

Fashioning *The L Word*.

By Rebecca Beirne

Abstract

This essay discusses the first and second seasons of Showtime's cable television series *The L Word* (2004-). *The L Word* is remarkable in that it is the first major drama series to focus its narrative on the lives of lesbian and bisexual women. This article critically analyses the first two seasons, together with initial responses to the series, in terms of lesbian femininity, masculinity and desire.¹

Introduction

Much has been made of how 'differently' the television series *The L Word*² represents lesbianism. The hype surrounding *The L Word* purports that the series ushers in a new era of lesbian visibility and representation to the mainstream, which presents a fashionable and glamorous image of lesbianism to counter 'the stereotype,' in a curious repetition of the popularised notion of early to mid 1990s 'lesbian chic.' During this period, the visible lesbian subject is claimed to have shifted from the 'mannish lesbian' of modernity, to the decidedly more marketable 'lipstick lesbian.' As Martha Gever remarks in her monograph on lesbian celebrity:

[i]f understated mannish garments and bearing could be said to constitute lesbian visibility in the past, the 1990s witnessed the arrival of a lesbian style that is decidedly more spectacular and, as a result, feminized if not always conventionally feminine – flashy but not necessarily frilly.³

This vision of lesbian style is displayed in *The L Word*, and the marked lesbian body is given significantly less representational prominence. It is even at times explicitly disavowed, most obviously in Alice's (Leisha Hailey) disparaging reference to what she terms a 'hundred footer': "[i]s it her hair? Is it her jog bra? Is it her mandles?" remarking that she can "tell she's a lesbo from across a football field" (1.11). Unlike most examples of lesbian representation on television, the ensemble nature of *The L Word* allows for multiple and

differential constructions of lesbians, even if this multiplicity is revealed primarily through contrast, and within a fairly glamorous, standardised spectrum. As Eve Sedgwick put it “[t]he sense of the lesbian individual, isolated or coupled, scandalous, scrutinized, staggering under her representational burden, gives way to the vaster livelier potential of a lesbian ecology.”⁴ This lesbian ecology does not spring full-grown from the heads of Ilene Chaiken et al., despite what celebratory media reports might insinuate, but rather recirculates a multiplicity of understandings (and clichés) of the lesbian subject and lesbian life.

Investigating femininity: Lipstick and Lesbians

The manner in which the femme is theoretically visualised has seen much change in the last twenty years. This owes much to the reclamation of butch-femme cultures engendered by the sex wars, of course, but also as Clark has asserted, “some credit for the changing perspectives on fashion might also be given to the recent emphasis on masquerade and fabrication in feminist criticism and to the more prominent role of camp in lesbian criticism.”⁵ These, and other, influences resulted in an intensified critical engagement with the femme, enabling her to be seen as something greater than a capitulation to and replication of heterosexual and misogynist norms. Such influential essays as Sue-Ellen Case’s ‘Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetic’⁶ for example, focused upon the camp masquerade of the femme, whose femininity is performed to the butch, which Case suggests points towards a new possibility for a feminist subject position. However, even in this account, which seeks to re-signify femme as a positive and authentically lesbian subject, she is only visible, and seemingly only *possible* in the presence of the desiring butch. Other writers, notably writing from a more personal perspective, such as Amber Hollibaugh and Cherrie Moraga⁷ and Joan Nestle,⁸ have articulated both lesbian authenticity and agency in the femme, rearticulating as active and subjective modes of desire previously understood as passive, and reclaiming being objectified as potentially powerful. Danae Clark’s ‘Commodity Lesbianism’ and Arlene Stein’s ‘All dressed up, but no place to go? Style wars and the new lesbianism’⁹ discuss the then-emerging phenomenon of lesbian

chic, attempting to ascertain the affirmative and injurious possibilities of this newfound (hyper)visibility. Later accounts, such as those of Inness¹⁰ and Ciasullo¹¹ have further read the significance of 1990s images of lesbians in the mainstream discourse. Others still have focussed on the manner in which the feminine lesbian is presented in contemporary theory and literary practice, notably Martin¹² and Walker, the latter of whom has also performed an analysis of historical literary productions of the femme lesbian.¹³ It is into the context of these obviously intersecting, yet rarely integrated, traditions of celebrating femme cultures within specifically lesbian contexts, and gay and lesbian studies' readings of feminine lesbians in mainstream culture, that I am attempting to locate my reading of *The L Word*.

The growth in images of 'lipstick lesbianism' can be seen as both a by-product of mainstream media attention, which inevitably favours a "consumable lesbian,"¹⁴ and the explosion of femme theory and writing in the 1990s, which could be characterised as the decade in which "the femmes...are finally asserting themselves".¹⁵ Gever has noted that lesbian celebrities must posit "a measure of the acquiescence to gender and sexual norms required for recognition and inclusion to occur peaceably."¹⁶ Likewise, in *The L Word*, we have images that have been constructed for a heterosexual media and populace, at least in part, which embody these measures of acquiescence for economic and political purposes of peaceable inclusion and integration, which are considered to be particularly necessary for the medium with which they are engaged.

The L Word has an odd approach to and relationship with visibility, simultaneously desiring and disparaging it, announcing and obscuring. It inserts the lesbian into a frame in which she is to this day fairly invisible, notably utilising a lesbian image that is historically invisible from the cultural imagination of what constitutes a lesbian via her frequent in-distinguish-ability from heterosexuality. In doing so the visible lesbian is rendered invisible through closeting, the invisible (though not 'real') lesbian is rendered hyper-visible, and lesbianism itself is rendered simultaneously more and less visible. The "visible difference" situated in the butch lesbian¹⁷ has enabled her

positioning as the “magical sign” of lesbianism¹⁸ – expressed in multiple texts, from *The Well of Loneliness* to lesbian theory to *Queer as Folk*,¹⁹ as the ‘real’ or authentic lesbian. It is perceived that because the marked (butch) body is “already and always marked as lesbian, she is *more* visible than the femme – and thus, if represented, more “lesbian” than the femme.”²⁰ The formulation that the femme is popular culture’s visible lesbian, and yet by virtue of her ‘sameness’ simultaneously invisible - hence unable to adequately represent lesbians, is a fairly common one. The converse of such arguments views the femme’s ‘likeness to’ (sometimes problematically expressed as proximity to) heterosexuality as rendering her uniquely able to denaturalise heterosexual perceptions of lesbianism, and by extension, heterosexuality itself. The publicity materials surrounding the series further add to this perception, as the theme is to distance the series from ‘old-style’ lesbians – characterised as those who are a little too feminist or a little too butch.

Considering the outward ‘reclamation’ of femininity undertaken by *The L Word*, it is curious that in the first and rare appearance of the actual *term* ‘femme’ in the series, it is used as a synonym for heterosexual. The second episode of the series, ‘Let’s Do It,’ features a lengthy sequence in which the protagonists engage in a mission to find out if the woman (Lara) that Dana (Erin Daniels) is interested in is a lesbian or not. These scenes allow for an examination of issues of visibility, particularly as they relate to courtship rituals. They observe Lara’s (Lauren Lee Smith) garb, movements and her reaction to Bette and Tina kissing, utilising the pseudo-scientific methods of placing her various attributes in ‘lez’ and ‘straight’ columns and assigning them points.

Bette (Jennifer Beals): Well, she's got some good lezzie points for her walk, and the way she moves that chopping knife.

Shane (Katherine Moening): Yeah, but she's way femme-y on the coiffure tip.²¹

It seems significant that here it is not ‘girly’ or ‘feminine’ that is used as a term that is interchangeable with heterosexual, or at least a marker thereof, but

‘femmey’ – a term seldom used outside western lesbian subcultures, which denotes a particular style of lesbian. It is quite mystifying that in a series that centres on a group of predominantly ‘lipstick lesbians,’ “lezzie” and “femmey” can be placed in such marked opposition to one another. While visual and attitudinal identification of lesbians as lesbians often, if not usually, relies on recourse to signifiers of the marked, butch lesbian, one would think that this group of predominately ‘femmey’ dykes would be aware of other codes, or would least problematise this statement, pointing out that feminine presentations do not necessarily denote unequivocal straightness.

The final scene of this storyline in ‘Let’s Do It’ sees Lara passionately kissing Dana in the locker room. Her consequent statement “[j]ust in case you were still wondering,” acts to undermine the analysis of Lara as straight based upon visible signifiers, portrayed as definitive by all the characters, reaffirming that a lesbian does not have to be visible as such in order to be one. This functions as almost a cautionary tale about using butch signifiers as the magical signs of lesbian gaydar – allowing for a demonstration of the elasticity of lesbian signifiers, and an affirmation that sexual identity cannot always be read from the body or its ornaments. Despite this message however, there are further implications to ‘mission: gaydar’ than simply undermining the preconceptions of the characters and audience as to ‘what a lesbian looks like.’ These scenes highlight a key facet of *The L Word* that is primarily found in the deeper recesses of the text – that ‘real’ lesbianism is to be found in (implied) female masculinity - and ruptures this message through to the surface in the form of dialogue.

Walker’s assertion that “the feminine lesbian cannot be studied in isolation from the idiom of race passing”²² is of particular resonance to an examination of *The L Word* due to its presentation of and engagement with both the feminine ‘passing’ lesbian, and the light-skinned ‘passing’ African-American. The issue of passing is further explicitly raised in the show via an altercation between Bette and Yolanda (Kim Hawthorne), an African-American single-mother-to-be in Bette and Tina’s therapy group for prospective parents. Whereas in the previous example, Lara’s passing is not an attempt or even

desire to pass, but rather a figural tendency to do so, here the question of intentional passing, or what is perceived to be intentional passing, and the ethics thereof, is raised. Yolanda, who has already been characterised as “confrontational” in the episode, criticises Bette for emphasising her lesbianism while never referring to herself as an African-American woman, asserting that “you need to reflect on what it is you’re saying to the world while hiding so behind the lightness of your skin” (1.8). This discussion is ended later in the episode through Bette outing Yolanda as a lesbian. Bette accuses Yolanda of practising a double standard by allowing herself to be mistaken for a straight woman, saying that “you’re not exactly readable as a lesbian, and you didn’t come out and declare yourself.” The writers’ aim in constructing this improbable and quite melodramatic scenario is perhaps to emphasize that one should not judge those who appear to pass, as it is not necessarily possible to announce all identities through bodily markers or overt declaration. When Bette asks “why is it so wrong for me to move more freely in the world just because my appearance doesn’t automatically announce who I am?” it further questions the centrality of visibility to truth, perhaps attempting to counter the emphasis placed on coming or being out by gay and lesbian political groups and individuals. Bette’s statement however also problematically insinuates that light-skinned biracial persons, or feminine lesbians, as the two are somewhat conflated in this story, ‘pass’ because they “wish to move more easily in the world” – that the unmarked body connotes a simple relationship of conforming or desiring to conform. The appearance of the unmarked body is therefore figured as an assimilationist performance rather than a complex expression of identities.

The L Word, while ostensibly advancing the cause of feminine lesbians, appears to reinforce perceptions of the feminine lesbian as inauthentic, or at the very least, to express a deeply ambivalent attitude towards lesbian femininity. Even as it overtly disparages non-feminine women as unfashionable, it is when Dana attempts to dress in a *more feminine* manner that she is disparaged as unfashionable and “geeky” (1.3). When (hyper)femininity is associated with lesbian tennis-player Dana (Erin Daniels), it is seen as a restrictive force, symbolic of her closetedness - a mask used to

demonstrate heterosexuality. The two most significant instances thereof are the dresses she wears to Bette and Tina's sperm-hunting party in the pilot, and when attending her first Suburu party in 'Lawfully' (1.5), which are associated with, and emblematic of, her attempts to pass as heterosexual, and in marked opposition to both her usual casual sporty clothes, and the tailored pantsuits she tends to wear after coming out. In the first episode, her floral patterned, underbust frock is seen as part of her heterosexual drag, available for activation (along with her doubles partner and beard,²³ Harrison) should any straight people show up at the party. In 'Lawfully' her pale pink, extremely tight dress is held together by ribbon lacing all the way up the back. This is of particular interest as in this scene she is taking Harrison out as her official 'date' instead of her girlfriend Lara, who comes over to Dana's apartment, assuming that she had been invited. Having an openly lesbian and very sexual partner makes her attempts to pass more difficult, on a literal and emotional level, and requires more restriction – here presented as more femininity: she is quite literally restrained by pale pink ribbon, and unused and unsuited to such constriction, she can move only her arms and take very small jerky steps, with her corseted chest heaving like a lady from a Regency romance.

There are moments in *The L Word*, however, that do function to undermine this proposition. In answer to the question of what she will wear on her first date with Lara, Dana proposes a 'blue sundress' to howls of disapproval from her friends. Her answer to this chorus of negativity is "but I'm going to a nice place, y'know, somebody might see me" (1.3), stressing both her closetedness and the ability of femininity to disguise obvious lesbianism. This association is almost critiqued once again by Lara, who is wearing a dress, and initially looks at Dana with horror, feeling overdressed in comparison to Dana's (supposedly casual) outfit of a white fitted button-up shirt and pants. Lara asks if she is thereby "a geek" for having worn a dress and Dana responds "no, I'm a geek. For letting my friends tell me what to wear." This could be read as an indication that her friends' constant attempts to make her dress more androgynously, are a source of pressure upon her, and she really *does* feel comfortable in her dresses. The fact that immediately after she does come out her dresses seem to disappear (at least for the rest of the first season) indicates

that this is not the case - when she is now required to ‘dress up’ for formal occasions or simply going out she eschews dresses in favour of pantsuits or jeans with a simple shirt. During season two, when further emphasis of the series was placed upon displaying designer frocks (even struggling-to-make-ends-meet waitress Jenny appears in new designer coats and dresses every week), and under the influence of fiancée Tonya, Dana once again begins to wear dresses, but that does not negate the very clear narrative message of the first season.²⁴

In season two, Jenny (Mia Kirshner), as part of her continued coming out and claiming of her lesbian identity, engages in the classic trope of such claiming: cutting off her previously long hair (‘Lynch Pin’ 2.4). This move is precipitated by a discussion she has with new (straight) housemate Mark (Eric Lively) as to whether or not she visibly appears to be a lesbian. When questioned as to why he can identify the other onscreen lesbian characters as such, but not Jenny, Mark tries to explain:

[i]t's not that they're masculine, or anything, 'cause actually some of them are pretty feminine. You know? It's... they have these... haircuts. These very cool haircuts – don't get me wrong – it's not - more – it's obviously more than a haircut. But it's - no, it's true. It's this... something that they exude that's...
(thinks) I'm gonna try and put my finger on it.

Although initially expressing disbelief at the limitations of this assessment, Jenny appears to take to heart this appraisal of visible-lesbianism as being the possession of a cool haircut, or at least seems to desire to render her sexuality more visible, as later that night she asks Shane to give her a haircut, saying that “I just feel like I... need to change.” The single tear rolling down Jenny’s face as Shane cuts her hair off is reminiscent of her mourning for heterosexual identity in the death of her alter ego Sarah Schuster. The next time we see Jenny, she is strutting down the street alongside Shane with her new short haircut, looking far more confident than she has before, and even being “cruised” by a female passer-by, as a song whose lyrics repeat “butch in the

streets, femme in the sheets” plays (‘Labyrinth’ 2.5). This moment is perhaps a reversal of the Dana storyline, as here Jenny must take on a (slightly) butcher persona at least “in the streets” in order to both assert her lesbianism and become empowered, while perhaps her femme side “in the sheets” is portrayed as the deeper, more authentic level of her personality.

The series predominantly, but not solely, associates its feminine lesbians with the ‘normal’ lesbian, the “lesbians’ blank page,” and places this in opposition to the term ‘femme.’ As Leslea Newman notes: “[e]ven in the gay nineties, with lipstick lesbians reigning supreme, some women find it an insult to be called a femme.”²⁵ And, for many femmes, including those who enjoy their lipstick, the ‘lipstick lesbian’ is “a derogatory term that conjures up an apolitical creature...a lesbian who doesn’t want to be a dyke and doesn’t want to be associated with dykes.”²⁶ Despite such antagonisms between the two, they are often conflated, particularly within mainstream discourse. Jetter claims that lesbians in the mainstream “have a few things in common: They’re white. They’re middle class. And they seem to be more interested in makeup and clothes than in feminism. In short, they’re femmes, or what the straight world prefers to call lipstick lesbians.”²⁷ The characterisation of lesbians in late 20th century mainstream culture that Jetter describes is (unfortunately) completely true. The subsequent conflation of the rich cultural history of queer femme identities with the culturally and temporally specific, consumerist and invented-by/for-the-mainstream image of ‘lipstick lesbianism’ is a vast oversimplification, although distinguishing them from one another on the basis of *image* alone is difficult if not impossible. Jetter’s formulation, repeated pervasively in the discourse, completely annexes the central role in femme history of femmes of colour, working class femmes and feminist femmes.

Perhaps this is due to *The L Word*’s attitude to butch-femme cultures. The series’ nod to 1950s butch-femme culture takes place in ‘Liberally’ (1.10), which sees Dana and Jenny meeting by chance in a bar, about which the newly bisexual Jenny in wonderment observes is “like something out of the 1950s. It’s so butch and femme.” The newly out Dana replies despondently that they indeed are in:

the oldest lesbian bar in L.A. Actually, it probably hasn't changed *since* the 1950s. But really, it's no different than any other club, you know, I mean, you have a few drinks, and you talk to a few people you have nothing in common with, and realize how unlikely it is you'll ever meet anyone who's right for you again.

Later in the episode they are suddenly and somewhat inexplicably shown at Jenny's abode, and what then proceeds to occur is one of the most awkward sexual encounters in the history of television. Although Dana is, as Walker would say "your jock type, not your butch type,"²⁸ in these scenes the discussed context of the bar, together with the contrast between her outfit (she is clad in a white singlet and jeans), mannerisms and attitude and those of Jenny (dressed in a black frock, pink sash and silver heels), indicate that Dana is intended to be read as 'the butch' in this scene.

The awkwardness of the ensuing attempted sex act is engendered by the fact that neither of them appears to know what to do to the other. This is not simply a matter of the sexual inexperience of both parties, but that they are both sexual "bottoms" (or at least have been portrayed as such at this point of the narrative). The scene acts to challenge perceptions of visible difference as sexual difference, and to undermine conceptions of the butch as necessarily top, a theme gradually being promulgated in lesbian culture, but entirely apparent in neither *The L Word* nor in other mainstream depictions of lesbianism. There are many ways this scene can be read. However, a defining sensation thereof is that both parties, and particularly Jenny, are *play-acting* desire. This is expressed by such factors as Jenny's big, pseudo-interested eyes and comments like "wow! That's really interesting," when 'that' clearly is not and her words contrast with the monotone in which they are uttered. This is problematic and troubling, particularly considering that the only other time butch-femme relationships are explicitly discussed, although butch-femme codes are in almost constant implicit use in the series, it is referred to as "butch-femme role play" (Kit 1.13). One cannot help but wonder if *The L*

Word is attempting to suggest that such identities are simply imitative and constricting ‘roles’ that do not work.

It appears that many cultural theorists who seek to view the femme as positive do so in light of the figure’s supposed proximity to heterosexuality. Sherrie Inness, for example, in the first chapter of her book *The Lesbian Menace: Ideology, Identity and the Representation of Lesbian Life* reads two 1920s texts, one of which presents a ‘mythic mannish lesbian’ and one of which depicts a feminine lesbian. Inness reads the representation of the feminine lesbian as revealing “a greater threat to heterosexual order than does the mannish lesbian” by virtue of her inability to be visually distinguished from heterosexual women, as the femme destabilises “an image of the lesbian as an easily excluded outsider.”²⁹ When it comes to lesbians in later mainstream discourse however, even Inness appears to shift somewhat on the point of how radical the feminine lesbian can be, noting that “[a]lthough I agree with Clark and Grocock that lipstick lesbians are too complicated to be viewed as merely a sign of lesbian cooption, I am far more ambivalent about how representations of lipstick lesbians or “designer dykes” are manipulated in the mainstream press....”³⁰

Throughout Ann Ciasullo’s survey of various magazine and filmic depictions of lesbianism in ‘Making her (In)visible: Cultural Representations of Lesbianism and the Lesbian Body in the 1990s,’ she finds the central trope to be that of the ‘consumable’ lesbian – “[m]ainstream culture is thus giving with one hand and taking back with the other: it makes room for positive representations of lesbianism, but the lesbian it chooses as “representative,” decoupled from the butch that would more clearly signify lesbianism for mainstream audiences, in effect becomes a nonlesbian.”³¹ Ciasullo later explicated this perception in relation to *The L Word* when interviewed for a newspaper article on the series:

[m]ost people envision lesbians as butch dykes in sleeveless flannel shirts and jeans — so how to represent lesbians on TV in a politically correct way becomes a quandary. “Think

about images of African Americans, and someone like Sidney Poitier, who was seen as changing the image of black men in film but by some critics was seen as an Uncle Tom figure,” Ciasullo says. “The same thing goes for lesbians. The stereotype is the butch lesbian, and to get away from that, you have the feminine lesbian. But as images get feminized, lesbianism gets subsumed.”³²

I am rather discomfited by the analysis that “as images get feminized, lesbianism gets subsumed.” I am concerned here that “[i]n our efforts to challenge forms of gender policing, we run the risk of replicating a kind of gender totalitarianism, even in the form of its deconstruction.”³³ Theorists should be wary of replicating the too easy association of femininity with heterosexuality, even within the loaded discourse of popular culture.

And yet, there is much truth in the analysis of the lesbian representations seen in popular culture as attempts to airbrush the spectre of homosexuality through the disavowal of those that visibly or sexually disrupt normative cultural precepts. In her analysis of 1990s women’s magazines during the first blush of lesbian chic, Inness observed that “[r]eaders are encouraged to look at the stylish, surface appearance of lesbianism, not to seek beneath the surface for a deeper understanding.”³⁴ Similarly *The L Word*, or if not the text itself then at least the discourse surrounding it, focuses upon style and stylishness - surfaces. The deeper layers of signification are not only consequently overlooked, but are frequently in fact activated to counter the meanings produced by the surfaces they have a hand in representing. This is particularly seen in the casting of at least outwardly heterosexual actresses in the central roles, with the exception of one out lesbian actress, who is notably cast as bisexual. Once again this resonates with the earlier depictions, which used “models who look stereotypically heterosexual pretending to be lesbians” in order to provide “titillation without threat as there is an implicit understanding that these are not ‘real’ lesbians.”³⁵

While such writers as Erin Douglas³⁶ feel that the sexuality of the actresses in *The L Word* is not relevant to their performance as lesbians, the seemingly deliberate casting of mostly heterosexual actresses has various repercussions on the signification of lesbianism that the series produces – perhaps most significantly in reinforcing hegemonic perceptions of lesbian sexuality as a liminal, mobile state, easily returned to heterosexuality, via the lesbian performances of straight actresses, who then, in interviews, are at pains to focus discussion as much as possible upon their husbands and boyfriends. For much as we insist on the text itself as being the only producer of meaning, it does not exist in a vacuum, and multiple factors, including previous knowledge of the actresses, and perhaps most particularly the media flurry accompanying the program, can come into play in a viewer's reading of the series. This is to some degree countered by various insinuations and at times statements that the cast may not be as straight as they seem.³⁷ Whether or not this is true, which it very well may be, one cannot help but feel that this practice replicates the simultaneous giving and withholding of what Clark refers to as “gay window advertising,” in that “lesbians can read into an ad certain subtextual elements.”³⁸ In *The L Word* the audience can read ‘real’ closeted lesbianism into the actresses, thus reading themselves into the frame, thereby becoming “a model of the new gay marketing strategy” in that they are “believable as lesbians to lesbians – but just barely.”³⁹ Much as scorn has been heaped on the inauthenticity of the feminine cast, *The L Word* has often also been praised for that very feature, as it is seen to re-signify the sign ‘lesbian’ from its popular associations with female masculinity, and thereby demonstrate that there are feminine lesbians (or as some have asserted, that lesbians are ‘just like’ heterosexual women). If *The L Word* is to indeed show its audience that there *are* feminine lesbians, however, is it not then a trifle curious to do so by using mainly heterosexual women to *perform* lesbian femininity?

Is the sense of femininity as heterosexual or imitative masquerade seen in the characterisation of Dana performing femininity as a means of disguising her homosexuality, transferable to the other, more clearly feminine, characters in *The L Word*? Although there are several characters who appear to inhabit an

embodied femininity, femininity is frequently presented as intrinsically performative in the series via the links drawn between femininity, manipulateness and duplicity, with the exception of those presented as virtuous wives. Either way, they are almost always presented as ‘less lesbian’ than their counterparts. Walker in her historical study of the feminine lesbian in literature and theory found that:

in general, these women are coded traditionally as either the “wifely partner,” with a woman’s financial and emotional dependence and a burning desire to darn socks, and/or as the wayward heterosexual who returns to men when “the life” becomes too difficult (when the going gets tough, the femmes go straight).⁴⁰

Feminine-coded characters are consistently associated with vanity and narcissism in the text, as well as (often sexual) duplicity. The depiction of feminine woman-desire as less authentic, or somehow less dedicated to women (seemingly by virtue of their femininity) can also be seen in the first season of *The L Word*. That this observation is primarily in relation to bisexually identified women in the series does not negate its impact. Three main examples of just such a ‘return to men’ occur in the first season of the series. The first transpires when Alice (Leisha Hailey) announces to Tina (Laurel Holloman) that she intends to “go back to men” as she has “had enough drama and mind-fucks, and women are fucking crazy” (1.3). Jenny then sleeps with her estranged husband Tim immediately after an awful dinner with Marina (whom she desperately wants to be with but can’t have), afterwards telling him that she is not going to see Marina ever again (1.9). The third example is the married and moneyed Cherie’s (Rosanna Arquette) choice of her husband, and the economic and societal privileges he represents, over Shane. While in the latter example it is indeed the idea of ‘the life,’ that is too difficult, in the first two, it is women themselves and their (apparently inherent) manipulations and inducements to drama that are too difficult. It is of course these characters’ positioning as bisexual which gives them the ability to choose such a thing, unlike those characters who are “really really

gay” (1.5), such as Dana, Shane (Katherine Moening) and Bette (Jennifer Beals), who are, significantly, less feminine than the others. The second season shifts somewhat in this respect, with Jenny becoming more lesbian-identified, and Alice expressing her preference for women over men (by choosing a marshmallow breast lollipop over a chocolate penis in ‘Labyrinth’ during an argument over which gender she prefers).

At the outset of the series, Tina’s maternal qualities together with her long-term monogamy, low sex drive and dedication to Bette’s career, acts to situate her as the “wifely partner” whom Walker describes - a perfect model of a 1950s housewife, a woman who “not only mimes but embodies a version of traditional femininity.”⁴¹ It should be noted here that the model of femininity embodied by Tina is accessible to her via her very specific class positioning. Her financially privileged position renders her the mistress of a large house with a referenced but invisible housekeeper without need of a second income. This is in keeping with a more general trend in depictions of lesbians on television in recent times that creates images that hearken back to earlier, ‘purer’ times. Television acts to disassociate these characters from connections between lesbianism and masculinity or ‘sexual perversion,’ enabling a proposition of lesbians as ‘just like’ heterosexual women, or perhaps as even more perfect examples of traditional ‘womanliness’ than contemporary heterosexual female television characters. As Heller argues, the lesbian couple on *E.R.* “are portrayed as more family oriented than any of the heterosexual characters on the show.”⁴² In *The L Word*, however, due to the multiple lesbian and bisexual characters, the pressure on a single lesbian or lesbian couple to signify many aspects of lesbian life is not as great, and so the baby storyline does not have the same desexualising effect as it does on, say, *Queer as Folk*.

Also, unlike triumphant narratives involving lesbian conception, which act as a positive affirmation of ‘alternative families’ such as *If These Walls Could Talk 2*, *The L Word*’s gayby storyline is quite differently coded, for while the series opens with the joyful “let’s make a baby,” the insemination and pregnancy is fraught with difficulty and heartache. This could be seen as

suggestive that the Tina and Bette's aspirations to this model of traditionalised heteronormative life with its firmly ascribed roles (one earns the money, the other picks up the dry cleaning,) is potentially and ultimately destructive to the selfhood of individuals, and thereby relationships. Or perhaps it is simply an element of the narrative drive towards tragedy in *The L Word*. This is then built upon during the second season wherein Tina, once again pregnant and despite certain attempts at manipulation by equally dominant women, is suddenly and rather inexplicably as a result of her separation with Bette in possession of emotional, sexual, and even physical power which she had heretofore never appeared to possess.

Tina is also clearly an embodied character in that she is unremittingly associated with bodily functions and activities. As Sedgwick points out “[o]ur intimacy with Tina’s body – inseminated, peeing, ultrasounded, vomiting – continues to be near-total.”⁴³ To this I would add the frequent discussion of such unspeakables as progesterone suppositories, and Tina’s constant, and usually quite indecorous, eating. These are all unusual to the medium of glossy, thin, sanitised television drama, bringing to mind assertions of the pregnant body as the ultimate expression of the grotesque⁴⁴ or the abject - wherein the “process of ‘becoming-mother’ is distanced from subjectivity and identity.”⁴⁵ This has a dual function. The audience is brought closer to Tina as this focus upon the body renders her the most physically real and least celluloid of the characters. However, by primarily associating her with the body, she is distanced from the audience as a character, as Tina’s storylines are funnelled primarily through the baby or Bette, and, unlike the other characters, we gain no back-story on her life prior to her relationship with Bette.

Desire and Relationships in the L World

Lesbian desire is frequently figured as structured alternately by similarity or by complementary difference. In *The L Word* both of these tropes are utilised in presenting the couplings of the series - those relationships that display codes

of ‘difference’ are characterised as more effective or possible, though ultimately these too are ineffective and come undone, while the relationships characterised by similarities – visual, racial or interests-based – are exemplified by unrestrainable desire and beguilement. The primary lesbian relationship in season one of *The L Word* is portrayed as being structured by visual and narrative gendered and racial difference, and it is (arguably) these differences that lead to the disintegration of Tina and Bette’s seven-year relationship. Bette is the wage earner, more commanding and involved in a very demanding career, while Tina is depicted as the ‘wifely’ partner, staying at home to “prepare [her] body for pregnancy” (1.1). The visual association of femmes in general and filmic/televsual lesbians who wish to bear children in particular with blondeness,⁴⁶ is reinforced by this representation, which mobilises cultural associations of ‘natural’ femininity with whiteness. Their difference is prominently visually coded through their clothing styles, with Bette generally wearing designer suits with tailored men’s shirts - these being marks of a necessitated corporate femininity, while Tina predominantly wears casual ‘peasant-style’ clothes, in keeping with her confinement to the sphere of the home. Even when both the characters are attired in suits, they are generally, and quite amusingly, put in one white suit with a black shirt and one black suit with a white shirt (almost as if one is a photo-negative of the other,) so although Bette and Tina are dressed almost identically, they are still coded as opposite and complementary to one another. Their emotional and communicative styles are also very different - while Bette does not enjoy verbalising her feelings, Tina is very enthusiastic about (and loquacious at) therapy, which seems to render them both completely unable to communicate with one another.

This lack of communication extends to the couples’ sex life, which has been less than perfect for three years out of their seven-year relationship. During the first season, the first two of the three Bette/Tina sex scenes depicted are either for the purposes of, or inspired by an attempt at, procreation. The third occurs in ‘Limb from Limb’ after Tina has discovered Bette’s affair. This scene - one of the few incidences of physical violence in the series, is instigated through the ‘out of control’ anger of the usually fairly passive Tina, who slaps Bette,

and Bette's response of restraining her and attempting to have non-consensual sex with her. Tina regains control of the situation, and seizing Bette's hand, puts it inside herself, and proceeds to use Bette's hand to satisfy herself, then collapses on top of her and the scene ends. This scene is not only very confronting, but rather perplexing in terms of its signification. Perhaps it is the culmination of Tina's recurrent casting as the victimised wife, and her victory in this sexually violent power struggle is symbolic of Tina's subsequent move away from Bette (the final scene of the season sees Tina at Alice's, distraught and minus her wedding band). The violence of this scene, or perhaps rather, the violence of domestication, is suggestively prefigured by the presence of Catherine Opie's photographic 'Self-Portrait' (1993) in both the (flashback) scene in which Bette and Tina meet (1.11), and more lingeringly, at the gallery opening at which Tina discovers Bette's infidelity (1.13). The portrait depicts a naked back, upon which a picture is engraved. The razor engraving on the skin is a childlike drawing of a house, cloud, and two girls (delineated as such via their triangular skirts) holding hands. The violence of this image's inscription at the beginning and (for the time being) the end of their relationship suggests that the childlike dream of perfect lesbian domestic felicity in a traditionalised mode depicted by this image and aspired to in Bette and Tina's relationship requires a certain degree of violence to the self, and Bette and Tina's violent battle for (sexual) dominance in this scene acts to bring the submerged power relations of such a heteronormative relationship to the surface.

Candace (Ion Overman)'s behaviour, race and gender presentation are visually presented as entirely different from Tina. Her most marked characteristics are toughness, assertiveness and desire, together with an impermeability and impenetrability directly contrasted to Tina's softness and fluid boundaries between self and other. These features are reflected in her profession (carpenter), which requires both physical strength and manual skill. Candace is often seen in overalls or singlets and pants, practical, butchy clothes that leave her upper arms bare to highlight her strength. Although she has long hair, she keeps it effortlessly slicked back into a ponytail. In the two scenes in which she is not dressed for work, she displays a somewhat more femme veneer,

with more make-up and somewhat more feminine tops, however, the fact that her outfits are in the same style as her usual wear (sleeveless tops with pants) combined with her various mannerisms, and the contrast between Candace and the other lesbians seen in proximity to her in these scenes, still render a certain butch persona. Candace not only aggressively pursues the object of her desires, but takes control from Bette during sex, who has been hitherto seen as both a top, and a control freak. Candace is also figured in relation to Bette's African-American heritage,⁴⁷ particularly through meeting her via Yolanda, and the environment in which they first meet – at one of Kit's performances, which is the first scene in which we see a large group of people composed primarily of people of colour. Interestingly, Bette first looks at Candace with explicit desire after Slim Daddy (Snoop Dogg) expresses his captivation with Candace, and with the idea of her and Bette being together, which perhaps functions to render this narratively illicit desire as being accessed through the male gaze. Douglas argues that “Candace offers Bette some type of authentic racial performance. Their attraction is depicted as almost carnal. Bette's desire is a need to not only consume Candace but also her race as well, which is very problematic.”⁴⁸

The other key example of unrestrainable and illicit desire is also structured by similarity as opposed to difference. From the first, Marina and Jenny's similarities are foregrounded - from their interests and tastes, to their hair colour and complexion. That the zenith of their figural correspondence is achieved at the peak of their relationship indicates the significance of notions of similarity to the representation of their relationship. This scene takes place in the short time period between Jenny's separation from Tim and knowledge of Marina's relationship with Francesca, and immediately after a scene in which we see a previously distraught and extremely dirty Jenny curled foetus-style in Marina's bath. The scene displays the only time they openly go out together as a couple, and they are dressed in identically fawn-coloured shirts, with Marina in black pants and Jenny in a black skirt. This lesbian party signals Jenny's 'birth' into a new, lesbian world, into which Marina will shortly abandon Jenny, having “opened up [her] world” (1.7). Such an awakening is, however, depicted as figuratively impossible without a death.

This allegorical death takes the form of Jenny's (heterosexual) fictional alter ego Sarah Schuster being drowned at *sea* (the symbolic and maternally coded *Marina*) shortly after she consummates her relationship with Marina.

Together, these metaphoric associations form an expression of Lacanian discourse that "...theorizes homosexuality as a desire to return to the moment of primary identification, and lesbianism in particular [as evocative of] that primordial signifier of mirroring, the mother-child dyad...."⁴⁹

Not only psychoanalytic, however, but sexological discourse is recalled by the recurrent allusions to lesbianism as vampirism, a "fantastic...demon possession sort of thing." (Jenny 1.4) Metaphors of vampirism and contagion hold sway in Jenny's seduction by Marina – from their first encounter; in which the camera pans from Marina's hypnotic stare, to Jenny's transfixed one, to extreme close-up shots of their mouths; to the first time they have sex, which is presented as both exquisite pleasure and extreme loss and pain.⁵⁰ Here, the falsely human visage of the vampire that allows it entry into human environments is replaced by that of femininity, which allows the 'falsely heterosexual' visage of the feminine lesbian unsuspecting entry into the heterosexual world. With her lesbian identity "obscured by the "mask" or "cover" of friendship," the feminine woman "can invade even that site of heterosexual sanctity, the home,"⁵¹ thereby being provided with further opportunities for seduction of 'heterosexual' women. This is emphasised through Tim's jealous conviction that Jenny is sleeping with a male friend, which ironically almost leads him to discover her and Marina *in flagrante delicto*. The multiplicity/unplaceability of Marina's aristocratic cultural background (she speaks multiple 'foreign tongues' in her language of seduction) further contributes a vampiric lineage to her depiction. In *Reading the Vampire* Ken Gelder discusses national identity in relation to Dracula and the discourse surrounding it, locating polyphonic abilities and mixed lineages within the characters of Vambery and Dracula. This is then read as an anxiety about reverse colonisation, loss of national identity and the ability to traverse national boundaries, which can be extrapolated in the case of *The L Word* as an anxiety about the bisexual/homosexual woman colonising the heterosexual

woman into a state wherein the stability of her sexual boundaries becomes fluid.⁵²

Female masculinity?

Shane is the most cogent example of *The L Word*'s rendition of a butch figure in the group. Despite her much discussed lack of short hair in season one, Shane's clothes, walk, posture and mannerisms, together with the contrast provided by the other characters, all embody butchness, rendering her the most visible lesbian of the protagonists – as Dana says to her in the pilot “every single thing about the way you're dressed, like, screams dyke” (1.1). This is seen as integral to her character, as she does not, like Candace, ‘scrub up femme’ for big events. This is despite her job as a hairdresser, an industry not generally associated with butch women, and one in which her clients are depicted as primarily (at least outwardly) straight women. Shane is also extraordinarily stylish, and her very androgyny is portrayed as chic. Despite the aspersions cast by Alice in ‘Looking Back’ upon ‘the hundred footer’ (a lesbian easily identifiable as such from a hundred feet away) in the narrative, here is a hundred (or at least a fifty) footer, who is not marked by the series as undesirable, indeed, she is the much mooted ‘lothario’ of the narrative.

Ciasullo, in her analysis of 1990s mainstream images, asserts that mainstream discourse has two quite contrasting ways of representing butch women. She can either be depicted as “masculine and *undesirable*,” or, like Gina Gershon in *Bound* for example, can be depicted as both butch and “simultaneously marked as feminine with her pouty, Julia Roberts lips, wispy hair hanging in her eyes, and her reputation as an actress.”⁵³ Shane appears to have much in common with Ciasullo's latter characterisation - she quite literally has the “wispy hair hanging in her eyes.” As far as her reputation as an actress is concerned, Moenning is not, unlike Gershon, usually dressed as a feminine character - previously having played both a transgendered character and a cross-dressing teenager. Unlike Hillary Swank for whom: “[m]edia coverage of Swank's nomination and subsequent selection by the Academy [for playing Brandon Teena in *Boy's Don't Cry*] emphasized her “real-life” femininity in contrast to the boyish Brandon she played on screen,” Moenning is promoted

via her *actual* likeness to Shane's androgynous or tomboyish characteristics, thereby presenting a less clearcut vision of 'femininity restored.'⁵⁴

The emphasis placed upon the very desirability of Shane, both within *The L Word* and in interviews and reviews, is a significant one. It appears that Chaiken in particular, is making a conscious effort to uncouple the signifiers of 'butch' and 'undesirable' in mainstream culture. Chaiken declares that Shane/Moenning:

...brings that revolutionary androgyny that confounds. She can pass for a boy, *yet* she's totally sexy. I think *men respond to her* as much as women do. [My emphasis]⁵⁵

The repeated usage of the word 'yet' in articles regarding Moenning and the character she plays is of particular interest, as it acts as both an apology and a celebration, an affirmation that butch women are sexy, and can be to all genders and persuasions, and an insinuation that they are not usually. The more apparent insinuations here of course are that women who can pass for men, are not 'totally sexy' usually, and that it is necessary for *men* to be attracted to her in order for her to be attractive. Despite the fact that within the narrative Shane is primarily attractive *to* women, and that these women are gay and "straight" alike (as Tina says in 'Let's Do It,' "the Shane test pretty much works on every woman,") the emphasis placed upon her attractiveness to gay men (in the series) and straight male viewers, is quite disconcerting in its need to 'validate' the masculine woman.

Here we return to Inness and her assertion regarding the enforcement of "the idea of the "correct" lesbian being a consumer and a style maven" in 1980s and 1990s magazines.⁵⁶ *The L Word* formulates a vision of the butch that is a 'correct lesbian' in these terms – both consummate consumer and style maven. Shane's stylishness despite, or rather because of, her look that "screams dyke" (Dana 1.1), is consistently emphasised, and making her an emblem of 'lesbian as style maven' (a concept quite rabidly promoted in 2004 in tandem with the release of *The L Word*).⁵⁷ Cherie's husband Steve (James Purcell) appears to

envision Shane as a kind of reverse *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* – a lesbian who can ‘make straight women look hot.’ Her ability to do so is predicated upon her difference, much as the presenters of *Queer Eye* trade upon their campy femininity to lend an edge to straight (and it is thereby presumed masculine) men, that is, they teach/groom them how to perform for their partners. Here the (supposedly) straight woman can be taught/groomed to look effortless, non-performative, far from the primping and ‘artifice’ of femininity. The fact that Cherie is given a tousled ‘just fucked’ hairstyle – i.e. a really messy one - is what makes her look hot. Steve thinks Shane “could be a gold mine” (1.9) and hence invests in her salon, as he believes this is a style or a mode that can be traded upon, giving women ‘looks’ that show that they appear not to care, even though these ‘looks’ are in fact highly stylised. The joke is of course that Cherie’s hair has not in fact been styled, nor is it the style itself that imparts sexiness upon Cherie. She sports a real “just [almost] fucked look,” as opposed to a synthetic performance of such. That Shane loses her salon as quickly as she acquired it can be seen as recognition of the vagaries of the acceptance of homosexuality as style, fad, novelty and service provider.

Shane and Cherie’s relationship is perhaps the most obvious expression of butch-femme styles in the series, and the mobilisation of figuring lesbian desire as structured by difference. Cherie is a seducing, active bottom, displaying herself in order to be taken, and hence plays with and confuses notions of active and passive sexuality in the manner suggestive of the “actively orchestrating” femme described by such theorists as Hollibaugh.⁵⁸ The power of seduction, and the power of withholding, are firmly placed in the hands of Cherie, and in these hands, the previously uninterested-in-relationships Shane is transformed into the well-known figure of the wounded and manipulated butch. Starting out in the series as an almost compulsive bed hopper, it soon becomes clear that such activities are for Shane not merely a love of sex and women, or an indication of sex-positive queer culture, but are related to her being depicted as emotionally stone, and deeply wounded. Martin has suggested that “[l]esbian butchness always seems to emerge in the form of a wound or woundedness,”⁵⁹ and Shane’s depiction is in keeping with the “melancholic loner image, which resonates with a whole history of butch

representation.”⁶⁰ The culturally inscribed association between masculinity in women and melancholy is not a new phenomenon, and its presence in *The L Word* evokes the spectres of psychoanalytic and sexological discourses of inversion, and the representation of melancholy butches in such classic lesbian narratives as *The Well of Loneliness* or *Stone Butch Blues*.⁶¹

Shane’s womanising is depicted as lack, her desires fulfilled yet unfulfillable. The articulation of desire as lack is a common theme in *The L Word*, and, I conjecture, even a guiding force to the narrative drives of the text. Marina explicitly paraphrases this notion in the final episode as part of her attempted seduction of Jenny’s lover Robin: “[t]he Greek word, *eros*, denotes want, lack. The desire for that which is missing. The lover wants what it does not have. It is by definition impossible for him to have what he wants, if, as soon as it is had, it is no longer wanted” (1.12), quoting from a text by Anne Carson that she describes as “very romantic.” Although this is the case with many of the series’ relationships, this pattern appears to find its ultimate embodiment in the character of Shane for whom

the psychoanalytic notion that all desire is founded in lack seems to solidify in relation to the stone butch as true lack, as real castration, and as the exact place where, to paraphrase Marilyn Hacker, lust tumbles into grief.⁶²

This is marked via the repetitious nature of her one-night stands, which are figuratively associated with the repetitious nature of her drug habit. A further example of links drawn between butchness and melancholy in the series can be found in the character Lacey (Tammy Lynn Michaels), who appears for three episodes as Shane’s stalker. Lacey is the only foregrounded female character during the first season with short hair, and she wears other accoutrements of butchness. Lacey’s obsession with Shane’s abandonment of her turns out to be transference/displacement/projection of her feelings of familial abandonment. Her fixation upon an inappropriate (unresponsive) object of desire, and consequent grief, is in fact remarkably similar to what Shane experiences later in the season with Cherie.

By the end of the first season, Shane has been fragmented by love, fragmented by the femme who will ultimately always choose the societal/economic comforts of heterosexuality over her lesbian desires. This fragmentation is most markedly performed in the *mise en scène* of their final break-up scene. The scene opens with Shane, and an artwork of impressions of body parts imprinted in what appears to be blood, framed by a mirror which is in itself surrounded by (or framed within) pink and blue neon tube-lights. She then enters the hall of mirrors proper, which contains Cherie. Throughout their interaction, their images are linked, separated, multiplied, distorted, confused and fragmented via the presence of the multiple mirrors. At the beginning of this scene, the camera journeys through what appears to be a mirror into the ‘real’ world. Mirrors thenceforth operate as a symbolic representation of the realms of both possibility and delusion. The scene utilises a “deep surface camera technique” – a technique that, according to photographer Del LaGrace Volcano, uses mirrors to “reveal both the back and front of the body” which has the effect of making “the viewer feel that they are seeing beyond the surface when, in fact, we are just seeing more surface.”⁶³ Due to the multiple mirrors in this scene, there are even further surfaces shown; however, it is difficult to see the surfaces themselves.

The second season sees Shane butching up somewhat. She finally gets a short(er) haircut, and frequently wears the slightly less androgynous wear of ties and jackets. Shane’s personal evolution in this season sees her fall in love and reject it before slowly opening herself up thereto, and she ends the second season on a happy note. Her professional advance is once again offered then removed due to the interest in her by a powerfully controlling woman - the vital shift in this season being that Shane actively rejects being controlled. In ‘Loyal,’ Shane visits a confessional in order to expurgate that “[e]veryone... wants something from me, and... I don't feel like I have anything left to give” specifying that sex is “mainly what people want” from her (2.8). This confession can be seen as indicative of *The L Word*’s mirroring of Butler’s perception of stone butches “whereby that “providingness” turns to a self-

sacrifice, which implicates her in the most ancient trap of feminine self-abnegation,” an argument which Halberstam critiques.⁶⁴

The character of Ivan in the first season appears to further the representation of female masculinity in *The L Word*, and could be said to be the first serious attempt to queer binary notions of gender in the series. Ivan (Kelly Lynch) is first introduced in ‘Locked Up’ (1.12), through a drag act to ‘Savoir Faire,’ where he wears a velvet suit and elaborate pompadour in a parody of and homage to 1970s masculinity (specifically the new wave writer of the song, Willy/Mink DeVille). The increasing popularity of drag kinging, particularly in lesbian communities, and post-Butlerian notions of gender performativity, inform this double presentation, which functions both as an embodied sense of butch/genderqueer/transgender masculinity and a campy deconstruction/celebration thereof via drag – both masculine performance and performativity. Reading Ivan in terms of the drag king categories proposed by Halberstam, Ivan is situated most clearly in relation to the categories of butch realness and denaturalised masculinity, in that: “the category of butch realness is situated on the sometimes vague boundary between transgender and butch definition” within which “masculinity is neither assimilated into maleness nor opposed to it; rather it involves an active disidentification with dominant forms of masculinity, which are subsequently recycled into alternative masculinities.”⁶⁵

During and after his first drag act, Ivan and Kit flirt and talk, and consequently arrange to meet for coffee the following day. Upon entering the café, Kit does not recognise Ivan, out of drag and now wearing a leather jacket, jeans, a white button up shirt and a large belt buckle, and sporting “a long mane of hair – styled somewhere between a quiff and a mullet.”⁶⁶ Although he is initially unrecognisable to Kit, there are strong visual and behavioural linkages between the two gender presentations, which are suggestive of his drag act being explorative rather than transformative.⁶⁷ There is much debate both on the show and among viewers as to Ivan’s ‘actual’ gender identification. The character only gives us one indication thereof – towards the end of ‘Locked Up,’ Bette corrects Kit on her reference to Ivan as ‘he’, and when Kit

apologises for her ‘mistake,’ Ivan states that he is “happy either way.” An exposition of Ivan’s gender identity is most immediately narratively pertinent in terms of Kit’s sexual identity. Bette’s warnings to Kit that Ivan is “courting you old school” and “*she* wants to be your husband” lead Kit to question her (previously seemingly unquestioned, or at least not greatly so) perceptions of Ivan as male. This questioning then leads to Kit clarifying to Ivan that she is a “two-months-from-50-year lifetime heterosexual woman,” and telling him: “If you were a man – you would be the perfect man,” but that under the circumstances, a relationship between the two of them would not work out. The stability of the identity categories of gay/straight and man/woman, is questioned by Ivan’s reply:

Ivan: Do you know what you're looking for, Kit?

Kit: No. No, not in the big picture sense that you mean.

Ivan: Then how do you know I can't give it to you?

While there is a tendency on the part of critics to wish to claim Ivan as either butch or transgender, undoubtedly in order to broaden the representational diversity of the show, the character resists definition.

Ivan appears to be an elaborate and somewhat convoluted pastiche of a variety of people and personas – storyteller Ivan E. Coyote, Heather Spear’s drag persona The Gentleman King and Willy DeVille. Ivan’s hair, like Shane’s, has been the subject of much discussion, both due to its proximity to the dreaded mullet, and its length, which acts to feminise Ivan’s appearance. This can be read as a manifestation of Gever’s “measures of acquiescence” discussed at the outset of this paper, with the creators of *The L Word* perhaps perceiving a butch or transgender drag king who could genuinely pass as male to be too threatening for their desired audience.⁶⁸ Interestingly, however, both Ivan’s wig for drag performances and his everyday hair, appear to be inspired by two of DeVille’s hairstyles – perhaps dearticulating the connection between long hair and femininity, and demonstrating Ivan’s portrayal of alternative rather than normative masculinity. The main inspiration for Ivan, suggested by

Chaiken herself,⁶⁹ is Ivan E. Coyote, a Canadian “writer, storyteller, tin whistler, lighting technician and performer.”⁷⁰ Coyote has been:

trying to define my gender my whole life, and I’m beyond it now... I don’t care about labels or pronouns, I don’t identify with ‘he’ or ‘she.’ But I don’t really like the term ‘trans-gendered’ either; it sounds like you’re moving from one state to another. I just am who I am.⁷¹

Considering Ivan the character in light of Ivan the person can conceivably here lighten the pressure upon Ivan the character to signify a particular gendered identity, instead becoming a character who refuses gendered signification, who is not “reducible to transsexual man, transgendered man, or stone butch.”⁷²

Heather Spear, in her incarnation as The Gentleman King, performed Leonard Cohen’s ‘I’m Your Man’ during the debut of Midwestern king troupe Dykes Do Drag in 1999, a drag act that is repeated in *The L Word*, and acts as the climax of both Ivan’s performance of gender and his attempted seduction of Kit.⁷³ The usage of this song creates “an interesting juxtaposition between Spear’s androgynous look and Cohen’s ultra-masculine baritone voice.”⁷⁴ In an interview Spear remarks that she selected Cohen’s song in order to “position the singer as a versatile subject...as a woman I can be that man.”⁷⁵ Cohen’s song is used by Ivan as a further response to Kit’s assertion that “if you were a man, you would be the perfect man” (1.12) – declaring that not only *is* he a man, but that given the chance he will be the perfect man for her. This scene complicates notions of gender and what it takes to ‘be a man,’ while simultaneously performing a deconstruction of classic models of manhood by articulating masculinity as capable of versatility and passivity. Although the act is ostensibly *about* the interplay between performance and ‘realness’ in constructions of maleness, reactions to Ivan’s performance generally hinge upon notions of authenticity. The lyric “if you want another kind of love, I’ll wear a mask for you” comes under particular scrutiny (see for example, Malinda Lo), as it is seen to imply that Ivan is ‘really’ a lesbian forced to wear a ‘mask’ of maleness to achieve her desires.⁷⁶ In contrast, it

can be viewed as a concurrent assertion and subversion of ‘true’ maleness if gender is seen as always a mask, or, as Douglas sees it, the act introduces at least the “concept of gender performance to mainstream audiences/dominant culture that still might see gender as essential and tied to biological sex.”⁷⁷

The second season of *The L Word*, despite the producers’ promises to be more daring in the series’ images of non-normative gender presentations, did not appear to seriously attempt to play out the character of Ivan or his storyline with Kit. In the first episode of the second season, Ivan continues to romance Kit, including giving her the keys to his apartment, and she appears to be falling for his charms and/or attentions. When Kit uses these keys and accidentally witnesses Ivan half-dressed, Ivan becomes extremely distressed and angry, manually shoving her out of the room, and later being unwilling to see her. In ‘Lap Dance’ (2.2) Kit manages, with some difficulty, to locate Ivan, during which time we see her refer to Ivan as “she” for the first time. Kit makes little attempt to reconcile with him or discuss the incident, instead the major reason for her effort to locate him is her desire to ask him for investment money, rather than an endeavour to resolve the situation between them, a request to which he eventually acquiesces. Ivan does not reappear in the series, nor is he discussed, with the exception of a brief encounter in episode 9, when Kit goes to him after being stood up by her current (married) beau, and it is revealed that he has been seeing Iris, a burlesque dancer (who interestingly is depicted as having a very low opinion of lesbians – suggesting that her relationship with Ivan is indeed a heterosexual one), for five years, and that monogamy “just doesn’t work” for Ivan. That he had not previously explained this to Kit, nor disclosed his relationship with Iris while attempting to romance her, implicates Ivan as, if not dishonest, then at least not straightforward, and thereby easily dismissed as a potential suitor for Kit. Ivan’s presence in the series, like that of Lisa the lesbian-identified man, appears to have been included more as a sort of gender-freakshow than a serious attempt to utilise the characters to engage in discussion of diverse or multiple gender (and sexual) identities. It remains to be seen whether the purported inclusion of an FTM character in the third series will alter the series’ attitudes to non-normative gender presentations.⁷⁸

Conclusions

For despite the much lauded or criticised new femme visibility the series appears to offer, upon deeper perusal its relationship with lesbian femininity is complicated and at times rather troubled. In *The L Word* it does not appear to be the case that “it is the femmes who are finally asserting themselves” as Clark speculated of late eighties and early nineties lesbian chic, for femmes and indeed, lesbian femininity is not necessarily authenticated by the series, which instead undertakes a strange practice of simultaneously making feminine lesbians both hyper-visible and rendering them less authentic.⁷⁹ The series’ attitudes towards other identities reclaimed by the lesbian sex wars, such as butch-femme relationships appear equally narratively combative. While female masculinity in *The L Word* is presented as more authentically lesbian, the series’ depiction of female masculinity is likewise representative of older conceptions thereof. Butchness is framed in terms of melancholy and woundedness, while drag king Ivan is dismissed in the second season as volatile and dishonest. The perceptions of lesbian relationships in *The L Word* likewise hark back to earlier conceptions thereof. Relationships that are seen to emulate heteronormativity through a clear delineation of ‘roles’ are portrayed as damaging to the selfhood of individuals, reminiscent of critiques of butch-femme relationships during the 1970s. Other relationships are portrayed within paradigms of psychoanalytic and sexological discourse through their metaphoric associations with mirroring and vampirism. Significantly, most relationships in *The L Word* are tinged with melancholy, a sense of lack, and end badly, fitting conclusions for a 1950s pulp novel. Taken together, these elements of *The L Word* offer an encyclopaedia of past lesbian cultural representation, packaged within a contemporary exterior that proclaims to present something new ‘Not Your Mother’s Lesbians’⁸⁰ indeed, but your grandmothers’, perhaps.

¹ This essay was originally submitted to a journal in December 2005, and I spent the majority of 2006 waiting for my assigned editor to notify me of the details of requested revisions, a contact that never eventuated. Completed in 2005, ‘Fashioning *The L Word*’ does not discuss

the third season of the series (screened during 2006), nor does it address the criticism contained in Kim Akass and Janet McCabe's (eds.) *Reading The L Word* (2006). My other forthcoming work on *The L Word* includes 'Dirty Lesbian Pictures: Art and Pornography in *The L Word*,' and 'Lesbian Pulp Television: Torment, Trauma and Transformations in *The L Word*,' which explicitly addresses the third season of the series.

² *The L Word*. Showtime 2004-.

³ Martha Gevers, *Entertaining Lesbians: Celebrity, Sexuality and Self-Invention* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 39.

⁴ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "The L Word: Novelty in Normalcy," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 16, 2004, B10.

⁵ Danae Clark, "Commodity Lesbianism," *Camera Obscura* 25-26 (1991): 186.

⁶ Sue Ellen Case "Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetic." *Discourse* 11.1 (1988-89): 55-73.

⁷ Amber Hollibaugh and Cherríe Moraga, "What We're Rollin' around in Bed With: Sexual Silences in Feminism," in *Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell and Sharon Thompson (London: Virago Press, 1984), 404-414.

⁸ Joan Nestle "The Fem Question," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance. (Boston, London, Melbourne and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 232-241.

⁹ Arlene Stein, "All dressed up, but no place to go? Style wars and the new lesbianism," in *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader*, ed. Joan Nestle. (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1992), 431-40.

¹⁰ Sherrie Inness. " 'They're here, they're flouncy, don't worry about them': Depicting Lesbians in Popular Women's Magazines, 1965-1995," in *The Lesbian Menace: Ideology, Identity and the Representation of Lesbian Life* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 52-76.

¹¹ Ann Ciasullo, "Making Her (In)Visible: Cultural Representations of Lesbianism and the Lesbian Body in the 1990s," *Feminist Studies* 27.3 (2001): 577-608.

¹² Biddy Martin, *Femininity Played Straight: The Significance of Being Lesbian* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996).

¹³ Lisa Walker, 'How to Recognize a Lesbian: The Cultural Politics of Looking Like What You Are,' *Signs* 18 (1993): 866-890 and *Looking Like What You Are: Sexual Style, Race and Lesbian Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2001)

¹⁴ Ciasullo, "Making Her (In)Visible," 584.

¹⁵ Clark, "Commodity Lesbianism," 197.

¹⁶ Gever, *Entertaining Lesbians*, 43.

¹⁷ Martin, *Femininity Played Straight*, 74.

¹⁸ Walker *Looking Like What You Are*, 201.

¹⁹ Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness* (1928; reprint, London: Virago, 2004), *Queer as Folk*, Showtime, 2000-2005.

²⁰ Ciasullo, "Making Her (In)Visible," 601-2.

²¹ Some of the textual quotations in this essay have been transcribed personally by the author. Others have been accessed via a website that provides transcripts for *The L Word* episodes. Acknowledgment goes to Steph of 'The L Word Transcripts' (<http://www.l-word.com/transcripts/transcripts.html>) for providing and hosting these transcriptions, as they form a valuable resource for critics of *The L Word*.

²² Walker *Looking Like What You Are*, 11.

²³ A term utilised by Melissa Hardie in 'Beard' to describe "...a woman or man who disguises the sexual interest of her or his partner" in *Rhetorical Bodies* ed. Jack Selzer and Sharon Crowley (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999) 276.

²⁴ Ilaria "Urbinati, owner of the hip LA show boutique Satine, joined the "The L Word" team to revamp its image for the second season....Looks like the other L word is luxe" in "'L Word' to fill SATC style gap?," *Fashionweekdaily.com* May 13 2004 <<http://www.fashionweekdaily.com/news/fullstory.sps?iNewsID=206807&itype=8486>>. In an extra ("L word Fashion Extra") on the first season DVD boxset, Urbinati introduces the fashion for the second season, stating that "Showtime wanted to really take the fashion of the show to the next level," and notes that the vision of the new fashion consultants for Dana's character is "a kind of country-clubbish vibe."

²⁵ Leslea Newman, 'I Enjoy Being a Girl,' in *The Femme Mystique*, ed. Leslea Newman (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1995), 11.

²⁶ Walker *Looking Like What You Are*, 211.

²⁷ Alexis Jetter 1993 cited in Ciasullo, "Making Her (In)Visible," 595. The quote is from a *Vogue* article and as such unsophisticated understandings are to be expected, however,

Ciasullo leaves it completely unremarked, and the conflation is repeated throughout her argument, as it is in many other texts regarding contemporary cultures, being especially prominent in reviews of *The L Word*.

²⁸ Walker *Looking Like What You Are*, xiii.

²⁹ Inness, *The Lesbian Menace*, 31, 32.

³⁰ Inness, *The Lesbian Menace*, 74. Inness discusses “how women’s magazines operate to “normalize” lesbians by assuring heterosexual readers that lesbians are, indeed, very much like heterosexuals, partially stripping lesbians of their identities” (53) and this is often done through emphasising the physical attractiveness of the magazine’s interview subjects.

³¹ Ciasullo, “Making her (In)Visible,” 599-600.

³² Booth Moore and Ciasullo quoted in Booth Moore, “Dressed-up diversity: On ‘The L Word,’ lesbians go chic, playing against stereotypes but raising issues of identity and acceptance,” *The LA Times* February 8 2004 <

<http://www.afterellen.com/About/Press/latimes-feb2004.html>>.

³³ Martin, *Femininity Played Straight*, 94.

³⁴ Inness, “They’re here, they’re flouncy,” 63.

³⁵ Inness, “They’re here, they’re flouncy,” 65-6.

³⁶ Erin Douglas, “That’s Not Me: Queer Performance’s ‘Troubling’ of the Desire for Authenticity in *The L-Word*,” *Femme Fem(me)inities: A Performative Queering*, (MA, Miami University, 2004), 48-66.

³⁷ The most marked of these came from Kelly Lynch (Ivan) who announced during an interview in *Curve* that “half of the cast is gay, another third of them are bisexual, another couple of them maybe are confused about who they are but maybe, you know, have some issues.” (Anderson-Minshall 2004: 38/39).

³⁸ Clark, “Commodity Lesbianism,” 183.

³⁹ Shane Phelan, ‘Public Discourse and the Closeting of Butch Lesbians.’ *Butch/Femme: Inside Lesbian Gender*. Ed. Sally Munt, (London and Washington: Cassell, 1998) 197.

⁴⁰ Walker, *Looking Like What You Are*, 43.

⁴¹ Walker, *Looking Like What You Are*, 53.

⁴² Dana Heller, "States of Emergency: The Labours of Lesbian Desire in *ER*." *Genders* 39 (2004): paragraph 29, < http://www.genders.org/g39/g39_heller.html >.

⁴³ Sedgwick, "*The L Word*," B10.

⁴⁴ "Eating, drinking, defecation and other elimination (sweating, blowing of the nose, sneezing), as well as copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up another body – all these acts are performed on the confines of the body and the outer world, or on the confines of the old and new body" and are all emblematic of grotesque imagery according to Mikhail Bakhtin in 'The Grotesque Image of the Body and Its Sources,' *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge and London: The M.I.T. Press. 1968): 317.

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Grosz discussing Julia Kristeva in "Motherhood" in *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (St Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1989): 79.

⁴⁶ For further reading on such associations, refer to Walker's *Looking Like What You Are*.

⁴⁷ Although, as is noted by C Taylor "even if racially, Ion Overman is difficult to read: she has been claimed and championed by bi-racial/multiracial, Hispanic and African-American lesbians alike." "Candace and Lesbians of Color on *The L Word*," *Afterellen.com: Lesbian and Bisexual Women in Entertainment and the Media*. April 2004, ed. Sarah Warn. <<http://www.afterellen.com/TV/thelword/candace.html>>

⁴⁸ Douglas, "That's Not Me," 58.

⁴⁹ Walker, *Looking Like What You Are*, 142. This is also exercised via actual mirrors in the text. For example, in the first episode we see Marina and Jenny in the bathroom, each reflected in two separate mirrors with individual large gold frames. Jenny asserts that she would like to see Marina again (this is before they first have sex), and Marina symbolically pulls her into the frame of her mirror.

⁵⁰ That Marina's love for Jenny destroys Marina's relationship and business, and causes her to attempt to take her own life (201), which while it doesn't actually kill her, is the device of her removal from the series (effectively 'killing' her by making her cease to exist) furthers the allusion to *Dracula* and many pulp novels.

⁵¹ Inness, *The Lesbian Menace*, 30.

⁵² Ken Gelder, *Reading the Vampire*, (1994; reprint, London and New York: Routledge, 2001) 11-13. Where in this literature, it is Eastern Europe in relation to Britain that is posited as the

'other,' a polyphonous source of fear and desire, in the case of Marina in *The L Word*, it is Western Europe (we see Marina speaking flawless French and Italian) with its associations with freer attitudes towards sexuality that is the site of cultural anxiety.

⁵³ Ciasullo, "Making Her (In)Visible," 601, 589.

⁵⁴ Kim Surkan, "Drag Kings in the New Wave: Gender Performance and Participation" in *The Drag King Anthology*, ed. Donna Troka, Kathleen LeBesco and Jean Noble (Binghamton: The Haworth Press, 2002) 167. During a fashion shoot and interview for *Vogue* for example, Moenning is quoted as saying: "I'm a total tomboy at heart. Incorporating menswear into my wardrobe is something that just happens when I dress myself" Irini Arakas, "What Women Want," *Vogue Magazine* September (2004): 400-408.

⁵⁵ Ilene Chaiken quoted in Gail Shister, "'L Word' is good word for series' local star," *Philadelphia Inquirer* February 3 2004,

<<http://www.philly.com/mld/philly/entertainment/television/7859765.htm>>.

⁵⁶ Inness, "They're here, they're floucy," 75.

⁵⁷ See for example Guy Trebay's "The Secret Power of Lesbian Style," *The New York Times* June 27 2004,

<<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/06/27/fashion/27LESB.html?pagewanted=3&ei=5062&en=a2e2eb5559cce8f4&ex=1088913600&partner=GOOGLE>>.

⁵⁸ Hollibaugh in Hollibaugh and Moraga "What We're Rollin'," 408.

⁵⁹ Martin, *Femininity Played Straight*, 40.

⁶⁰ Judith 'Jack' Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998) 227.

⁶¹ Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* (Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1993).

⁶² Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 112.

⁶³ Del LaGrace Volcano and Judith 'Jack' Halberstam, *The Drag King Book*, (London: Serpent's Tail, 1999), 39.

⁶⁴ Judith Butler, 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination,' in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss. (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 25. This argument of Butler's is critiqued by Halberstam in *Female Masculinity*, 127-128.

⁶⁵ Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 248.

⁶⁶ Stacy Farrar, "The L Word," *Sydney Star Observer* July 1 2004, <

<http://www.ssonet.com.au/display.asp?ArticleID=3313> >.

⁶⁷ Halberstam and Volcano, *The Drag King Book*, 131.

⁶⁸ Gever, *Entertaining Lesbians*, 43.

⁶⁹ At a seminar in May 2004 Chaiken stated that the character was inspired by "a lesbian "sexpert" named Ivan...from Vancouver" (Chaiken paraphrased by Kristen n.p.), who ran a seminar on lesbian sex for the (primarily heterosexual) actors prior to commencement of shooting. Although not anywhere listed as a 'sexpert', as far as I can tell, this has to be Coyote, as the intersections between their names, gender definitions, dress and Coyote's location in Vancouver seem too strong for this to be otherwise.

⁷⁰ Taste This (Anna Camilleri, Ivan E. Coyote, Zoë Eakle and Lyndell Montgomery), *Boys Like Her: Transfictions* (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1998) 221.

⁷¹ Coyote interviewed in Joy Parks "Straying From the Gender Pack: An Interview with Ivan E Coyote." *Herizons* (Summer 2003)
<<http://www.herizons.ca/magazine/backissues/sum03/profile.html>>.

⁷² Judith 'Jack' Halberstam and C. Jacob Hale "Butch/FTM Border Wars: A Note on Collaboration," *GLQ* 4.2 (1998): 285.

⁷³ Leonard Cohen, 'I'm Your Man,' *I'm Your Man*, Sony, 1988 and Surkan "Drag Kings," 173-176.

⁷⁴ Surkan, "Drag Kings," 174.

⁷⁵ Spear quoted in Surkan "Drag Kings," 174.

⁷⁶ Malinda Lo, "It's All About the Hair: Butch Identity and Drag on *The L Word*," *Afterellen.com: Lesbian and Bisexual Women in Entertainment and the Media*, April 2004, ed. Sarah Warn, <<http://www.afterellen.com/TV/thelword/butch.html>>.

⁷⁷ Douglas, "That's Not Me," 62.

⁷⁸ Beth Callaghan, "'L Word' creator Ilene Chaiken atop the Gay.com bus with new cast member Daniela Sea," *PlanetOut Entertainment* June 2005 <
<http://www.planetout.com/content/slideshow/splash.html?coll=569&order=4&navpath=/entertainment/>>.

⁷⁹ Clark, "Commodity Lesbianism," 197.

⁸⁰ ‘Not Your Mother’s Lesbians’ was the article which featured *The L Word* on the cover of *New York Metro* prior to its release. Kera Bolonik, “Not Your Mother’s Lesbians,” *New York Metro* January 12 2004 < http://www.newyorkmetro.com/nymetro/news/features/n_9708/ >.