. Have you every heard of *The L Word*?

2. Do you watch/have you ever watched *The L Word*?

3. How often do you/have you watched *The L Word*?

4. What are your reactions to/feelings about *The L Word*?

5. Have you ever visited any of the websites related to *The L Word,* such as www.thelwordonline.com, www.l-word.com, or Showtime's *L Word* site?

6. If you have visited any of these sites, what types of things have you visited them for?

7. Do you believe that the creators (writers, directors, actors, producers, etc.) of *The L Word* read the responses/opinions of viewers posted on these sites? Do you think it impacts the way they create the show?

8. How important do you think *The L Word* or other queer-themed popular culture is politically?

APPENDIX B: SURVEY CONSENT FORM

You are invited to participate in a research study on queer-themed popular culture. Any person over 18 years of age, who self-identifies as either a consumer of queer-themed popular culture or a supporter of queer politics/social movements is welcome to participate.

My name is Marnie Pratt and this research part of my work towards a Ph.D. in the American Culture Studies Program at Bowling Green State University. This study will be an element in my dissertation. I will be collecting information from April-September of 2007.

The purpose of this study is to explore the types of popular culture consumed by queer individuals and their political/social allies. I am interested in discovering what political or social gain, if any, is actually achieved for queer communities through popular culture that includes queer content and/or discusses queer issues. The Showtime lesbian drama *The L Word* is serving as a case study for this project. The results will hopefully indicate patterns of popular culture consumption and specific opinions regarding *The L Word*. This study will benefit those interested in the political and social possibilities contained within popular culture. For example, it may highlight ways in which people interact with or value popular culture. Aside from the satisfaction of participating in scholarly research, this study has no specific benefits to you as the participant.

This study will require you to fill out one survey, which includes questions about personal demographics, queer-themed popular culture, and the television show *The L Word*. It is estimated that your participation will take approximately 10-20 minutes. The anticipated risks to you are no greater than those normally encountered in daily life.

The information you provide will be completely anonymous and therefore, your identity cannot be revealed in any publication of study results. Your responses may be quoted directly in published study results, but the quotes will be anonymous. In order to further protect your anonymity, you should remember that some companies/employers may have software to monitor and record keystrokes, mouse clicks, and web sites visited; therefore, you may wish to complete the survey at home or public computer. In addition, you may also wish to clear the browser cache and page history after completing and submitting the survey on a public computer.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and you can refrain from answering any or all questions without any penalty or explanation. You are free to withdraw consent and to discontinue participation in the project at any time. By completing this survey, you are indicating your consent to participate in the study. You may print off and keep this consent information sheet in case you have questions about this study later.

If you have any questions or comments about this study, you may contact:
Researcher: Marnie Pratt 419-372-8261, mpratt@bgnet.bgsu.edu
Advisor: Ellen Berry 419-372-6833, eberry@bgnet.bgsu.edu

If you have any questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Chair of Bowling Green State University's Human Subjects Review Board at 419-372-7716 or hsrb@bgnet.bgsu.edu.

Click here to take the survey.