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### Lesbian “Femininity” on Television

“From dysfunctional dyke to designer doll.” “Vivacious and never far from a vibrator.” “Lipsticked, hyper-femme, and sexy as hell.” Over the past five years, lesbian images on TV have generated a multitude of headlines like these. *The L Word*, *Work Out*, and *South of Nowhere* have triggered battles among critics, viewers, and members of the TV industry about the status of lesbian femininity on TV. Each show features predominantly stereotypically feminine lesbian characters; Showtime’s soap opera *The L Word* follows a closely-knit web of lesbian friends and lovers living in West Hollywood. Bravo’s reality series *Work Out* stars openly lesbian gym owner and personal trainer Jackie Warner, following the daily lives of Warner, her entourage of personal trainers, and their clients. The N Network’s *South of Nowhere* is a teen drama that centers on a family’s life changes as they move from Ohio to L.A., especially on the daughter’s coming out process.

The debates about femininity vacillate between whether these lesbian characters represent a kind of new visibility or an old voyeurism. Some argue that femme characters debunk the theory that femininity is nothing without male appreciation. A recent *Advocate* article by columnist Guinevere Turner touted *The L Word* as “shifting the aesthetic of actual lesbians and the way lesbians in general are perceived.”<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, some critics argue that femininity sanitizes, depoliticizes, and even de-homosexualizes lesbian characters. They argue that while femme images may challenge traditional viewers’ sense of what being lesbian looks like, these same images are for straight male pleasure. These criticisms are concerned with the

way that TV as a business commodifies images to sell to the mainstream public, without regard for political implications.

While these debates have their merits, I want to try to move beyond them, understanding lesbian femininity on TV in terms of both class and in relation to changes in the cable market. Rather than only see these images as palpable to mainstream audiences because they're stereotypically feminine, I argue that these shows depict a particularly class-based expression of femininity. This class status relates directly to cable structures, especially its requirements for and methods of targeting audiences. I argue that seen in relation to one another, class and cable provide a context for the function of lesbian femininity on television. This analysis, I suggest, deepens our understanding of why the shows are marketable and the images commodifiable, extending beyond discussions of only male voyeurism or lesbian chic. I examine the construction of a specifically lesbian femininity among TV characters and personalities not as a queer reading but as an attempt to understand the tensions at work in what it means to be feminine and lesbian on TV. Additionally, while queer theory has certainly shown the importance of deconstructing essential identity categories, I use the term lesbian because it is still a relevant category in the sense that it takes into account the cultural forces that play upon TV characters, in experiences of coming out, identity formation, and sexual style in everyday, material culture.

From their marketing campaigns to their title sequences to their characters' clothing, jobs, and education, these shows foreground high class lifestyles and aesthetics. Furthermore, these high class markers conform to white ideals; femininity in these shows normalizes and adheres to white standards of taste in beauty, education, and physical fitness. While they tend to include characters of color, and directly address timely discussions of race, their high class look is a

distinctly white aesthetic. In this way, the shows' signifiers are of class, not sexual orientation, displacing lesbianism as the primary marker of identity.

These shows depict a certain lifestyle, and not just a lesbian one; it is an upper class one where high-end fashion, food, and bodies are the norm. For starters, take the shows' settings: they're not just set in generalized urban centers; rather, they take place in well-known, distinct neighborhoods of Los Angeles: *The L Word* in West Hollywood, known as an upscale, gay area of town, *Work Out* in the elite beauty, fitness, and chic shopping culture of Beverly Hills, and *South of Nowhere* in L.A.'s always trendy and celebrity-laden Sunset Strip.

One of the most instructive ways, however, to see the way class bears out in these shows is to look at their marketing campaigns and title sequences, which present class as central to the shows' identity. Ad campaigns and title sequences are often the first glimpse viewers have of a show, conveying key information to attract audiences. *The L Word's* initial ad campaign promoted the show as a lesbian version of *Sex and the City*, using the tag-line "Same sex. Different city," hoping to make associations with the show's no-holds bar approach to talking about and having sex. Billboard and print ads featured the show's cast dressed in elegant gowns and feminine suits, foregrounding their looks above all else. Aside from the show's name and tag-line, the ads had no text, did not promote the show with any actor names, instead featuring only exquisitely adorned, hyper-feminine women. The network also advertised for the show in upscale women's publications, like *Elle* magazine, which target consumers interested in "fashion, beauty, and style – with a brain" who are looking for "high-end inspiration."<sup>2</sup>

*Work Out*, which premiered in 2006 following Bravo's success with programs like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *Project Runway*, presents lesbian sexuality within the context of Beverly Hills beauty culture, where notions of youth, control, and bodily discipline reign

supreme. The title sequence's montage immediately draws the viewer into this world, first with street signs marking the entrance to Beverly Hills, and to Rodeo Drive followed by quick cuts of Warner and her trainers in the gym, of the gym equipment, and shots of their well-toned bodies. Along with the images, the show's theme song establishes a tone of fame, voyeurism, and exhibitionism that comes from the worked out body: "you can really work it out...Beverly Hills where the rich keep it sexy, work hard, play hard, turn into celebrities...whatever drives your passion, Jackie keeps you motivated, top of your game, your lifestyle will change..." Opening with Beverly Hills culture establishes a tone of an elite world of fitness and beauty that only few attain. There are no signifiers of Warner's sexuality or lesbianism in general. The show's title sequence codes itself foremost as high class rather than lesbian.

Once immersed in the shows, the characters embody lesbian femininity in their successful achievement of what Pierre Bourdieu calls cultural capital. For Bourdieu, cultural capital builds on economic capital, traditionally understood to determine class status. Cultural capital adds that tastes in products such as art, food, clothing, and cars, are indicators of class. Distinctions in taste legitimate the privileges of those with more education and more money, who see themselves as better than those whose tastes differ from their own. In this way, class is embodied, and as television studies scholar John Fiske notes, "the metaphor of 'taste' works...by displacing class differences onto the physical, and therefore natural, senses of the body."<sup>3</sup>

In *The L Word*, for example, characters are coded as high class through fashion, expensive cars and homes, powerful jobs, and cultural sophistication. Bette (played by Jennifer Beals) for example, is described as a power-suit wearing, well accessorized art world titan. She tries to break barriers between high and low culture, especially around sexually-explicit artwork, showcasing her extensive knowledge of avant-garde art. By the show's fourth season, she has

been an esteemed museum director and art school dean. Education and taste in expensive and avant-garde art imbues Bette with cultural capital that distinguishes her as high class. This status contextualizes her feminine sensibility wherein her appearance ascribes to particular class and lifestyle tastes, rather than to conventional lesbian ones.

These high class images seem to contradict assumptions about lesbian consumers and audiences. Since the 1970s, lesbianism has largely been associated with a rejection of conventional femininity. Lesbian feminist's rejection of patriarchy created a legacy that tends to send marketers running the other way. Traditional addresses to women as consumers appeal to their roles as wives, mothers, and caretakers of the home and family. But the publicly visible lesbian woman that emerged in the last 40 years since the Stonewall riots, refused the heterosexual contract, both ideologically and practically. Communications scholars Katherine Sender explains that for marketers, lesbian women tend to imply the rejection of stereotypical femininity and the separation of consumption from heterosexuality. In practice, this also means that marketers assume lesbian women live in more suburban, less urban areas, and are more prone to domestic social entertainment than gay men. Scholars such as Sy Adler and Johanna Brenner find "...that the reason that lesbians are poorer is most significantly because they are women but also because they are women who live without the benefit of male access to wealth."<sup>4</sup>

The rise of "lesbian chic" in the 1990s did help to diversify the image of gays beyond affluent white men. At the time, "lesbian chic" was proof that lesbian women were no longer associated with second wave feminist, anti-consumption stereotypes, and instead were new, apolitical, postfeminist consumers. But their presence and their endorsements of products did not create a lesbian market. Sender notes that "the whole lesbian chic thing has been largely a media event rather than reality..."<sup>5</sup> Quantitatively, few changes have occurred. She says,

“neither lesbian celebrities nor the lipstick lesbian stereotype has displaced the vilified image of the lesbian feminist.”<sup>6</sup> Rather, marketers still associate lesbianism with rejections of stereotypical femininity, codes of style, dress, and consumption.

Narrowcasting and niche marketing however provide fertile ground for representations of lesbian sexuality. Since the early 1980s, cable has been seen as an efficient and relatively inexpensive way to target narrow segments of viewers, a remedy for underrepresented minorities.<sup>7</sup> Satellites and the government’s relaxation of cable’s restrictive structures, allowed the industry to become a major force in providing high quality television to consumers. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 altered the regulatory and policy landscape for TV, stimulating renewed competition and increased choice for consumers. In this environment, large networks established numerous niche cable stations, aimed at smaller audiences. Targeting niche audiences has created an intimate and loyal relationship between specific groups of viewers and cable channels. Networks like Discovery Health Channel, The Game Show Network, and Spike TV rely on small numbers of viewers, whose interests are catered to by a very specific range of programming.

Unlike broadcast channels, which are subject to heavy regulation because they use public airwaves, cable is a profit-driven, private enterprise, less regulated and more diverse in its ownership patterns. Cable’s fewer regulations tend to mean more sex, violence, and profanity, as well as more images of transgressive sexualities, such as lesbianism. At the same time, as profit-driven companies, cable channels still require minimum audience numbers to get the advertising revenue needed to sustain and market themselves. As Sender notes, “In order to be included in the Neilson Cable Activity Report, the cable equivalent to the broadcast television ratings, a cable channel has to be available in at least 3.3 percent of U.S. households and to generate a

minimum .1 rating in those households (approximately 100,000 homes).”<sup>8</sup> This dynamic forces cable channels to constantly walk a fine line between targeting small, loyal audiences and appealing to a big enough audience to keep advertisers invested. With channel proliferation, this also means maintaining a uniqueness that distinguishes each cable channel from the hundreds of others that target niche markets.

Showtime, like other premium cable networks, courts a loyal customer base through programming choices, advertising in LGBT publications, and sponsoring fundraisers with LGBT organizations such as GLAAD and HRC. These promotional tactics target LGBT viewers who presumably are out, interested in LGBT-directed products, and who actively support LGBT rights. They are also presumably financially able to be out, to buy print or TV subscriptions, and have the money and time to pay for and attend fundraisers.

To cast a wider net though, the network promotes itself to the high-tech, wired audience demographic. In 2000, Showtime launched a series of online ventures aimed at broadening its audience base. The network created a series of original and fan-produced content exclusively for the internet. Viewers could view, rate, and review featured works, chat with content creators, and participate in technology forums. Showtime’s aggressive approach to targeting wired audiences earned it a reputation as “the premier next-generation entertainment destination featuring original content created exclusively for the web by up-and-coming digital artists, animators, directors and programmers from around the world.”<sup>9</sup> With shows like *The L Word*, the network continues to appeal to a high-tech audience, creating websites designed for show fans, holding fan fiction contests where the winner’s scenario is used as an episode’s opening sequence, and building an online spin-off of the show’s fictional chart that fans can use for their own social networking.



What these strategies mean is that channels like Showtime, Bravo, and The N Network are not “lesbian channels.” Rather, they target broader audiences while retaining loyal, lesbian viewers. Sender argues that since Bravo launched *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, it has worked to attract gay men and straight women. Against claims that Bravo is the de facto gay channel, she argues that “dualcasting” to gay men and straight women provides the network’s required audience base and still appeals to a niche audience of gay men.

With its audience now well established, I argue, Bravo’s lesbian-themed reality series *Work Out* is a logical programming extension. With its core cast that includes openly lesbian Warner, two openly gay trainers, and several attractive straight trainers, women and men, the show provides eye candy for women and men, gay and straight. Dualcasting for this show tries to appeal to straights and gays (female and male) on the premise that there’s someone for everyone to identify with and desire.

The shifting dynamics between lesbian images and niche cable markets reveal the need to understand lesbian images as channeled through commodification and consumerism, through identification and desire. They underscore trends that complicate the codes of the visual performance of difference, challenging the relationship between a visible signifier and its signified. I urge discussions of lesbian femininity to incorporate a critique of class, which in addition to race, is crucial to the ways gender and sexuality play out on television. These conversations also ought to take place within the context of TV’s political economy, taking into account the structures of the industry. In this way, analyzing femme images foregrounds the intricacies of changes to cable TV, niche marketing, and representations of lesbian sexuality.

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<sup>1</sup> Turner, Guinevere. “The Age-old Question: How to stay young in Hollywood? Become a lesbian.” *The Advocate*. Issue 998. December 4, 2007. 20.

<sup>2</sup> Source: Elle.com. <http://www.elle.com/aboutus/>. Accessed January 8, 2007.

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<sup>3</sup> Fiske, John. (1987). *Television Culture*. New York: Routledge. 14.

<sup>4</sup> Adler, Sy and Johanna Brenner. (1992). "Gender and Space: Lesbians and Gay Men in the City." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*. No. 16. 24.

<sup>5</sup> Sender, Katherine. (2004). *Business, Not Politics: The Making of the Gay Market*. New York: Columbia University Press. 189.

<sup>6</sup> Sender, 194.

<sup>7</sup> Source: National Cable & Telecommunications Association. Keyword: History of Cable.

<sup>8</sup> Sender, Katherine. "Dualcasting: Bravo's Gay Programming and the Quest for Women Audiences." In *Cable Visions: Television Beyond Broadcasting*. Eds. Sarah Banet-Weiser, Cynthia Chris, Anthony Freitas. New York: NYU Press. 303.

<sup>9</sup> "Showtime Networks Launches Phase 2 of alt.SHO.com Targeting Viewers/Consumers." *Business & Entertainment Editors*. Sept. 28, 2000. Accessed January 10, 2008.