The Black Lesbians Are White and the Studs Are Femmes: A Cultural Studies Analysis of The L Word

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Abstract:
Showtime's popular series The L Word follows the lives and relationships of a group of middle class, primarily white lesbians living in Los Angeles, California. Because there are so few representations of lesbians airing on cable television in the United States, we argue that the representations that do exist must be continually critiqued. People use popular culture texts, like The L Word, to learn about themselves and others. We conduct a feminist cultural studies critique of the text and argue it is heteronormative and privileges whiteness. We also include qualitative data from a focus group with viewers of the show to support our analysis.

1 In an early episode of Showtime's popular series *The L Word*, a group of lesbians sits around a table having breakfast.[1] They are all young, white upper-middle class femmes. In walks Shane, a self-proclaimed butch.[2] She is dressed in tight jeans and a close-fitting shirt. We read her as a femme. However, one of her friends says that she looks 'too gay.' This short excerpt raises a variety of questions for us as academics and cultural theorists. For example, what does a lesbian really look like?[3] Who gets to decide? On *The L Word*, it is the producers who decide but the power of these representations are such that often these decisions made by a few have societal consequences for many.[4]

2 *The L Word* follows the lives and relationships of a group of middle class, well-to-do lesbians, living in the plush hills of Los Angeles. Although *The L Word* has aired four seasons, our analysis centers on Season One. We believe Season One deserves a comprehensive cultural analysis because it was a defining moment in television history. It was celebrated as the lesbian *Queer as Folk* and received much attention in the media. Season

[1] Showtime is a subscription cable channel widely aired in the United States and Turkey. Showtime has over 39,500,000 subscribed viewers. According to Cabletelevision Advertising (2006), 'the average Cable household income stands at $68,151/year — +21% higher than the average non-Cable home.' This information is important given that Showtime, and thus *The L Word*, may only be available to those with a particular income level. This is particularly important given Jon Binnie's (1995) assertion that queer textual studies often focus on meaning but neglect production (markets and capital accumulation).

[2] We use the words 'stud,' 'butch' and 'femme' to denote particular kinds of lesbians. Though, we do so with the caveat that these are racially and culturally specific terms. For instance, 'stud' is a term intending to denote the performance of Black masculinity by a woman while 'butch,' the term often used in popular culture, is the term White women performing White masculinity utilize. 'Dom,' is another term often used by lesbians of color to signify the performance of Black or Latino/a masculinity. The word 'femme' to signify the performance of lesbian sexuality is not racially specific, though, performances of femininity are, of course, racially specific.

[3] See Esposito and Baez, 2008 for a discussion on the uses and limits of 'gaydar.'

[4] *The L Word* has numerous producers: Ilene Chaiken, Steve Golin, Mark Horowitz, Elizabeth Hunter, Larry Kennar, Rose Lam, Bob Roe, Rose Troche, and Mark Zakarin.

One,[5] is set around seven lesbians and two heterosexual characters, Tim (Eric Mabius) and Kit (Pam Grier). A few of the main characters embody an ambiguous sexual identity. For example, Jenny (Mia Kirshner), Tim's fiancée, is a talented writer, who seems to be in a constant battle to find her sexuality and sanity. Her current love interest, Marina (Karina Lombard), is the owner of the Planet, a café that the *The L Word* women frequent. Similar to Jenny's personal sexuality conflict, Alice (Leisha Hailey) is a funny, witty, bisexual, who is looking for love in all the wrong places. Dana (Erin Daniels), Alice's best friend, is a professional tennis player with a talent for attracting the wrong women and, to add to the dramatic ambiguity, she has not fully accepted the fact that she is gay. Tina (Laurel Holloman) is a selfless lesbian, who wants nothing more than to have a baby with her partner Bette (Jennifer Beals), a high strung, control freak who demands the undivided attention of Tina and everyone around her. Important for this paper's argument, Bette is biracial; however, she performs for the most part as a White woman. Bette's half-sister Kit is a recovering alcoholic with a troublesome past of which she cannot seem to let go. Shane (Katherine Moennig), mentioned above, is the so-called butch of the show, a tomboyish heart breaker who has a problem with commitment. All of the characters, with the exception of Bette and Kit, are White.

3 Our analysis of *The L Word* is important to the fields of sociology, education, queer theory, and cultural studies because popular culture is a site that educates us about others and about ourselves. Marginalized groups such as lesbians, who are not well represented in mainstream culture, are "particularly susceptible to being 'created' by popular representations" (Inness 3). *The L Word*'s representations inform heterosexual perceptions of lesbianism but they also, to an extent, inform lesbians' perceptions about themselves. As Kellner argues:

> Media culture also provides the materials out of which many people construct their sense of class, of ethnicity and race, of nationality, of sexuality, of 'us' and 'them.' Media culture helps shape the prevalent view of the world and deepest values: it defines what is considered good or bad, positive or negative, moral or evil. (1)

Indeed as Hall eloquently states, "it is only through the way in which we represent and imagine ourselves that we come to know how we are constituted and who we are" (30). Given that school systems in the United States, for the most part, silence lesbianism, The L Word becomes an important site for education (for lesbians and heterosexuals) about who lesbians are. *The L Word* may be, in fact, one of the only texts students consume that takes up the issue of lesbianism.

[5] We have analyzed Season one only. *The L Word* has now aired Season Four.

4 In recent years, media representations of homosexuality on television have increased substantially; however, heterosexual normalization and andocentric ideology fuel many of these representations. We argue that the representations of lesbians on *The L Word* are heteronormative and, thus, narrow. We utilize the term heteronormativity similar to the definition provided by Berlant and Warner, who state that it is the 'institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent – that is, organized as a sexuality – but also privileged' (548f). In this way, heterosexuality becomes normative and this normativity is recreated through daily social interactions, institutional ideologies, and popular culture texts. In fact, the privileging of heterosexuality "often operates unconsciously or in ways that make it particularly difficult to identify" (Valocchi 756). Popular culture, as an institution, helps reify heterosexuality's dominance when heteronormativity within representations remains un-interrogated.

5 Heteronormativity pervades *The L Word* as characters are portrayed in an assimilationist fashion. They experience serial monogamous relationships and some of them work toward obtaining the ultimate signifiers of heterosexuality, a house and children. The show privileges heterosexuality by representing lesbianism as similar to heterosexuality. For example, the first season does not examine homophobia and discrimination experienced as a daily fact. The realities that we experience as lesbians, such as having to perpetually 'out' ourselves or 'teach' heterosexuals about lesbian life, are not represented. Such a representation does disservice to the many complexities of lesbian life. *The L Word* helps create a heteronormative narrative.

6 We will argue that *The L Word* makes the struggles lesbians face invisible and, instead, defines lesbianism by the sex act. This narrow representation may teach heterosexuals (and some lesbians) that lesbianism is a social past time, not fraught with political, economic, and other difficulties related to discrimination. While *The L Word* works to inscribe lesbianism within heterosexuality, it also portrays a very White middle-class version of lesbian life. Although there are Black and Latina characters, their race and ethnicity and any hint of cultural difference are often erased by the show's normative intent.

7 We write from a feminist cultural studies standpoint[6], which posits that textual representations matter and that most popular culture texts articulate ideologies of race, gender, class, and sexuality.[7] In addition, viewers of a text enter into a relationship with all texts. This means, then, that there are multiple representations of *The L Word*. Ours is but one. We

[6] McRobbie, 1991; Probyn, 1993
[7] Kellner, 1995

interpret the text from the standpoint of lesbian women of color. Although within queer theory there is a movement away from textual analysis and a turn toward "analysis of practices as they are constructed in social and institutional locations" (Talburt 526), this project is still important because it examines a site of learning about lesbianism. Our project also uncovers the ways a dominant text such as *The L Word* participates in the silencing of the Black lesbian. As Hammonds questions:

> . . . if the sexualities of black women have been shaped by silence, erasure, and invisibility in dominant discourses, then are black lesbian sexualities doubly silenced? What methodologies are available to read and understand this void and its effects on that which is visible? Conversely, how does the structure of what is visible, namely white female sexualities, shape those not-absent-though-not present black female sexualities. . .? (141)

Though we will examine this argument in more detail later, it is important to note that our analysis takes up the ways in which the Black lesbian functions as an absent-present in *The L Word*.

8 We also recognize that popular culture is not only a site where identities are produced, but it is also a site of struggle. It is a place where viewers negotiate, resist, and even reshape texts. It is in this spirit that our critique of *The L Word* moves beyond whether or not representations of lesbians are 'good' or 'bad.' In fact, it would be difficult to determine what a good representation is versus a bad one because lesbianism as a social identity is so complex. Instead, we are interested in examining how the text takes up the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation because viewers construct lived experiences from texts.

9 As we begin our critique of *The L Word*, it is important to remind ourselves of Fiske's argument that television texts, in order to be popular, must appeal to multiple audiences. Fiske imagines the text as existing in "a state of tension between forces of closure, which attempt to close down its potential meanings in favor of its preferred ones, and the forces of openness, which enable its variety of viewers to negotiate an appropriate variety of meanings" (84). This means, then, that television texts can be interpreted multiple ways and, thus, they are situated within a struggle for meanings. This is one reason we felt it important to include voices of viewers besides our own. In addition, we follow Stein and Plummer's challenge to queer sociology:

> Queer theorists have attuned us to the importance of looking at texts, but as sociologists we need to look at how identities are constituted in the cultural practices of everyday life, though mediated by texts. (184-185)

Because all viewers may negotiate the text's meanings and because all viewers make these negotiations based on lived identities, we also include qualitative data collected from a focus

group intended to investigate the lived experiences and meaning making of the participants' relationships with *The L Word*. Data from the focus group suggests that the informants found *The L Word* problematic on many levels, but they were still happy that a lesbian representation existed on cable television.

Focus Group Data Collection

10 We recruited participants for the focus group through snowball sampling. We were interested in including those who watched the show regularly. All of the participants had viewed Season One and, at the time of data collection, were watching season two. We also wanted to interview mostly women of color as we were interested in learning their perspectives on race and *The L Word*. On the evening of the focus group, we screened the first episode for participants. We then engaged in a three hour question/answer session. It was our hope to foster an open dialogue among participants instead of a dyadic dialogue between an individual participant and the researchers. Some questions we posed included: "What do you think about the show? Which characters do you identify with and why? How is lesbianism represented? How is race represented?"

11 The focus group participants were a diverse group of women, all identified as lesbians or bisexual. Six informants classified themselves as Black and one informant as White. Informant number one, Devon, is a 27-year-old third grade teacher. Informant number two, Maxine, is a 33-year-old corporate lawyer. Lisa, informant number three, is a White 24-year-old bisexual, non-profit program manager. Informants four and five, Pam (31), a fourth grade teacher and Toni (32), a chef, both identify as studs. Natalie, a 29-year-old middle school teacher, was informant six. Finally, Tracy is a 30-year old elementary teacher. We tape recorded the 3-hour conversation and then transcribed it. We utilized open coding to develop a variety of codes. From these codes, a variety of themes emerged. Some of the themes fit within our own analysis about the text and some were new ideas to us. We will include focus group data throughout the body of the paper to enhance our argument and to illustrate diverse perspectives of The L Word viewers.

Do Black Lesbians Really Exist?

12 Since the inception of lesbians on television, Black lesbian characters have been limited. This section will explore the presence/absence of Blackness in general and Black lesbianism in particular. *The L Word*'s absence of Black lesbianism privileges the experiences of White lesbians, and attempts to construct those experiences as normative. By doing so, The

L Word as a text undermines the presence of Black lesbians as well as other lesbian 'minority' groups in the United States. Although we argue *The L Word* helps to make Blackness and lesbianism invisible, we recognize that viewers actively make meaning of the texts and can negotiate ideologies.

13 Jennifer Beals, and her character Bette Porter, is the quintessential example of the presence/absence of Black lesbianism. Beals is of mixed racial heritage: her father is African-American and her mother is Irish. Therefore, her portrayal as Bette, a biracial (African-American/White) woman, is a natural role for Beals. Our examination of *The L Word* indicates that, aesthetically and socially, Bette does not identify with African-American culture. For example, Bette has been in a long-term relationship with a White woman, Tina, for a number of years. Bette's ex-girlfriends of whom we, as viewers, are aware are also White women. The viewer is left with the impression by Bette's previous relationships that she exclusively dates White women. Bette eventually engages in an affair with a Latina (season two) but in subsequent seasons dates White women.[8] This choice to date only White women legitimates her Whiteness because Bette is, therefore, never called upon to identify with her Blackness due to her limited interaction with Blacks romantically or socially. Furthermore, Bette's Blackness is invisible to her fellow lesbian characters. For example, Bette does not discuss her biracial 'lived' experiences or openly acknowledge her Blackness with her friends; the only signifier of Bette's Blackness is her half-sister, Kit (Pam Grier), an easily identifiable Black woman. This subsequently makes her Blackness invisible to the viewers who watch *The L Word*.

14 The most glaring example of Bette's assimilation to White culture occurs in an early episode of *The L Word*. Bette and Tina attend a therapy session for people interested in parenting. In the session, an easily identified Black woman, Yolanda, challenges Bette to assert her own Blackness. This occurs when the group discusses adoption. Yolanda says to Bette, "it is only hard to adopt as a lesbian if you want a White baby." A Latina responds, "What is wrong with a White person wanting to adopt a Black baby?" Bette does not correct the mistake. Yolanda says to Bette, "You talk so proud about being a lesbian but you never once mentioned you're an African American woman." This example, while making clear the absurdity of biological notions of race, reminds us how often we use cultural knowledge to assert race as an identity. Sometimes, race is not clearly visible through skin color and other

[8] In season 2, Bette has a biracial (Black/White) child with Tina. The addition of a mixed race child forces the issue of race in particular ways. While this is important to analyze, we do not have the space in this manuscript to examine Seasons Two, Three, and Four.

physical traits (as in the case of Bette). If she wants to be identified as part Black, then she must assert herself as such.

15 As academics, we believe that people should be able to define themselves and, thus, we are not arguing that Bette must define herself as Black. We understand the ways racism has infiltrated understandings of race and miscegenation and invited the 'one drop rule.' Race is socially constructed. Some people, however, have fewer choices as to how they will define themselves. Bette has a choice and it bothers us that she chooses to privilege her Whiteness over her Blackness. In the above example, Bette becomes offended when she is accused of not living Black racial embodiment. She tells the woman, "You don't know how I've walked through the world." As viewers, we are tempted to believe that Bette has struggled to maintain an identity as a Black woman. The text up to this point, however, has yet to reveal this. As viewers, we are left wondering how exactly Bette has walked through the world.

16 Our argument is that Bette's refusal to 'out' herself as a Black woman promotes White privilege. Bette's visible and non-visible denial of her Blackness suggests that if she identifies with her Blackness she is no longer White and loses the privileges of her White existence. Bette's concealing of her Blackness privileges her Whiteness, and ultimately shames her Blackness. Omi and Winant contend that "assimilation was viewed as the most logical, and 'natural,' response to the dilemma imposed by racism" (17). Bette's character does not experience racism in the plush communities of Los Angeles; consequently, her 'lived' experiences center on her life as a lesbian and not as a woman of color who is also a lesbian.[9] We can speculate whether Bette's absence of Blackness is intentional by the producers of The L Word; however, we know that mainstream culture values Eurocentric beauty over all other forms of beauty.

17 The aesthetics of the women depicted on *The L Word* embody the Eurocentric ideology of beauty that is entrenched within mainstream culture. The women on *The L Word* are portrayed as quintessential lesbians intended to eroticize White straight males' lesbian fantasies. This follows the trend of popular culture representations that heterosexualize lesbians by consistently producing the femme body—a body that is White, upper middle class, and embodies a hegemonic femininity.[10] Watching *The L Word*, one is led to believe that all lesbians are White (even Bette). *The L Word* does not create a space for Black lesbians in mainstream culture. The women of *The L Word* are depicted in ways similar to Creed's argument about lesbian representation, "as if [lesbians are] mirror-images of each

[9] Bette's character is also upper-middle class. While this certainly complicates the portrayal of Blackness, her socio-economic status would not, in the United States, insulate her from racism.
[10] Ciasullo, 2001

other: identical faces, hair, clothes" (86). This portrayal leaves no room for Black faces on *The L Word*. All the women must look and act the same to be considered lesbians.

18 In 1993, super model Cindy Crawford graced the cover of *Vanity Fair* "shaving imaginary whiskers from the boyish, smiling lathered face of K.D. Lang, the out-lesbian country and western singer," (Creed 86) establishing that lesbians were tall, skinny, glamorous beautiful—White women. This epoch moment in popular culture established White lesbians as the prototype for all lesbians thereafter. Jenkins illustrates that the current wave in teen movies is to cast lesbians as "heterosexually desirable women" (492). The White lesbian characters who appear on *The L Word* are popular culture's means of privileging and normalizing one particular group of lesbians. These narrow depictions of what a lesbian looks like, we argue, are to stimulate and interest White heterosexual males. Through television shows like *The L Word*, Black lesbians and other lesbians of color are made invisible. This invisibility devalues the lesbian of color experience and further reifies White lesbianism.

19 One of the first issues we raised in the focus group was what people initially thought about the show. Lisa, the only White informant, explained that she and her girlfriend "had straight people come over and hang out with us. . .and they all came back. They wanted to watch it again." Devon, the 3rd grade teacher, said:

> I wasn't able to get closer to the show because it didn't really do anything that I was familiar with. [Initially], I got really excited because I was thinking, 'Finally, there's an answer to *Queer as Folk*, the lesbian perspective.' And, I'm watching it and I really couldn't identify with it.

We further explored this issue of identification with the show and received a variety of responses, though all informants said they were displeased with the lack of racial diversity:

Every week I wanted to see if it was going to get better. . .I enjoyed it because it seemed like [the producers] sat around and said, 'Okay, what different types of lesbians [should we include]. They tried to make sure they incorporated all different kinds. It could have been more racially diverse I felt. But, as far as different types of us [lesbians], that was covered pretty well. (Natalie, middle school teacher)

There aren't too many types of racially diverse populations brought up into the show. (Toni, chef)

First, I don't feel that the Black lesbian community is represented in *The L-Word*. Pam [Grier]

is not really gay and Bette has major issues when it comes to being Black. So, I don't feel represented in *The L-Word*. (Pam, 4th grade teacher)

Of all the topics we explored during the 3-hour focus group, the topic of race was returned to again and again. We will explore further our informants' comments throughout the body of the paper. Because our current interest is lesbian women of color and the representations of race and sexuality in The L Word, we examine Kit's character (Pam Grier) below, which Pam's comment above cues. Given that Pam Grier became famous playing specific Black female roles, The L Word shifts the public's view of her, and possibly other Black women, through a particular racialized and sexualized stereotype that problematizes the overall stability of women of color. The L Word, as a pioneer in representing marginalized sexuality on cable television, falls short in addressing the marginalization of raced bodies.

The Taming of Foxy Brown

20 In the 1970's, Pam Grier was regarded as one of the sexist women in the movie industry. In 1974, Grier portrayed a sexy, fearless character named Foxy Brown, a woman who did not take 'no' for an answer. Before her role as Foxy Brown, she played the role of Coffy, a strong Black woman who fought against drug dealers and White power structures that oppressed Blacks in poor communities. A large majority of Grier's movie roles throughout her career have portrayed her as a strong, intelligent, sexy Black woman.

21 According to Roberts' *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, Black women's bodies have, throughout history, been represented, monitored, and regulated by a White supremacist patriarchal society. Roberts explains that "American culture is replete with derogatory icons of Black women—Jezebel, Mammy, Tragic Mulatto, Aunt Jemima, Sapphire, Matriarch, and Welfare Queen" (8). Even today, Black women's bodies are still (re)presented as grotesque, pathological, and deviant. Representations of the Black female body are still constructed by a White supremacist patriarchal society. Though the meanings of these bodies may change throughout different historical moments, one thing has remained constant. According to hooks, (re)presentations of Black women "seem to represent an anti-aesthetic, one that mocks the very notion of beauty" (71).

22 Black women (and Latinas) are often constructed against normative White femininity. Roberts argues that "whites are associated with positive characteristics (industrious, intelligent, responsible), while Blacks are associated with the opposite negative qualities (lazy, ignorant, shiftless)" (9). In the seventies, Grier depicted to mainstream culture what a strong Black woman embodied, but it is important to note that we do not intend to

romanticize these images for there were still racist and sexist subtexts. Our argument, however, is that Pam Grier is no longer playing a sexy, strong Black woman. Instead, she is the present day Aunt Jemima of *The L Word*. Pam Grier, once known as Foxy Brown—the essence of Black sexuality in the 70s—has become the desexed Sapphire and Aunt Jemima. Cornel West argues that

> The dominant myths draw black women and men either as threatening creatures who have the potential for sexual power over whites, or as harmless, desexed underlings of a white culture. There is Jezebel (the seductive temptress), Sapphire (the evil, manipulative bitch), or Aunt Jemima (the sexless, long-suffering nurturer). (119)

Unfortunately, there is not much diversity in the roles Black women can play on television and in film. This is especially evident on *The L Word*.

23 Portraying the only Black character on a lesbian based show is a far cry from the dominant roles of Foxy Brown and Coffy. Grier's character, Kit Porter, is the half sister of Bette, one of the main characters. We are continuously reminded that Kit and Bette are 'half sisters.' It is not clear why each of them refers to the other this way, especially upon introductions. It is, however, a defining feature of their relationship. Kit is an uneducated (Aunt Jemima), unemployed, manipulative (Sapphire), recovering alcoholic who was once a famous R&B singer (ironic). Kit's life is portrayed as a constant battle between good and evil: she habitually falls short of her goals, and she can never seem to reach the level of success of her White lesbian counterparts because of her educational, economic, and emotional shortcomings. Andrea Queeley contends, "Black performers have always been pressured to perform the Blackness of the white imagination, and the Blackness is most often in the service of white supremacy" (4). Pam Grier's character perpetuates multiple negative stereotypes of Black women and reaffirms White negative perceptions of Blacks. *The L Word*'s narrow-minded generalizations of Black women are a result of the racial stereotypes that have been perpetuated by Eurocentric culture, which control the media. West contends that these myths and stereotypes "are part of a wider network of white supremacist lies whose authority and legitimacy must be undermined" (131). The first time Kit appears in *The L Word* strongly exemplifies of West's argument. She is pulled over by a White police officer and we learn that Kit is driving with a six month suspended driver license. Facing jail time or a pricey fine, Kit tries to bribe the officer with Aaron Neville concert tickets. She sweet-talks the officer and, instead of jail or a ticket, he impounds her car and gives her a ride to Bette and Tina's house. We find this scheme problematic for various reasons. First, since Kit is the only easily identified Black character on *The L Word*, to many viewers she is their weekly representation of Black culture. Kit's portrayal as a fast-talking, manipulative, recovering alcoholic

demonizes Blacks to the millions of viewers who may learn about Black culture through watching *The L Word*. Second, this scheme glorifies the White police officer since he does not take the concert tickets and ultimately goes out of his way to drop Kit off. He upholds his pure, egalitarian White standard while Kit seems irresponsible and corrupt.

24 Grier's character also bolsters the current myth of meritocracy. Sociologist Thomas M. Shapiro defines meritocracy as "the idea that positions are earned through hard work and personal achievement and through no resources other than one's own" (77). The principles of meritocracy are instilled in North America's very fabric; intertwined within the stars and stripes is the myth that everyone has the same opportunities for social and economic mobility, no matter one's skin color. Kit's poor decision-making and alcohol abuse are seen as the only reason behind her failures. The topics of racism and discrimination are never mentioned; Kit's shortcomings are never socially deconstructed to show societal injustice against Blacks, people of color, and gays and lesbians of all races. Gallagher observes, "whites view the opportunity structure as being open to all regardless of color. . .whites attribute racial inequities to the individual shortcomings of blacks" (4). Kit's lack of education, employment, and lengthy history of alcohol abuse reinforces White's negative views of Blacks, and legitimates Whites' rational for their racist views as they control what is Black through the media. According to Queeley,

> From *Birth of a Nation* to *Amos 'n' Andy* to *Good Times* to *Family Matters*, the television and film industries are notorious for disseminating stereotypical depictions of Black people created by white writers and directors. (4)

Queeley illustrates hegemony in popular culture. White writers and directors disseminate negative and sectarian images of Black culture, of which, as mentioned above, all viewers make meaning. However, the images read and internalized by Blacks assist in their own oppression; too often, Blacks, as well as many other groups, learn what it is to be Black by reading popular culture images. These negative images of Blacks, therefore, are made a reality by Black viewers through 'lived' experiences.

25 On *The L Word*, Kit is powerless because of her inability to 'pull herself up by her bootstraps,' and live the American Dream. According to Kellner, "Radio, television, film, and the other products of the culture industries provide the models of what it means to be male or female, successful or a failure, powerful or powerless" (1). Thus, through Kit's character, White viewers consciously and unconsciously learn about Black culture. *The L Word*'s representation of Black culture transmits negative ideological images. White media perpetuates negative Black stereotypes, which frame Blacks as deviant, nihilistic, pugnacious,

irresponsible, yet profitable for billion dollar corporations that want to market their products with Black faces to the masses, i.e. Nike, Sprite, Polo, Reebok, Verizon, etc.

26 As one views and interprets *The L Word*, the racial and cultural stereotypes are expressed to mainstream White America through pseudo diversity. *The L Word* is an apt example of Cornell West's contention that "[W]hite beauty plays a weightier role in sexual desirability for women in racist patriarchal America" (130). Grier's beauty, intelligence, and strength have been dismissed because of her skin color; the scope of her beauty is only known to those who still call her Foxy Brown.

27 Negative Black representation was an issue that our focus group informants discussed at length. In response to the counseling session we mentioned previously, Maxine, a lawyer, said:

> The Black person in me wants to say, of course, I don't want to see us portrayed in that manner on television or for other people who don't have the definition of what it means to be Black and see something like that.

Devon, a 3rd grade teacher, said:

> I wasn't so much offended by the counseling episode or by her [Yolanda's] role in the counseling episode. I guess for me it goes back to the fact that you don't have any representation of anyone else. It was episode nine and this is the first character who comes on the show as a Black woman. The first one? In episode nine? And it's a bad representation. It goes back to the lack of representation period. That's where I was more so offended. Not by what she said or what she did but how she was written into the script.

Pam, a 4th grade teacher, articulated her feelings:

> Everyone's speaking about the counseling session. I kind of identify with that sister because many times I know I get very loud when I'm saying something and if I responding to someone. If I sit up and I start saying, 'But, no, this is what I feel. . .' It's, 'Pam's angry.' And, no, I'm not angry. I'm passionate about what I'm talking about. I can identify with her because she wasn't angry. She was letting them know how she felt.

Pam went on to explain that she took offense to how, as often happens in her own lived experience, the White counseling session members misinterpreted Yolanda's passion for anger. She felt that the producers could have handled this episode with more complexity, but she was still "happy they did spend the episode on race because a lot of times we don't see that discussion on television."

We Never Knew Being a Lesbian Was So Easy . . .

28 Sedgwick, in *Epistemology of the Closet*, was one of the first queer theorists to discuss how homosexuality is often forcibly assimilated into the dominant heterosexual gestalt. This process of disavowal allows lesbian and gay difference to be erased. We see this occur on *The L Word*. Of course, the storyline includes the usual gay or (lesbian) topics like 'coming-out,' gay adoption, and lesbian pregnancy. We argue, however, that the bulk of the show portrays lesbianism as a fun social past-time, not necessarily a lived identity. For example, all of the main characters exist in a tight social network. Some are currently living together as lovers and some are ex-lovers, but they are all friends. They meet, apparently, every morning at a local café for lattes and breakfast. They also dine at expensive restaurants, socialize at one another's houses, and celebrate one another's milestones. Nothing illustrates the complex nature of their bond more so than when Tina discovered Bette cheated on her. Tina showed up at Alice's (Bette's ex-girlfriend) house and asked to spend the night. Bette's affair polarized the group. Even Bette's own ex-girlfriend, now a friend of both Tina and Bette, supported Tina. Bette was ostracized for a while, but eventually came back into the circle of friends when she proved her devotion to Tina and their unborn baby.

29 All of the friends, including Shane who was once homeless, earn a decent living and live well enough to have large amounts of expendable income. Good things continuously come their way. In fact, Dana, a professional tennis player, was actually offered an endorsement deal with Olivia Cruises. Olivia[11] is a 'real life' company offering cruises for lesbians. None of the characters face real economic hardships. Jenny, a woman transitioning to lesbianism, began living with Shane during the second season. In order for them to meet the rent, they ended up needing a roommate. This was the extent of economic struggle.

30 Just as economic hardship is not represented within Season One, neither are issues and concerns pertaining to homophobia. None of the characters speak about homophobia because presumably none of them experience it. While we understand that the goal of popular culture texts may not be to portray 'reality,' we argue that oppression is something all lesbians, regardless of race or economic status, will have to face. We are talking about institutionalized oppression which stems from heteronormativity. *The L Word* has examined personal instances of homophobia. It is important to note that Dana, a professional tennis player, structures her life around the fear of being revealed as a lesbian. While this certainly is an example of homophobia, the show does not take up the issue in a complex manner. While there is portrayal of Dana's fear of being "discovered" and examples of the many ways she must

[11] Sheryl Swoops, a WNBA basketball player who recently 'came out' as a lesbian is now a spokeswoman for Olivia.

masquerade as straight, these portrayals are often at the expense of a laugh. Viewers laugh as Dana pretends to have a boyfriend. They laugh when her brother terrorizes her about revealing her secret to their parents. As viewers, we are witness to her personal struggles but there is never a discussion of the social consequences of her choices. Her personal struggle is never contextualized as a societal one.

31 By examining personal homophobia at the exclusion of the more powerful institutionalized oppression, however, *The L Word* propagates that being a lesbian is not fraught with difficulties caused by heterosexuality being viewed as normative. As lesbians of color, our 'lived' experiences are a testament to the institutionalized oppressions lesbians face in a heteronormative society. As professionals who pursue the so-called American Dream, we are in a constant battle to obtain the rights and privileges of our single or married heterosexual colleagues. For example, at every momentous occasion in our lives, such as homeownership, birth of a child, or job advancement, our relationships are either scrutinized by a society that only privileges heterosexual accomplishments or made completely invisible, as if our girlfriends and lovers do not exist. *The L Word*'s portrayal of a perfect world denies the very real problems we face as lesbians of color who exist in a world that privileges Whiteness and heterosexuality. Wouldn't it be interesting if we learned that Shane, like so many other gay teenagers, became homeless because her parents threw her out of the house when they discovered she was gay? Or, wouldn't it be beneficial to see one of the characters have to address the often routine question, 'what is your husband's name?' Instead, they remain isolated from this discrimination and normativity.

32 Maxine was the only informant who spoke on *The L Word*'s assimilationist tactic. She said:

> I don't personally care for what I think is the underlying heterosexual, stereotypical and patriarchal tension between promiscuity and being faithful. This comes out through the characters a little bit between Marina and Jenny and Shane. They're like, 'Screw values.' And then you have the contrast of Bette and Tina kind of like emulating normalcy and heterosexuality.

Here Maxine argues that *The L Word* participates in the privileging of heterosexuality by showcasing Tina and Bette, long term partners, as the most stable couple of the show.[12] Jenny, in contrast, is cheating on her boyfriend with Marina. Shane is also non-monogamous and is known for her fear of commitment. She often only has sex with a woman once before she moves on to her next conquest.

[12] Bette and Tina end their relationship by the end of the first season. Subsequent seasons portray them dating others. Bette continues life as a lesbian. Tina ultimately enters a relationship with a man.

33 Although this topic did not engender much discussion, informants were able to relate to the coming out story of Dana. The professional tennis player, Dana, was offered a lucrative endorsement deal which showcased her skill as an athlete but also her lesbianism. As the advertisement went in print, Dana was faced with the formidable task of 'coming out' to her conservative, right-wing parents. The idea of 'coming out' "gives expression to the dramatic quality of privately and publicly coming to terms with a constructed social identity" (Seidman, Meeks, and Traschen 9). 'Coming out' involves a notion of previously living in the 'closet,' hiding one's sexuality in order to avoid persecution. As Seidman, Meeks, and Traschen argue:

> The era of the closet has not passed. Representations continue to typify the homosexual as polluted and civic and social disenfranchisement and violence structure gay life in the US. As a set of practices responding to the repressive logic of normative heterosexuality, the closet continues to organize the lives of many Americans. (27-28)

This 'coming out' process seemed taken-for-granted by our informants as they unquestionably identified with Dana's 'coming out' process. Her storyline allowed informants to discuss their own coming out stories:

> It was scary for me to tell my mom. I didn't tell my dad because he's in the country and it's just a whole different mentality. Those are things that you just don't do. You're just not like this [gay]. (Devon)
> [After I sent emails to my sisters], I used to go on and be like, 'Damn, I didn't get a response,' and I'm always checking. Refresh, refresh and then I finally wrote again and I said, 'Well I'm assuming you don't want to be my sisters anymore. One of my sisters wrote me right back and said, 'I've just been busy and I didn't get a chance. I don't care what you are. You're still my sister. I still love you.' But then there was another email from my oldest sister who said, 'You are going to rot in hell.' I mean, all this stuff. I'm at work and I'm like, '(Gasp) I'm going to lose my sister.' (Pam)
> But, what about when they say, 'I still love you?' Are you committing some kind of crime? You know, 'I love you anyway.' (Tracy)

The informants went on to compare their coming out stories with Dana's. Some even examined how, like Bette, they often feel the need to overcompensate in professional accomplishments to earn their parents' respect. It was clear that the informants, although they found other faults with *The L Word*, found something they could unmistakably identify with.

Identity Politics

34 Because readers of popular culture texts may make meaning in multiple ways, we do not argue that *The L Word* should not exist. Rather, we are excited to see a show that examines the lives of lesbians. Additionally, it is a show that includes the important ways lesbians create communities of family, friendship, and support. But, because so few

representations of lesbians exist, it becomes ever more important that we continually critique those that do. With that being said, we would like to explore one way *The L Word* might be read as a progressive text. *The L Word*, in its creation of a male lesbian, Lisa, has taken a decidedly postmodern stance on identity. Lisa, a White male, identifies completely as a lesbian. He becomes Alice's, the only bisexual character, girlfriend. Apparently, even though Lisa has a penis, he does not engage in phallic sex. Alice says to Lisa, "You do lesbian better than anyone I know." In this sense, *The L Word* might be a site to work out tensions between essentialists who argue that our bodies are marked with identities and postmodernists who argue that identity is fluid. The idea of a biological male (and he does not alter his male appearance in any way) choosing to be a lesbian is a postmodern phenomenon. Lisa exists to show identity as a fluid choice, as something not fixed.

35 When Alice began dating Lisa a few of the characters raised their eyebrows about his obvious biological male status, but no one said anything to Alice. Although the definition of lesbian has been problematized in some lesbian films, the idea of a man identifying as a lesbian is a new concept to popular culture.[13] It could have been a chance to bring lively debate about who a lesbian is and discuss concepts of male privilege. Instead, we were introduced to Lisa and she/he became a character to laugh at. The focus group informants were not necessarily excited to see the male lesbian explored on the show:

> I see myself in her [Alice] in that aspect. Not the fact that she likes to date men that think they're lesbians, or anything like that. That's just wrong. (Tracy, elementary school teacher) That was a mistake. (Maxine)
> Yeah that was gross. (Tracy)

This exchange was not explored in more depth because the conversation quickly shifted to the women Dana dated. Although informants' perspectives have, up until this point, been consistent with ours, it is clear that Lisa—the male lesbian—was not appreciated by our informants as a postmodern celebration.

36 Although Lisa's character certainly complicates the otherwise homogeneous portrayal of lesbians on *The L Word*, we are not completely satisfied with how *The L Word* has dealt with identity politics within the (White) lesbian community It is not accidental that all of the characters of*The L Word* embody versions of femininity. As we argued earlier, the characters are feminine in order to attract a heterosexual male audience. This tactic, we thought, might maximize profits of *The L Word* by encouraging a larger viewing population. Upon reflecting on media interviews with the producer of *The L Word*, it became clear to us that her reality is

[13] *Go Fish* produced by Rose Troche examined lesbians who have sex with men.

a world of rich White feminine lesbians. The characters she has created are women she claims live in Los Angeles. We, however, argue that these may be the women who live in the producer's reality of Los Angeles but they do not represent the lesbian population (in LA or anywhere else).

37 We have already discussed the lack of racial diversity on the show. We also are displeased with the lack of stud, butch, and dom identities. Of the seven focus group informants, two identified as 'stud' while five identified as 'femme.' When the topic of Shane (the 'butch' character) came up, it sparked a lively discussion:

> Shane was still kind of girly. . .She was really just about sex and she wore tight clothes and she still revealed her body a lot. My friends who are in the butch category aren't like that. (Devon)
> I think there should be a whole different butch, like stud type [represented on the show]. (Toni)
> She doesn't represent me. She doesn't represent most doms who I know. Not the ones in here. I don't know many doms or people who consider themselves to be doms who have the tight clothes. (Pam)
> Naked. (Toni)
> She's naked during sex. I mean she looked like a femme when she was [having sex]. (Pam)

38 Our stud/dom participants made decisions about whether they believed Shane represented them based on her appearance and her role during sex. By examining Shane's role during sex (active versus passive) to determine her identity within the category homosexual, our informants illustrate the various ways sexuality is gendered.[14] Shane wore tight women's clothing, which contradicted the look of our stud/dom participants who opted for loose fitting men's clothes. In addition, Shane was naked during sex, which contradicted the lived experiences of our participants as many believed the stud/dom should keep on some of her clothes. *The L Word* portrayed Shane as sexually voracious. She is afraid of commitment and moves from one woman to the next.[15] Her representation as a butch is not complex as she seems to portray what are traditionally considered "masculine" values about sex. *The L Word* has not troubled what it means to be a butch in a heteronormative world. How do butch women negotiate their identities when they are perceived by the larger heterosexual population as being women who want to be men or at least have some of the perks of heterosexual men? This remains unproblematized by the show.

39 Although butch/femme identities have been conceptualized within the academic world as a class phenomenon, we believe there is an important racialized aspect to these identities.

[14] Kulick, 1998.
[15] In Season Three, however, Shane does fall in love with a Mexican femme, Carmen. Although Shane cheated on her, they eventually scheduled a commitment ceremony. Shane, however, stands Carmen up at the altar.

We know many middle class and upper-middle class professionals (educators, lawyers, physicians) of color who live out stud/dom/butch/femme identities. These identities are integral to "The way that we live."[16] Though we cannot in the space of this paper deal with the complex issue of butch/femme identities, we want to voice that femme/femme couples (or stud/stud) are a rare occurrence in the lesbian worlds we inhabit. We encourage the producer of the show to expand her knowledge base about diversity within the lesbian community across race and class. Maxine posed the question, "What obligations does this White creator have particularly to this show? To present us?" Tracy persuasively responded:

> I can't get offended anymore. . .I just look at it as, 'You don't know who I am. You don't know my background. You don't know my people. So, therefore, you need to go do some research before you can go speak on me. . .I cannot expect a White person to know who Black people are fully to represent them. So, what they see is on television, what they hear from their friends, what they read in the newspaper. That's what they're going to [think] unless they do some real research. And, I was surprised that Blacks were not represented on [*The L Word*] because there are a lot of Black people in the lesbian community. The writers could have gone out and interviewed a few people, just like you guys are talking about the show. They could have went out and done that and even gotten input from gay Black people. And been like, 'Okay, what do you think? How should this be represented and happen in the show?' But then again, it could not happen really for us.

We would like to end Tracy's words because they summarize the power of popular culture representations. It is obvious from the lived experiences of the informants as well as the cultural theorists we have cited that representations matter because they teach us about ourselves and others. *The L Word* is a site that teaches about race, gender, class, and sexuality and, thus, it cannot be ignored.

40 Since we first began writing this manuscript, *The L Word* has aired Seasons 2, 3, and 4. Of course, a cultural studies analysis of these texts is necessary. We believe, however, that Season One is important to examine on its own. It was advertised as the inaugural response to gay men's *Queer as Folk,* also produced by Showtime. We suspect countless viewers may have watched Season One to get an idea of what the lesbian lifestyle is like. However, many viewers, like our focus group participants, may have discontinued their viewing because they could not find something with which to identify. There are also the viewers who remain riveted by the series' storylines and learn, with every episode, how a group of White middle-class lesbians 'live and love.' This living and loving is a narrow representation and is, therefore, in need of continual cultural critique.

[16] "The Way That We Live" is the theme song for the series. Elizabeth Ziff, "The Way That We Live," *The L Word: The Second Season Sessions – Original Score* (Tommy Boy, 2005).

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