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Lesbian Pulp Television: Torment, Trauma and Transformations in The L Word - Rebecca Beirne

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Discussing the 1950s and 60s in a paper on lesbian pulp fiction, Yvonne Keller characterises the era as a time where “Dominant culture sought a return to a mythical pre-War, pre-Depression ‘normality’ visioned in ideologically conservative terms,” a time of increased paranoia and suspicion (about communism and homosexuality), and as having a focus on surveillance (1999: 1). The 2000s have shared remarkable similarities to this period including a rise in the power of the Christian right in dominant culture, championing ‘family values,’ and calling for a return to a mythical, nostalgic vision of the 1950s. So too have recent years been marked by paranoia and suspicion – fear-mongering over the threat of ‘terrorism’ has subdued the public and suppressed civil liberties in much the same way as the threat of ‘communism’ once did. And while significant progress has been made in GLBT rights and visibility around the world since the 1950s and 1960s, in nations such as the United States and Australia, homosexuality has also been utilised to whip up public fear, with constitutions being changed and anti-gay laws being passed in the name of a ‘threat’ to the institution of marriage – so dear to the hearts of 1950s and 2000s lawmakers. In this paper, I would like to outline the similarities in circumstances, themes and images Showtime’s lesbian drama series *The L Word* (2004-) shares with lesbian pulp fiction from the 1950s and 1960s, proposing that *The L Word* functions in a similar fashion to lesbian pulp novels in that it hearkens back to these texts, mediating its depictions of lesbian life in order to relate to the mainstream and depict lesbianism in a popular cultural medium.



Lesbian pulp novels had a curious duality: they presented lesbianism within a popular culture in which lesbianism was otherwise largely invisible, however, they were also often as Lisa Walker notes “homophobic in the extreme” and written with the intent to titillate heterosexual male readers (2001: 103). Not all lesbian pulps, however, were so prurient, with several lesbian authors taking on this genre and authoring more sympathetic portrayals of lesbian subjects. Even these texts, however, were not immune to the demands of the genre and the market. As Keller observes,

lesbian writers who wrote lesbian pulps were caught in a similar bind: they wanted to write about lesbians, which the genre encouraged, but they were also compelled to conform to generic imperatives such as homophobia, sexism, frequent and gratuitous sex, voyeurism, male-centredness, and sad endings—typically, ones in which the lesbians do not end up happily together” (1999: 4).

It is important to note that despite attempting to appeal to a mainstream audience of popular culture, lesbian pulp novels were not only consumed by their intended, male readers, but also by lesbian readers. In an era where lesbian texts were hard to come by, even texts with limitations placed upon their characterisation and stories were embraced by lesbian readers keen to encounter narratives and characters they could identify with, and these texts have become known and classified as “survival literature.” The fine line walked by lesbian authors who sought to depict lesbians positively while still remaining within the confines of the genre often resulted in, as Keller observes, “obvious contradictions within the texts, such as perfectly content lesbians who suddenly commit suicide or marry men at the very end of the book” (1999: 5).

These sorts of limitations and contradictions can also be seen in *The L Word*, and I contend that this is no coincidence, but rather is in keeping with the mediations that are, or at least are deemed to be, necessary when taking lesbian images into popular cultural forms. To take two examples that directly correlate to the “obvious contradictions” Keller pinpoints, *The L Word*’s café owner Marina Ferrar (Karina Lombard), goes from being a stable, relatively happy character, to suddenly attempting suicide at the end of the first season of the series, ostensibly over her love of, and rejection by, Jenny Schecter (Mia Kirshner), despite having expressed little desire to be with her prior to this point. Early in the second season, it is then revealed that Marina was, indeed, married to a man, something that was completely at odds with her previous depiction and characterisation. Similarly, Tina Kennard (Laurel Holloman) goes from a long-term relationship with Bette Porter (Jennifer Beals) in season one, to a relationship with Helena Peabody (Rachel Shelley) in season two, before developing a seemingly overpowering desire for men. Whole scenes are devoted to her obsessing over men, making out with a male employee before getting involved in a relationship with another man, and even placing a cybersex advertisement that reads “dyke w/baby seeks real man for good fuck...slide your big cock into my blonde pussy” (3.5). Although Tina’s ‘return to men’ is explained away by the character in the fourth season as being accounted for by her “humiliation at finding out that her lover was cheating on her” (4.9), this does not narratively make sense in light of both her relationship with Helena that directly followed Bette’s affair, or the intensity of her desires for men as they were portrayed in the third season, which occur on a purely physical rather than a psychical plane.

Tina’s desire for men wanes in the fourth season, with Henry being characterised as “boring” (Tina 4.11), the fact remains that

this storyline is in keeping with the narrative traditions of with many pulp novels wherein male characters “always [got] the girl—at least, the most feminine girl—in the end” (Keller 1999: 3). Perhaps this is because mainstream society finds the idea of the feminine lesbian—who appears to be visually indistinguishable from heterosexual women—threatening, and thus by portraying these lesbians as always potentially bisexual, it undermines the challenge of depicting such characters, assuages the discomfort of potentially homophobic viewers and allows male viewers to feel that they ‘have a chance’ with such women.^[1]

As Samuel A. Chambers observes, “The pilot has plenty of sex, just not very much between two women Eventually, of course, *The L Word* offers numerous and repeated portrayals of lesbian sex Yet reminders of the implicit message that lesbians are sexy, attractive objects of desire, even for straight men, crop up repeatedly” (2006: 90-91).

The L Word shares other features with lesbian pulps, including the impulse towards voyeurism, its desire to ‘show’ lesbians to the public, depicting lesbian lives as full of torment and trauma, and portraying butch lesbians as wanting to be men. In *The L Word* it seems that happy committed relationships are impossible, as is joy in anonymous sex—someone is always crying, there is frequent depression, disaster, suicide attempts and also death. Of course, this is not the case evenly over the course of the seasons, with the first and fourth season being at least somewhat more hopeful than the second and third, but nevertheless, there are sufficient examples of the kinds of negative images and narratives insisted upon in lesbian pulp fiction to suggest that there is something afoot. Some may argue that these elements are simply in keeping with the tendency towards melodrama in television drama/soap opera, however, the very specific nature and context of this repetition renders such assertions simplistic, as the particular kinds of narratives and images of lesbianism *The L Word* engages in are precisely in keeping with both the traditions of lesbian pulps, and homophobic assumptions about lesbianism: that lesbians are deeply unhappy, that they are unable to find happy relationships or enjoy sex, and that lesbians are poised for male voyeurism.

Voyeurism was an important component of lesbian pulp fiction, as it indeed is an inextricable element of *The L Word*. Much as lesbian pulp novels portrayed their buxom, and often scantily clad, heroines in titillating circumstances on their covers, *The L Word* produces promotional material that presents its actresses in a manner akin to men’s magazine images. They are often in various states of undress (sometimes completely naked, with only each other for draping), or posed with breasts thrust forward, mouths slightly open, gazing directly into the camera with ‘come hither’ expressions. The images used to promote *The L Word* are clearly in keeping with cover images for such novels as the *Twisted Loves* (1959) or *The Leather Girls* (1966), and no doubt perform precisely the same purpose – to attract the largest possible audience, of both men and women, via titillation and the suggestion of erotic scenes ‘inside’ the texts. The frequent sex scenes, while very welcome to lesbian audiences sick of television’s sanitised depiction of lesbian sexuality, also link back to pulp novels, many of which were written as barely-veiled erotica.

This voyeurism extends beyond sexual voyeurism into that of an anthropological nature. Novels like *Lesbian Hell* promised their readers a glimpse into “the twilight world of lesbians — furtive lovers ensnared in a web of lust, degradation and debauchery” (1963: cover), while Paula Christian’s *Edge of Twilight* was declared on its cover to be “one of the most candid and challenging novels ever written about today’s women who dare to live in that outcast world of ‘twilight’ love” (1959). What is significant about these descriptions is their declaration that they will allow their readers to *observe* some simulacrum of a real-life lesbian world. Through its dialogue and narratives, *The L Word* likewise makes clear that its intention is indeed to ‘show’ lesbians and lesbian worlds to its heterosexual audience. While this often appears to be part of a pedagogical impulse, such didacticism is also in keeping with lesbian pulps authored by lesbian authors. Nowhere is *The L Word*’s urge to display ‘lesbians’ for its audience more clearly apparent than in the opening credit-sequence that was instituted at the beginning of the second season, which encourages the voyeuristic impulses of its audience to ‘know’ lesbianism through this television drama. During this sequence, a song plays whose chorus asserts that “this is the way, it’s the way that we live...and love!” (Betty 2005).

Voyeurism can also be seen as inextricably entwined with the narrative from the very first episode of *The L Word*. While this is initially, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has observed, in the form of Jenny (2004: B10), this intra-textual voyeuristic gaze is returned to the heterosexual male in season two through the character of Mark Wayland (Eric Lively). His storyline of unauthorised filming of his lesbian housemates Shane (Katherine Moening) and Jenny in the name of documentary filmmaking is utilised to critique male voyeurism, while simultaneously offering the male voyeur an identificatory position within the narrative and to some extent authorising his actions.^[2] Such simultaneous performance and subversion of the narrative conventions of heterosexual male voyeurism is not original to *The L Word*. Indeed, as Keller observes, the authors of pro-lesbian pulps “implemented three strategies in reaction to the conventional voyeurism of the genre: refusal to acknowledge its existence in their writing, appropriation, and subversion” (1999: 6). *The L Word* clearly utilises the latter two of these strategies. Its appropriation of filmic objectification of women can be seen by its insertion of the female gaze into shots commonly utilised for male voyeurism (see for example the sightline match of Jenny’s gaze to a lingering close-up on Marina’s buttocks in the pilot), while subversion can be seen in the narrative ‘punishment of voyeurism’ (see for example Mark being shouted at by Jenny, his remorse and loss of friends and home, or Tim’s grief at witnessing Jenny and Marina together).^[3]

Another central element of *The L Word* as the new generation of lesbian pulp can be seen in the centrality of torment and trauma in its narratives. Indeed, it is clear that *The L Word* has taken on one of the central directives issued to writers of lesbian pulp such as Vin Packer (Marijane Meaker) that the text “couldn’t have a happy ending... Otherwise the post office might seize the books as obscene” (Marijane Meaker in Forrest 2005: xiii), as a happy ending may imply that there was nothing ‘wrong’ with homosexuality. Although the serialised format of television drama offers no clear ‘ending,’ lesbian relationships within *The L Word* certainly feature sufficient unhappiness to keep post-office, or other, censors happy. Bette and Tina’s relationship through the seasons features a lack of sexual desire, infidelity, emotional persecution of one another, and even a scene akin to sexual violence in ‘Limb from Limb’ (1.13). Another character, tennis player Dana Fairbanks (Erin Daniels) breaks up a happy relationship with Lara (Lauren Lee Smith) due to her closetedness, then almost marries a controlling woman who is only interested in her for her fame and fortune. Dana proceeds to get involved with Alice, to whom she had been drawn for some time, only for this relationship to go from a seemingly happy one to Alice suddenly becoming so neurotic that Dana can’t tolerate her and goes back to Lara, leaving Alice desolate and somewhat insane, before Dana develops breast cancer, rejects Lara, and

dies in 'Losing the Light' (3.10). Jenny too certainly has her share of unhappiness in her lesbian relationships, from her realisation that her first female lover, Marina, is with another woman, to beginning a relationship with Carmen (Sarah Shahi) only to find out that Carmen is with her only in order to get close to Shane, the two of whom end up happy together at the end of season two, with the exception of Shane discovering Jenny in a pool of blood in the bathroom as a result of self-injury. Shane and Carmen's relationship is then portrayed as happy for most of season three, until Shane has sex with the ex-lover who broke her heart. The couple seem to work through this and Shane asks Carmen to marry her, before jilting her at the altar in 'Left Hand of the Goddess' (3.12). These are only a few examples of the forlorn and damaging lesbian relationships presented by *The L Word*, and the portrayal of happy relationships which do not include some kind of manipulation, betrayal or just generalised misery are rare and short lived in the series.

It is not just that relationships are presented as traumatic, but lesbian desire itself is often portrayed by the series as a form of torment, once again in keeping with lesbian pulp fiction in which lesbian desires were frequently depicted as tormented. Examples include Jenny's desire for Marina, which is presented as an unwilling, almost supernatural seduction or Alice's desire for her ex-lover Dana, which is portrayed as a tormented desire bordering on madness. It is in the character of Bette, however, that the representation of desire as torment crystallises most clearly. During the first season, Bette acts out her tormented adulterous desire for Candace, season two focuses on her frustrated desire for Tina, which is portrayed as equally tormented, and even in her more recent relationship with sculptor Jodie, her *desire* is presented as something that troubles Bette. Jennifer Beals' performance style as Bette is an important element of depicting lesbian desire as a kind of *Lesbian Hell* in *The L Word*. The face that Beals presents for Bette's moments of desire is one of anguish, distress, almost agony. That the visible expression of her lesbian desire looks so emotionally painful, is in keeping with those protagonists who found their desires so disturbing in the 'twilight' world of lesbian pulps.

Before the beginning of the third season of *The L Word*, the inclusion of a new character played by Daniela Sea was vigorously promoted in the lesbian media. The series, criticised for focussing "on the experience of gender conforming lesbians" (Moore and Schilt 2006: 160), positioned this character as a response to such criticisms, implying that Sea's character would "bring a butch sensibility to the show that has been criticized for playing it too safe on the genderqueer spectrum" (Lo 2006a: n.p.). However, it was not long before it became apparent that *The L Word* intended to use Sea's character as a counter to more than one critique of their representational strategies, selling the character as both a butch woman and a transgender man, which resulted in disastrous portrayals of both, reinforcing old stereotypes that butch lesbians are or want to be men, as well as presenting female-to-male transsexuals as some sort of gender traitors – assimilationist, misogynist and eager to embrace 'male privilege.' [4] This is perhaps because, as becomes clear through the conversation had by many of the established characters towards the end of 'Lobster' (3.3), the creators of *The L Word* offer little complexity of in their depiction of gender and desire, and view butch and femme identities as some sort of heterosexual "role-play" (1.13 and 3.3). For while butch characters did appear in lesbian pulp fiction, the most famous of whom is undoubtedly Beebo Brinker from Ann Bannon's novels, in the *visual* popular cultural medium of television, the butch lesbian poses an even greater threat as her visible dissimilarity with normative conventions of femininity calls into question the naturalised relationship between women and 'feminine beauty' which advertisers are so keen to promote. As Malinda Lo adroitly observed in an article about the character's narrative arc:

It's too bad that as soon as that "real butch" sauntered onto the scene, she transitioned from female to male in a clumsy storyline that reduced the complexity of transgender issues to a stereotypical war between the sexes. To make matters worse, Moira's transition into Max was written in a way that not only dismissed the possibility of butch identity, it ridiculed it....What is disappointing about this engagement with masculinity is that *The L Word* is a *lesbian* show. By only allowing men—or women who are in the process of becoming men—to display or engage in masculine behaviors or attitudes, *The L Word* continues to deny a major part of what has made lesbian cultures so fascinating and so queer for hundreds of years (2006b: n.p.).

That is, *The L Word* once again hesitates at presenting something that may challenge conventional notions of gender, once again presenting images that are mediated for, and directed towards, a presumed heterosexual audience.

Season four sees *The L Word* attempting to make up for some of their more irresponsible portrayals of transgendered men of season three, most clearly through the discussion of Max's taking of illegally-obtained hormones in a medically unsupervised manner at a transgender support group meeting that plays something akin to a poorly produced and acted public service announcement. However, Max's representation is still clearly a mediated one, whether this be framed through questioning the 'reason' behind his transsexuality (4.8), or through the visual construction of this character. As Moore and Schilt have noted of Shane's androgyny, Max's masculinity too

lacks full believability on-screen....This allows the show's producers to have their cake and eat it too: they are able to successfully introduce the notion of a woman being read or intentionally passing as male without visually alienating squeamish viewers by rendering one of *The L Word's* permanent characters male in appearance, or worse, gender ambiguous. (2006: 161)

Max's girlish voice, floppy hair and tiny soul-patch does little to convince the viewer that his conservative boss and co-workers would truly accept him as male. No mention is made of the difficulties transitioning people experience in terms of name and gender changes on official documents and bank accounts (that one would assume would have had to be presented for his employment), or of the fact that the 'male-privilege' that Max is depicted as willingly entering into is indeed not accessible for many female-to-male transsexuals.

As if in deference to the "squeamish" viewers Moore and Schilt identify who may find transgenderism difficult to take, 'Lez Girls' (4.5) opens with a scene of Max undressing in front of a mirror. This scene could have been utilised to great effect to undermine conventional and ideologically ascribed notions of sex as 'naturally' dimorphic, by demonstrating the real-life

masculinising effects that hormone therapy can have on an ostensibly 'female' body. Indeed, if *The L Word* had wished to make an attempt at realism in its depiction of a transgendered man who has undergone a breast reduction and hormone treatment, they could have utilised digital technology to superimpose Sea's head onto the body of a real-life transman. Instead, we see Sea's clearly female body, and the camera focuses on a hairless chest, unlikely for the amount of testosterone Max is reputed to take, breasts, and even freshly waxed legs. This narratively unnecessary scene acts as if to deliberately reaffirm viewers' scepticism of transsexuality that Max 'really' is a woman, and this acknowledgement of 'womaness' is implied as necessary for him to defend a female colleague as he proceeds to do later in the episode. Once again, this can be seen as a mediated representation, one in which the depiction of a transgendered man can only take place in this popular cultural format if it is seen to offer a voyeuristic 'insight,' and play into dominant conventions of gendered representation.

In the introduction to her anthology of excerpts from lesbian pulp fiction, Katherine V. Forrest wrote "

The importance of all our pulp fiction novels cannot possibly be overstated. Whatever their negative images or messages, they told us we were not alone. Because they told us about each other, they led us to look for and find each other, they led us to the end of the isolation that had divided and conquered us" (2005: xviii).

We certainly live in a very different time from the 1950s, in terms of both queer rights and visibility. Many, though not all, lesbians today have access to a variety of film, literature and magazines in which they can find stories and images that reflect their desires and experiences. These are still often difficult to access, as they are generally only available via specifically gay and lesbian film festivals, bookstores or outlets. Within mass culture, lesbians are still fairly illegible, and when they do appear, it is often as pseudo-lesbians performing for males, or as the kind of daffy, asexual characters of the Ellen DeGeneres mould. For all its weaknesses, lesbians do love to watch *The L Word*, much as they loved reading lesbian pulp novels, as can be seen in the number of online fan communities that have sprouted since the show's inception. For *The L Word* takes on the same duality offered by lesbian pulps, simultaneously offering lesbian survival television through its creation of lesbian stories and sexuality rarely seen on television, just as it mediates these images in order to appeal to a predominately heterosexual marketplace and appease potentially homophobic censors and viewers. Perhaps one day we will reach a point where lesbian images and narratives that appear in popular cultural formats will not need to be mediated in this manner, but until then, lesbian pulp television such as *The L Word* will offer us an eroticised, twilight glimpse of Sapphistry on the small screen.

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Endnotes

[1.](#) For further discussion of the feminine lesbian in *The L Word* see Beirne 'Fashioning *The L Word*' and Erin Douglas' forthcoming 'Pink Heels, Dildos, and Erotic Play: The (Re)Making of Fem(me)ininity in Showtime's *The L Word*.'

[2.](#) For further discussion of this storyline see Dana Heller 'How Does a Lesbian Look?' or Beirne 'Dirty Lesbian Pictures.'

[3.](#) Tim's witnessing of this scene, and his subsequent impotence, are discussed by Merri Lisa Johnson in 'L is for "long term": Compulsory monogamy on *The L Word*' (119-122).

[4.](#) Each of these representations are in keeping with the pre sex-wars, second-wave political aesthetic that can be witnessed elsewhere in *The L Word*. See discussion of its attitudes towards pornography in Beirne 'Dirty Lesbian Pictures' or discussion of the tension between third and second wave feminism in *The L Word* in 'Straight-up sex in *The L Word*' by Wheeler and Wheeler.

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