LESBIANS ON TELEVISION

NEW QUEER VISIBILITY & THE LESBIAN NORMAL

KATE MCNICHOLAS SMITH

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Introduction

In September 2010, media advocacy organization GLAAD[1] issued their 15th annual television report, stating that the year in US television was 'shaping up to be a record season for inclusivity' (Kane 2010: n.pag.). In 2011, *Entertainment Weekly* announced 'TV's gay-teen revolution' with its cover story of 'Gay teens on TV' and Aaron Hicklin proclaimed in *The Guardian* that it was 'a good year to be gay' (Hicklin 2011: n.pag.). In 2012, headlines again pronounced a 'record high' for LGBTQ+ representation (*Huffington Post*, Moore 2012: n.pag.). In 2013, GLAAD's report showed a decrease in overall representation from the previous year, but an increase in lesbian representation, whilst an article on *Vulture* claimed that: 'Lesbians are having the best summer ever on TV' (Lyons 2013: n.pag.).

As these headlines attest, the early 2010s saw a distinctive shift in LGBTQ+ representation in British and North American popular culture: a notable increase in the visibility of LGBTQ+ characters and media content that has continued throughout the decade. Where once queer representation was marked by absence, subtextual hints and/or dire warnings of the dangerous pitfalls of homosexuality, LGBTQ+ characters are increasingly normalized into contemporary media. From soap operas to Hollywood film to celebrity culture, media culture is coming out: critically acclaimed films such as *Blue Is the Warmest Colour* (2013) and *Carol* (2015) have brought queer women's romance to the big screen (see Bradbury-Rance 2019); more and more celebrities from the worlds of film and television, modelling and the music industry are publically identifying as LGBTQ+; advertisements for products from oven chips to bank accounts have featured lesbian and gay couples; and online platforms like YouTube host multiple coming out stories, queer vloggers and content creators. Thus, we find ourselves in a media era defined by a *new queer visibility*. Critically, whilst this new visibility crosses multiple media forms, it is television that has been a central driver. Across varying platforms, genres and networks, televisual media has, in the past decade, made LGBTQ+ narratives and characters visible on a previously unseen scale. Lesbian, bisexual and queer women are more represented than ever before, in examples ranging from British soap opera *Coronation Street* to teen hits such as *Skins*, *Glee*

and *Pretty Little Liars,* US prime-time dramas like *Grey's Anatomy*, *The Good Wife* and *Empire,* superhero drama *Black Lightning,* BBC dramas *Last Tango in Halifax*, BBC–HBO collaboration *Gentleman Jack* and Netflix originals *Orange Is the New Black* and *Sense8*.

New queer visibility has emerged in a period of significant social and legislative change in relation to LGBTQ+ lives. British and North American public cultures have witnessed a seemingly liberal transformation in sexual politics, epitomized in the introduction of same-sex marriage legislation. The representations of lesbian, bisexual and gay characters seen in this period have been celebrated for mobilizing shifts in public opinion: in 2012, for example, *The Hollywood Reporter* stated, '*Glee* and *Modern Family* drive voters to favor gay marriage' (Appelo 2012). Certainly, *Lesbians on Television* will argue, the mainstreaming of LGBTQ+ representation that is *new queer visibility*, constitutes a re-imagining of queer lives that mediates these social shifts and the discursive struggles of this era. In doing so, it functions both to expand and limit the intelligibility of queer subjects. Whilst the tensions of LGBTQ+ inclusion have been, and continue to be, well critiqued – such as in Lisa Duggan's influential account of homonormativity – this book applies a queer feminist lens to draw out their specifically gendered implications. Foregrounding representations of lesbian, bisexual and queer women, *Lesbians on Television* examines the complex and contradictory losses and gains of *new queer visibility*, asking what is brought into being by lesbians 'having the best summer ever on TV'.

A new era in LGBTQ+ rights

The twenty-first century has seen LGBTQ+ rights emerge at the forefront of public discourse and national politics, in ways that would once have been hard to imagine. In British and American legislation, key changes have included the lifting in 2000 of the ban on openly gay people serving in the British armed forces, and the 2000/1 reformation of the age of consent legislation: equalizing the age of consent between heterosexual and homosexual couples, and introducing lesbian women into the age of consent law for the first time. 2003 saw same-sex activity legalized in all US states, and Section 28 repealed in the United Kingdom. 2004 saw the introduction of civil partnerships in the United Kingdom, allowing homosexual couples to enter into state-recognized unions. The same year also saw the introduction of the Gender Recognition Act, which allowed trans people who met certain criteria (such as a diagnosis of gender dysphoria) to have their gender legally recognized. Whilst limited in critical ways, it marked, at the time, an important shift in transgender rights. The 2006 Equality Act made discrimination against lesbians

and gay men in the provision of goods and services illegal in the United Kingdom, and the 2008 Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act made it easier for lesbian couples to access IVF and ensured same-sex couples could be recognized as the legal parents of their children. In 2011, the 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' policy was repealed in the US military. Perhaps the most significant and symbolic social shift, however, has come in the form of same-sex marriage campaigning and legislation. As Suzanna Danuta Walters writes, 'this issue dominates our current historical moment, crowding out any other battles in gay rights' (Walters 2014: 180). After hard fought and highly visible public campaigns, same-sex marriage legislation came into force in 2014 in the United Kingdom and in 2015 in the United States, as well as in various other countries around the world: 29 at the time of writing.

Meanwhile, various companies, celebrities and charities appear to be united in their public support for LGBTQ+ rights. Same-sex marriage campaigns have been supported by corporations such as Starbucks and Coca-Cola, and, in what many have critiqued as rainbow capitalism, pride month in the United Kingdom sees high streets awash with rainbow flags: from Pride fashion to Marks and Spencer's LGBT sandwich. Politicians who have historically stood against gay rights have changed positions, meaning lesbian and gay inclusion has been invoked through discourses ranging from liberal progress to conservatism, family values to national belonging and, in a particularly insidious manoeuvre, islamophobia and anti-immigration rhetoric. As these seemingly contradictory convergences suggest, this period of LGBTQ+ mainstreaming has brought both meaningful material changes and critical compromises. Furthermore, these changes have also been met with resistance, and a homophobic backlash runs alongside these shifts. Rights are also under threat: the inauguration of Donald Trump as US president, for example, brought a series of attacks on legislative protections for LGBTQ+ people. Reports increasingly state rises in homophobic and transphobic hate crimes (Marsh et al. 2019), whilst trans lives continue to be constituted as 'up for debate'. In May 2019, the story of two queer women who were violently attacked on a London bus made headlines, when they shared an image of their bloodied faces in the aftermath of the attack. The assault highlighted, as the couple argued, the continued intersections of homophobia and misogyny experienced by queer women. Nonetheless, the couple also critiqued the selectivity of the public concern over an attack on two white, cisgender, conventionally feminine women, with one of the woman powerfully arguing: 'The commodification and exploitation of my face came at the expense of other victims whose constant persecution apparently does not warrant similar moral outrage' (Chris 2019: n.pag.). Indeed, the ongoing violence of racism and imperialism is combined with the contemporary rise of right-wing populism across multiple sociopolitical contexts. Various attacks on welfare and public services cause material and symbolic damage to the lives and bodies of queer, working

class, disabled and other marginalized subjects, and gender inequality continues across various sites (from domestic violence to the gender pay gap). *New queer visibility* and its mediation of the same-sex marriage era emerge into and negotiate this complex and contested context. Intersecting exclusions and inequalities are at stake in the mobilization of a new era of LGBTQ+ inclusion.

New queer visibility

In 1992, B. Ruby Rich coined the term 'New Queer Cinema' to describe a movement in independent cinema that saw the release of a number of queer-themed independent films. These films varied in content but, as Michele Aaron describes, 'what they seemed to share was an attitude' (Aaron 2004: 3). The films of New Queer Cinema refused acceptance-seeking tactics of 'positive' representations of good gay citizens, infused instead by a more radical queer politics. These films, Aaron describes, represented queer subjects that were marginalized even within LGBTQ+ communities, were 'unapologetic about their characters faults' and defied recognized cinematic conventions (Aaron 2004: 3). In addition, the films of New Queer Cinema rejected 'the sanctity of the past', re-instating queerness where it had been denied (Aaron 2004: 3). Emerging in the context of AIDS, some of the films of New Queer Cinema imagined ways of defying death: 'death is defied as the life sentence passed by the disease' (Aaron 2004: 5). New Queer Cinema was of its era, emerging in the 1980s context of queer politics. Twenty years later, a new wave of representation was emerging that also had a shared sensibility: what I define as new queer visibility. Where New Queer Cinema emerged as an unapologetic politics of rupture, however, new queer visibility emerges through a complex politics that encompasses (homo)national discourses of democracy and progress, heterosexist and racialized media cultures, and queer and feminist challenges to sexual norms and hierarchies. In this book, I argue that new queer visibility is characterized, albeit complexly, by two key features: post-queer popular culture and the lesbian normal.

New queer visibility and post-queer popular culture

Tracking the shifting representations of *new queer visibility* as it has taken shape in the twenty-first century, I have identified the emergence of a *post-queer sensibility*: a sensibility characterized by a convergence of homonormativity and postfeminism (see McNicholas Smith and Tyler 2017). Duggan defined homonormativity to describe the shifting norms and allegiances of the social shift

towards LGBTQ+ inclusion in the United States. Duggan's influential account critiqued what she argued was a move towards individualized, depoliticized inclusion on normative terms, situating this shift as 'a crucial new part of the cultural front of neoliberalism' (Duggan 2002: 177). Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff describe neo-liberalism as broadly referring to 'a mode of political and economic rationality characterised by privatisation, deregulation and a rolling back and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision', rising to prominence in the 1980s in the United Kingdom and United States under Reagan and Thatcher and extending globally (Gill and Scharff 2011: 5). Critically, however, as Tyler argues, the *power* of the state is not shrunk: 'instead, modes of surveillance and control hybridised and multiplied' (Tyler 2013: 6). Neo-liberal forms of governance produce the subject as individual, enterprising and self-regulating. The power of the state combines with markets in ways that produce a dispersal of state power in 'every stratum of social and cultural life' (Tyler 2013: 6). Thus, as Tyler describes, 'on the one hand, neoliberal political discourses are state-phobic, and on the other hand neoliberalism demands continuous, repressive interventions by the state' (Tyler 2013: 6). The post-queer sensibility, a product of the homonormative era, is embedded in these politics.

Like Duggan, Michael Warner's work has been influential in developing queer critique of the move within LGBTQ+ politics towards the 'normal'. Warner's critique responds, like Duggan's, to assimilationist articulations, such as Andrew Sullivan's 1993 critique of 'the notion of sexuality as cultural subversion', a position he argued 'alienated the vast majority of gay people' (Sullivan 1993: n.pag.). Warner argues that the mainstreaming of the lesbian and gay movement and its mobilization within popular culture 'makes us imagine we want to be normal', shifting attention and participation away from 'a queer movement' towards 'a gay trend' (Warner 2000: 70). Warner's work calls attention to *The Trouble with Normal* (Warner 2000), arguing that, whilst 'to insist on being seen as normal' makes sense in the context of the cultural discourse of shame that has structured queer lives, to embrace the terms on which that shame is produced 'merely throws shame on those who stand farther down the ladder of respectability' (Warner 2000: 60). *Lesbians on Television* continues the work of queer theorists like Duggan and Warner, but foregrounds the gender politics of homonormativity, or, the trouble with *the lesbian normal*. To do so, I situate this era in the context, not only of homonormativity but also of postfeminism. In *Lesbians on Television* I draw together homonormative and postfeminist critiques to define *post-queer*, a sensibility constituted by the convergence of the two. In 1998, James Collard, editor of *Out* magazine, articulated a 'post-gay' moment, a term coined four years earlier by British journalist and activist Paul Burston. For Collard, post-gay constituted 'a critique of gay politics and gay culture – by gay people, for

gay people', in a period in which we 'should no longer define ourselves solely in terms of our sexuality' (Collard 1998: 53). Collard's statements, like Sullivan's, captured the homonormative shifts beginning to build momentum in this period. The term 'post-gay' has continued to be variously utilized (Ghaziani 2011), as mode of identification, descriptor of a period in gay politics and form of critique. As Amin Ghaziani describes, 'the post-gay era may be marked by the acceptance of a segment of gays and lesbians who are gender conforming, middle class, upwardly mobile – in other words, those best able to take advantage of the benefits of assimilation and the valorization of a particular type of diversity' (Ghaziani 2011: 104). In *The New Gay Teenager*, Ritch C. Savin-Williams describes 'the new gay teenager' as 'in many respects the non-gay teenager', who might consider themselves 'post-gay' (Savin-Williams 2009: 1). The use of the term 'post-queer' mobilized here draws on and extends the use of such phrases as a form of critique, but follows theorists of postfeminism in its articulation. Furthermore, the post-queer, as defined here, is a sensibility specifically characterized by its postfeminist functions.

Whilst there are, similarly, various uses of the term 'postfeminism' (see Gill 2007b; Gill and Scharff 2011), the way it is used in this book draws on the work of Angela McRobbie and Rosalind Gill: utilizing Gill's account of 'postfeminism as a sensibility' (Gill 2007b: 148). As Gill notes, 'the notion of postfeminism has become one of the most important and contested terms in the lexicon of feminist cultural analysis' (Gill, 2007b: 147). Developed in response to the media culture of the 1990s and 2000s, the concept has continued to be utilized, critiqued and developed in the years since. Writing in the early 2000s, Angela McRobbie identified the emergence of a sexual politics characterized by a 'double entanglement' of 'neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life […] and processes of liberalisation in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations' (McRobbie 2004: 255–56). This complex convergence mobilized feminist politics, as Gill describes, as 'simultaneously taken for granted and repudiated' (Gill 2007b: 161). In this context, 'a certain kind of liberal feminist perspective is treated as commonsense' (Gill 2007b: 161), whilst feminism itself is deemed no longer needed. The feminist concerns of the 1960s and 1970s are mobilized as either dealt with or unnecessary. Feminist critiques of media objectification are, for example, reconstituted as old-fashioned prudishness, whilst the postfeminist sensibility mobilizes new media conventions: as Gill argues 'women are not straightforwardly objectified but are portrayed as active, desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their liberated interests to do so' (Gill 2007b: 151). Meanwhile, various objects of feminist critique are re-centralized as desirable and, in a supposedly post-patriarchy era, freely and simply chosen. Thus, 'pre-feminist

ideals', such as marriage and motherhood, are 'repackaged as post-feminist freedoms in ways that do nothing to question normative heterosexual femininity' (Gill and Herdieckerhoff 2006: 499). For McRobbie, postfeminism thus functions as an 'an active process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 80s come to be undermined' (McRobbie 2004: 255). As noted, the concept of postfeminism has developed, with various nuances and complexities drawn out and changing social and media contexts responded to. Indeed, the current moment raises questions of the postfeminist framework, as feminism has been re-animated in popular culture and in various forms of activism and public debate. *Lesbians on Television* contributes to these conversations in two central ways: (1) expanding the postfeminist archive in its analysis of the contemporary lesbian subject as postfeminist figure and (2) drawing out the more radical possibilities of the 'new cultural life of feminism' (Gill 2016) as it is animated in *new queer visibility*.

Emerging through homonormativity and postfeminism, the post-queer sensibility functions to situate the struggles of *queer and feminist* politics as redundant as it mobilizes its progress narrative of gay rights. It declares a new era of LGBTQ+ inclusion, and offers pedagogic trajectories for negotiating contemporary sexual politics. For the lesbian subject, a postfeminist sensibility converges with homonormative inclusion in ways that have multiple effects: structuring the subject positions queer women are invited to take up in this new era of LGBTQ+ inclusion as well as reiterating gendered norms of sexual availability and the necessary centrality of marriage and motherhood. These institutions are also reconstituted, with their inclusion of gay couples allowing for the re-imagining of them as progressive. This has implications for women's rights more broadly, and for all those against whom the institution of marriage is utilized. As Duggan summarizes, marriage has had, and continues to have, multiple regulatory functions:

> Various efforts to 'promote' marriage have been aimed at poor women and women of color, assumed to be immoral and dependent on the taxpaying up right citizenry. A vigorous conservative 'marriage movement' has arisen with a long list of goals for shoring up 'traditional' marriage: restricting the grounds for divorce, punishing adultery, teaching abstinence, bringing children and teenagers more tightly under the authoritarian control of parents. Marriage has been endorsed as the best way to privatize social welfare costs – by shifting them from the government to already overburdened private households.
>
> (Duggan 2008: 157)

All these concerns are at stake in the contemporary negotiations of the same-sex marriage era, and its mobilization of a post-queer sensibility.

New queer visibility and the lesbian normal

There are variations in the forms of representation *new queer visibility* takes, and the kinds of characters and identities included in this still developing archive. Nonetheless, there are also repetitions of narrative, characterization and visual codes that come to produce recognizable tropes – tropes that I argue constitute *the lesbian normal*. The repetition of these tropes constitutes a representational frame through which queer women are normalized into popular imaginaries, mediating a re-making of social norms. Butler writes, 'the norm governs intelligibility' (Butler 2004: 42), the frame through which subjects and worlds are brought into being and made recognizable. With some notable examples, however, the dominant codes of the lesbian normal largely conform to heterosexist ideals and classed and racialized exclusions, and thus both open up and close down possibilities of intelligibility.

Diane Richardson argues that the 'neoliberal politics of normalisation' mobilize in part around discourses of 'sameness' (Richardson 2005: 516), where inclusion depends on 'the continuity of lesbian, gay and heterosexual lifestyles and values' (Richardson 2004: 392). Richardson asks: 'if lesbians and gay men are becoming "normal citizens", what kinds of citizens are they being constituted as?' (Richardson 2004: 397). I argue, in this period of *new queer visibility*, the lesbian citizen is constituted through the lesbian normal. There are three central characteristics of the lesbian normal, which gather significance in their repetition: (1) 'she doesn't look like a lesbian', the decoding of the lesbian through the visual codes of normative femininity; (2) 'that's so old fashioned', the discursive distancing from particular forms of LGBTQ+/queer/feminist histories, lives and politics; and (3) 'happily ever after', romantic narratives of marriage and motherhood. The lesbian normal, thus, leaves new visibility open to reconstitution on familiar terms, reproducing codes of normative femininity, whiteness, inauthentic lesbians and heterosexist objectification. This is also, as Lisa Henderson argues in *Love and Money: Queers, Class, and Cultural Production*, a 'class project', in which 'comportment, family, and modes of acquisition are the class markers of queer worth' (Henderson 2013: 34). Meanwhile, images and identifications less easily consumable to a racialized heterosexist gaze remain far less visible: *new queer visibility* remains limited for queer women of colour, butch, older, disabled, gender non-conforming or non-binary subjects. The lesbian normal reiterates what Alison Winch describes as the 'traditional femininities that post-feminist popular culture covets' (Winch 2012: 72), whilst, at the same time, queering the heteronormative imperative of postfeminist discourse.

Indeed, the lesbian normal is multiple in its effects. As images and narratives of lesbian, bisexual and queer women's lives are 'normalized' into public culture, they do make possible frames of identification that shift the terms of intelligibility in meaningful (albeit limited) ways. These shifts do, to a certain extent, work to open

up possibilities of living lesbian and bisexual lives. The 'everyday-ness' of *Coronation Street*'s lesbians, for example, challenges the marginalization and othering of lesbian subjects and queers the familiar. As dominant institutions and spaces – schools, families, religions, workplaces etc. – continue to exclude and discriminate against LGBTQ+ people, *new queer visibility* does mediate forms of belonging that disrupt the heteronormativity of social worlds. Intimacy is re-imagined to include possibilities of queer desire, and the heteronormativity of futurity is complicated. Thus, *Lesbians on Television* tracks the constitution of the lesbian normal, recognizing its significance as well as interrogating its limits. Furthermore, for all its limitations, I contend that moments of radical rupture do emerge in the context of the lesbian normal, and sometimes do so in unexpected places.

New queer visibility has opened up new markets, and the new profitability of LGBTQ+ inclusion has allowed for representations that exceed the post-queer, even as others continue to mobilize limited (and limiting) terms. In examples such as Netflix's *Sense8*, or *Orange Is the New Black*, we have seen powerful representations of queer women of colour, butch lesbians and trans lesbians. As Lea DeLaria as *Orange Is the New Black*'s explicitly butch lesbian character, Boo, states: 'I refuse to be invisible' ('Finger in the Dyke' 2015). In more 'mainstream' contexts, however, we also see notable examples. As I argue in Chapter Six, ABC's *The Fosters* both reiterates homonormative inclusion and offers moments of re-imagining feminist critique and queer world making. Indeed, it should be noted that whilst the post-queer sensibility is one of the central features of *new queer visibility*, *new queer visibility* is not exclusively post-queer. *Lesbians on Television* attends to the mobilization of post-queer and the lesbian normal, drawing critical attention to their discursive effects, but also to their complications. As the precarity of post-queer's promise is increasingly revealed, we also see media content struggling against and exceeding it terms. As Stuart Hall's well-cited and still relevant words remind us:

> Popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance.
>
> (Hall 1981: 239)

Critically, representations are not limited to the television screen, but extend beyond it into audience engagements and fan cultures. In *Lesbians on Television* I follow *new queer visibility* into its extended digital media platforms, exploring audience engagements through interviews and analysis of fan media. Here, as the fans I interviewed for this research testify, powerful sites of comfort and collectivity open up. In *Feeling Normal: Sexuality and Media Criticism in the Digital Age*, F. Hollis Griffin engages with the 'affective value' (Villarejo 2014) of 'gay

and lesbian media', considering the ways in which it can allow its consumers 'to "feel normal", in ways that are often simultaneously emancipatory and oppressive' (Griffin 2016: 13). Indeed, fandoms reveal various forms of affective value that both reproduce and exceed the limits of the lesbian normal. Further, fandoms are also sites of struggle, in which the terms of visibility are intervened in and challenged and representations re-made, extending the media archive of *new queer visibility*. I conceptualize fandoms as contradictory 'queer counterpublics': producing oppositional speech and mobilizing queer forms of stranger sociability, even as they simultaneously reiterate post-queer investments in normative belonging.

Lesbians go public

Publics and counterpublics

Television has long had a distinctive role in mediating social concerns. As Lynn Joyrich and Julia Himberg state:

> TV has had an intensely political history; as a domestic medium, located in the home, it has long provoked concerns about its influence on politics, social dynamics, and cultural values as well as its impact on the more minute politics of everyday life, personal relations, and intimate relationships.
>
> (in Joyrich 2014: 113)

Whilst television is undergoing various changes, it remains the case that, as Helen Wood and Lisa Taylor suggest, 'the old screen medium of TV […] whether multiple and diffuse in new arrangements of time and space, or diversified in content and form, is as durably and consistently located in the fabric of everyday life as it ever was' (Wood and Taylor 2008: 144). As an everyday, intimate medium, with its accessibility and potential to reach large audiences, it remains a key site of public culture and its constitution. Thus, the resignification of the lesbian figure on television functions as a resignification of public culture.

Work on publics draws on, if complicates, the work of Jürgen Habermas, and his book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. In this 'social-historical analysis', Habermas outlined the development in the late seventeenth century of the 'bourgeois public sphere': 'the sphere of private people come together as a public' (Habermas 1991: 27) distinct from the state, the economy and the private realm. Facilitated by, amongst other things, the development of the printing press, Habermas described what Nancy Fraser summarizes as 'a theatre in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk. It is the

space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs, hence, an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction' (Fraser 1990: 57). Participation in the public sphere is, of course, exclusionary, and Habermas' dualistic distinction of private/public has been much critiqued. As Lauren Berlant notes, 'the anti-war, anti-racist and feminist agitations of the 60s denounced the hollow promises of the political pseudo public sphere' (Berlant 1997: 3). Indeed, the gendered separation of public and private, and the distinction between the two, has long been of concern to feminist activism and theory ('the personal is political'). Similarly, such distinctions are incompatible with sexuality and queer studies. As Warner suggests, 'any organised attempt to transform gender or sexuality is a public questioning of private life, and thus the critical study of gender and sexuality entails a problem of public and private in its own practice' (Warner 2005: 31).[2] Warner took up Habermas' account of the public sphere in his 1990 work *The Letters of the Republic*. Warner offers an 'analysis of the bourgeois public sphere as it developed in colonial America'; similarly foregrounding the significance of print media, Warner understands this shift as 'fully historical', complicating its attribution to 'an ahistorical point of reference, such as the intrinsic nature of individuals' reason, or technology' (Warner 1990: xi). Warner's account of publics speaks to the constitution of 'the kind of social world to which we belong and […] the kinds of actions and subjects that are possible within it' (Warner 1990: 12). This is the central concern of *Lesbians on Television*, as it examines an archive of texts of public culture as they mediate changing social worlds and the possibilities of living within them.

Warner draws our attention to publics as a fundamentally discursive space: 'a public is a space of discourse organised by nothing other than discourse itself […] it exists by virtue of being addressed' (Warner 2002: 50). It becomes 'real' only through a process of discursive reflexivity in which its members or its addressees are brought into being in order that they can be addressed. Furthermore, this discursive address must be a circulatory one. This circulation is, and must be, ongoing; its texts must be connected, produced, reproduced and engaged with over time and in various intertextual contexts. It is not single texts that create a public, rather the ongoing production and circulation of texts. Or as Warner describes, 'it is not texts themselves that create publics, but the concatenation of texts through time' (Warner 2002: 62). Publics are self-organized and require, and exist because of, participation, however notional. It is participation, or rather attention, that is the constitutive feature of a public: 'attention is the principal sorting category by which members and non-members are discriminated' (Warner 2002: 61). Publics also produce what Warner terms 'stranger sociability' – the bringing together of strangers through participation – although participation is structured through material, historical and social contexts. Publics are specifically addressed: for Warner, 'public discourse says not only: "let a public exist",

but "let it have this character, speak this way, see the world in this way" ' (Warner 2002: 82). Critically, publics are also hierarchical and exclusionary: 'there must be as many publics as polities, but wherever one is addressed as the public, the others are assumed not to matter' (Warner 2002: 49). Thus, there emerges a dominant public and dominant public discourse; the circulation of which takes its scope for granted and presents a false universality in its address. Publics go beyond the bourgeois ideal of democratic spaces where the sexual or gendered individual is represented; rather, they mediate those very subjects: thus, dominant publics organize the possibilities of citizenship and national belonging they claim to represent (Berlant and Warner 1998). There are also counterpublics, 'defined by their tension with a larger public' (Warner 2005: 56). Whilst subordinated, counterpublics offer sites for articulating different versions of what it means to exist within a social world. *New queer visibility* functions across, and calls into being, these multiple forms of publics.

The intimate public

Berlant develops an account of a shift in the 1980s towards, what she describes in *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* as, the 'intimate public sphere' (1997: 1). For Habermas, the intimate sphere constituted a domestic space in which individuals developed a sense of self; a sense of self that became a sense of citizenship when it was abstracted in the nondomestic public sphere. In the contemporary US context, however, Berlant argues that citizenship is instead constituted as a condition of social membership reliant on a sense of personal actions and selfhood, in particular those related to the domestic, or family, sphere. Berlant describes the production of a 'national symbolic' through the 'tangled cluster' of texts that mediate a national public (Berlant 1991: 5); the dominant public sphere is comprised of a cluster of texts and images of sex and citizenship. These clusters mobilize a 'nationalist politics of intimacy' (Berlant 1997: 7); nation is defined on intimate terms. Thus, the political public sphere has become the intimate public sphere; an intimacy mobilized through the national symbolic and its normative heterosexuality. Nostalgic fantasies of the family are defined in opposition to the disruptions of other forms of intimacy, sex and kinship. The 'logic of the national future' relies on the generational form of the family, mobilizing the citizen as 'straight, white, reproductively inclined heterosexual' (Berlant 1997: 18). At the same time, intimacy is paradoxically constituted as 'the endlessly cited elsewhere of political public discourse'; a 'triumph' of Reaganism is its positioning of intimacy as private, sacred and familial (Berlant 1997: 3). The public good then is recognized in relation to the way in which 'private' lives are lived (Berlant 1997: 4–5).

Thus, as 'normal intimacy' (Berlant 1997: 8) comes to signify individual (and individually produced) happiness, politics is displaced by the personal. Fantasies of the 'good life' mobilize normative terms of intimacy and belonging. The heterosexual family model bestows material and symbolic privilege; it is *necessary* in order to claim citizenship and a relationship to the future (Berlant and Warner 1998: 557). *Lesbians on Television* draws on and extends Warner and Berlant's accounts of publics, theorizing the reshaping of 'the intimate public sphere' (Berlant 1997: 1) as the terms of public intelligibility are reconstituted to include (some) queer lives. In considering television and its surrounding media as circulatory *public* speech, the ways in which these representations matter becomes clearer. *Lesbians on Television* identifies a contemporary media archive of *new queer visibility*, in which (particular) LGBTQ+ subjects are made possible within the terms of dominant imaginaries. In this book, I examine struggles of public and counterpublic discourse within and beyond televisual media: from the public-making texts of popular culture to the sociability and queer world-making of fandom.

Methodology: The lesbian figure

Lesbians on Television tracks the resignification of the lesbian figure in popular culture. In doing so, it continues what Jo Littler has described as 'a long trajectory in cultural studies' of the study of 'overdetermined figures that gain their force as figures repeated across different media' (Littler 2013: 228). This analysis, thus, follows this trajectory, drawing on theorists from Stuart Hall and Richard Dyer to Imogen Tyler and Littler herself. Tyler has been particularly influential in developing the figurative approach, in her analyses of contemporary figurations of 'national abjects' (Tyler 2013: 9). Tyler (2008) draws, in turn, on Donna Haraway's account of figuration, Sara Ahmed's stranger fetishism (2000) and Claudia Castañeda's figuration of the child (2002); an approach Castañeda describes as making 'it possible to describe in detail the process by which a concept or entity is given a particular form – how it is figured – in ways that speak to the making of worlds' (Castañeda 2002: 3). Tyler describes social classifications as 'complex political formations that are generated and characterised by representational struggles'; struggles that are often mediated through the formation and circulation of what she describes as 'highly condensed figurative forms' (Tyler 2008: 18). At particular social and historical moments, types, groups, bodies, anxieties are repeatedly imagined and represented in ways that, as they accumulate, constitute them as coherent figures. The figurative approach tracks these repetitions, paying close attention to the processes of figuration and what they bring into being. Mediation is constitutive: through their repetition and circulation,

representations become generative. In *Lesbians on Television* I argue that we are seeing a contemporary re-imagining of the lesbian figure. Whilst Tyler's figures become 'symbolic and material scapegoats' (Tyler 2013: 11), however, *new queer visibility* works to re-figure LGBTQ+ subjects through the 'charmed circle' (Rubin 1984) of normative belonging. At the same time, these new figurations can expand to mediate more disruptive possibilities of political struggle.

Lesbians on Television's figurative account draws together critical social and cultural theory and empirical research to offer a detailed analysis of the complex dynamics of this period of social change. The book is structured around five central case studies of popular British and American television shows featuring lesbian, bisexual and queer women characters: *The L Word*, *Skins*, *Coronation Street, Glee* and *The Fosters*. These programmes cross geographical location (the United Kingdom and the United States), genre and distributor: from British soap opera to teen drama to US cable channel series. Furthermore, whilst focusing on television media, I track the figuration of the contemporary lesbian through a mixed archive of texts that includes: news reports, political speeches and legislation; publicity materials from press to official websites and Twitter accounts; and fan/audience media such as Twitter hashtags and discussions, recaps and reviews, and fan-made images, videos and stories. The figurative archive, thus, includes content that varies in form and genre, but it is this multiplicity that constitutes the figure as generative. Furthermore, this approach recognizes the expansion of televisual media in the era of convergence culture (Jenkins 2006), or what Maria del Mar Grandío and Joseba Bonaut describe as a 'revolution in the ways of watching TV' (del Mar Grandío and Bonaut 2012: 559). Television culture has transformed in recent years towards a transmedia experience, meaning audiences are watching lesbian characters on the television screen *but also* following them into Twitter debates, reading and writing analytical recaps, and engaging in their re-animations in fanfiction and fanvids. Audiences might be watching these representations as they are broadcast, or streaming them online from multiple locations, or watching YouTube compilations of specific characters' storylines. Thus, following the lesbian figure across multiple platforms is necessary to understand the complexity of *new queer visibility* and its effects. Furthermore, what might appear to be a random selection of texts is in fact a coherent archive within fan cultures, where LGBTQ+ representations, still notable in their interventions in heteronormative media cultures, are tracked down and engaged in: thus, an American teen might be as familiar with *Coronation's Street*'s Sophie and Sian as they are with Freeform's *The Fosters*, for example, and, as my fandom research suggests, *Skins* fanfiction is being written by queer youth from the United Kingdom to Brazil to Serbia. The television programmes focused on in this book provide, of course, a selective and partial account. Their selection was, however, guided by fandoms, drawing on

interviews with fans, engagements in fan-populated platforms such as Twitter and Tumblr and observation of queer women's web content such as AfterEllen and Autostraddle. AfterEllen and Autostraddle are key sites for the discussion of queer women and popular culture, and their episode recaps and reviews are drawn into the analysis throughout.[3] Nonetheless, there are, of course, other examples that might have been included here, but I hope the ones that are provide key insights into these broader shifts. The discussion is limited to a British and North American context – although the content itself moves beyond that in its broadcast and engagement; this is, therefore, a partial perspective. One of the key concerns of this discussion is, however, the mediation of specific sociopolitical and national contexts, including the global broadcast of national fantasies. The focus on British and North American television allows for the specificities of these contexts to be drawn out. The United Kingdom and the United States are different contexts in many ways, and this is apparent in the specifics of the various iterations of the contemporary lesbian figure considered here. There is also, however, a long and complex sociopolitical relationship between the two countries, and an established exchange of cultural objects (as film critic Mark Kermode stated in relation to cinema: 'the movie industries of Britain and America are inextricably intertwined' [Kermode 2012: 227]). Current media contexts are further opening up various forms of transnational media flows, including successful co-productions between UK and US broadcasters (amongst others) and an increased accessibility of British and American content on platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime. Ultimately, of course, the scope of this discussion is necessarily limited, but might exist as one of many accounts of changing contexts for LGBTQ+ lives and their mediation in popular culture.

Alongside close analysis of media content, *Lesbians on Television* draws on a series of online interviews with *Skins* fans and fanfiction writers. I conducted interviews with twenty *Skins* fans between April 2011 and April 2013 as part of Economic and Social Research Council–funded doctoral research. Whilst respondents were predominantly based in the United Kingdom and the United States, they also included fans based in Brazil, Argentina, Canada, Australia, Finland and Serbia, speaking to the mobile potential of contemporary media. Participants were recruited from 'private messages' sent out to *Skins* fans on FanFiction.net – the largest online fanfiction database – and video-sharing site YouTube, in which they were given information about the project. After agreeing to participate, each interviewee received a series of set questions regarding *Skins*, fanfiction and fandom. Once these had been responded to, each participant received a follow-up email responding to their answers and asking further questions accordingly. Participants were given the opportunity to ask any questions about the study and offer any further comments, and have been anonymized throughout. A content analysis of the

interview responses was undertaken, drawing out key themes around online fan communities, identity, visibility and the creation and reception of fan media. In 2018, I contacted participants again to attain consent for inclusion in this book, and further reflections from this time from two of the interviewees are quoted.[4] These interviews, alongside other fan media, offer critical insights into the significance of *new queer visibility*, and its life as it extends beyond the television screen.

A note on terminology

Throughout *Lesbians on Television*, I use the terms 'queer', 'lesbian', 'LGBTQ+', and 'lesbian, gay and bisexual' varyingly. Situated in queer theory, I use 'queer' to reference what Warner describes as a rejection of 'a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal' (Warner 1993: xxvi). I also use it to refer to examples that cannot be simply described using the categorizations of gay, lesbian or bisexual, and as a form of umbrella term. At the same time, I use lesbian, bisexual and queer woman when appropriate to foreground the gender politics of sexuality. I shift between these terms as relevant to the specificities of the discussion at hand, but, ultimately, the inconsistency of terminology reflects the messy complexities of this debate.

Chapter outline

Lesbians on Television begins with a brief overview of histories of queer women's representation on screen. From the subtexts of classic Hollywood to the lesbian chic of the 1990s, this chapter maps key moments and tropes in lesbian, bisexual and queer visibility. This chapter provides a necessary context to the significance of the emergence of *new queer visibility*. The second chapter takes up this discussion as we enter a new era of LGBTQ+ rights and representations in the 2000s. Here, we turn to a TV show that is both loved and hated, celebrated and critiqued, but undeniably significant: Showtime's *The L Word*. In this chapter I explore *The L Word*'s struggles over the possibilities and constraints of queer women's representation. I examine ways in which the contemporaneous debates of equal marriage and the military are mobilized in *The L Word*, and the tensions of the show's simultaneous investments in homonormative belonging and queer-feminist challenge. The following chapters turn to *The L Word*'s successors, and what I am describing as a *new queer visibility*. Chapter Three considers Channel Four's controversial teen hit, *Skins*, and its normalization of lesbian romance, or, the lesbian

normal. Chapter Four continues the conversation on *Skins*, but turns to its audience, drawing on fan media and interviews with fanfiction writers to explore the significance of queer visibility for young queer audiences. This chapter, like the following one, speaks to the ways in which representations are taken up by fans in ways that both celebrate and exceed, and even resist, their original incarnations. Chapter Five turns to long-running British soap opera, *Coronation Street*, and the introduction of its first lesbian characters. This chapter examines the pedagogic representation of the everyday lesbian of the soap opera, and the imagining of the lesbian bride as Britain moved towards the introduction of same-sex marriage legislation. Chapter Six discusses US musical comedy drama, *Glee*, examining its mediation of contemporary lesbian, bisexual and gay subjects. From coming out narratives, to wedding happy ever afters, to a post-gay teen, *Glee* epitomizes the tensions of *new queer visibility* and the gender politics of the lesbian normal. Here, the post-queer's convergence of the homonormative and the postfeminist is made particularly clear. The final chapter turns to another US teen drama, ABC's *The Fosters*. This chapter, however, speaks to the ways in which *new queer visibility* has also mobilized representations that exceed the post-queer. In versions of the lesbian normal, the radical possibilities of queer feminist media might also play out. *The Fosters*, I argue here, mobilizes those possibilities in an unexpected context, complicating the postfeminist repudiation of feminist politics.

NOTES

1. A US-based lesbian gay, bisexual and transgender media advocacy organization, originally formed in 1985 as the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD).
2. Other theorists have also taken up public sphere theory and reworked it in various ways. See, for example, Seyla Benhabib (1996); Charles Taylor; Jane Mansbridge (1996); Gerard Hauser (1998, 1999).
3. Recent years have seen various changes in the organization and content of AfterEllen, with current content dominated by transphobic rhetoric – a move that has been heavily criticized by previous AfterEllen writers. The AfterEllen content drawn on in *Lesbians on Television* is from before the change in editor/ownership that brought about such shifts, and from writers who have distanced themselves from such positions (see O'Hara 2019).
4. Only interviews from participants who gave consent for inclusion in this publication are quoted from here.

1

'Previously…': Queer women on screen

In 1974, the BBC aired the first kiss between two women on British television, in the drama *Girl*. *Girl* starred Amanda Steadman and Myra Francis, in a storyline in which both characters were treated unusually sympathetically. The short drama aired post-watershed, of course, and was preceded by a special announcement (Cooke 2012). The earliest representations of homosexuality on British and North American television, however, came in the form of documentaries. As the gay and lesbian rights, or homophile, movements of the 1950s began to build momentum, fascination and fear around the 'mysterious' lives of homosexuals began to play out on television and radio. In 1962, an episode of *Confidential File* – a US tabloid-style investigative reports show that had previously aired episodes titled 'Homosexuals and the Problem They Present' (1954, KTTV) and 'Homosexuals Who Stalk and Molest Children' (1955, KTTV), which focused on gay men – covered the 1962 convention of lesbian civil rights organization Daughters of Bilitis. In the United Kingdom, the lead up to the partial decriminalization of homosexuality in 1967 saw the BBC's current affairs show *Man Alive* air a two-part report on gay men and lesbian women titled *Consenting Adults: The Men* and *Consenting Adults: The Women*. With some notable exceptions, it was not until the 1990s that lesbian, gay and bisexual characters really began to populate fictional television. Queer women's representation also has a longer screen history, however, in the earlier medium of the cinema. Whilst television is our focus here, this broader history is important in the development of codes and conventions that continue to shape LGBTQ+ visibility. This chapter maps a history of lesbian and bisexual women's representation in the United Kingdom and the United States, from classic Hollywood cinema to the lesbian chic of the 1990s. The examples cited here are, of course selective ones, and there are many other histories that could be written. However, these examples represent key features of the media archive through which new queer visibility emerges, both defining itself against this history and continuing to be haunted by old associations.

Early screen lesbians and the motion picture production code

The history of queer representation is, on one level, a story of invisibility, in the context of what Adrienne Rich described as the 'idealization of heterosexual romance in art, literature, media, advertising, and so forth' (Rich 1986: 39). Indeed, heterosexual romance continues to dominate media culture. For all that we are seeing a contemporary reorganization of sexual and gender norms, heteronormativity retains its dominance, mobilized, as Berlant and Warner describe 'in almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life: nationality, the state, and the law; commerce; medicine; and education; as well as the conventions and affects of narrative, romance, and other protected spaces of culture' (Berlant and Warner 1998: 554). Nonetheless, queerness has had a significant presence throughout screen histories, both on and off screen. The 1929 German silent film *Pandora's Box* features what is considered to be film's first lesbian, the Countess Geschwitz (Alice Roberts). Notably, however, allusions to the character's sexuality were cut from the UK and the US releases of the film. *Pandora's Box* starred iconic silent movie star Louise Brooks. Brooks didn't identify as a lesbian or as bisexual, but was certainly a sexually liberated public figure, open about her friendships and affairs with lesbian and bisexual women – including an affair with Greta Garbo. As Andrea Weiss writes: 'Brooks was not a lesbian but rather […] drifted around the edges of various sexual definitions' (Weiss 1992: 22). This was also the period in which Marlene Dietrich, Berlin cabaret and film star, found Hollywood success. In Dietrich's 1930 film *Morocco* (1930) the central heterosexual narrative does not preclude flirtation with gender and sexuality norms. Dressed in a tailcoat and top hat, Dietrich's character flirtatiously kisses a woman in the audience of her cabaret performance. Performed by the bisexual Dietrich, *Morroco* offers 'the rare scene of an actress with a cult reputation acting out that rumoured sexuality on the screen' (Becker et al. 1981). Similarly, the 1933 biopic *Queen Christina* flirts with the lesbian subtext of its central figure.[1] With Christina played by Greta Garbo, also known to have had relationships with women, the 'female homoeroticism' (White 1999: 13) of her relationship with the Countess Ebba (Elizabeth Young) is knowingly suggestive. Two years prior to this saw the release of another notable German film, *Maedchen in Uniform* (1931), described by B. Ruby Rich as: 'a film about sexual repression in the name of social harmony, about the absent patriarchy and its forms of presence, about bonds between women which represent attraction instead of repulsion, and about the release of powers that can accompany the identification of a lesbian sexuality' (Rich 1981: n.pag). Shown internationally, the film is notable for its sympathetic framing. Indeed, for Rich, *Maedchen in Uniform* emerges as 'the first truly radical lesbian film', its narrative resolve mobilizing a 'validation of lesbianism as a personal and public right' (Rich 1981: n.pag).[2]

In 1930, The Motion Picture Production Code, or Hays code, was introduced in the United States. Formally implemented from 1934, the code shaped classic Hollywood cinema from this period. The code set out 'moral' guidelines for film content; prescribing that 'no picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience shall never be thrown to the side of crime, wrong-doing, evil or sin'. This account of the American 'good' laid out in clear terms a national public structured around norms of gender, sexuality, class and race. Amongst numerous other stipulations, the code forbid the representation of 'sex perversion', a category into which the lesbian certainly fell, 'miscegenation', 'licentious or suggestive nudity', 'ridicule on any religious faith' and required that 'the sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld' (Hayes 2000: n.pag.). This regulation of what was and was not possible to be seen on screen is significant because, as Patricia White argues, 'during an intensive period of the shaping of the modern lesbian social subject, homosexuality was not denoted on the nation's film screens' (White 1999: 1). Indeed, the introduction of the Code and an increasingly conservative social context saw queer representation (and the lives of queer film stars) increasingly restricted. When lesbian desire was represented, or suggested, in the following years, its framing worked to assure the viewer of its deviance. Connotations of danger, deviance, pathology and death run through these representations, mobilizing tropes that continue to shape lesbian representation.

The evil lesbian

The 1940 adaption of Daphne Du Maurier's *Rebecca* introduced a lesbian undertone through the character of Mrs Danvers (see White 1999; Berenstein 1995). Characterized as cold and manipulative, the character immediately seems to pose a mysterious threat to the heroine, the young Mrs de Winter. As the narrative progresses, her relationship to her previous mistress is revealed through unsettling scenes that reveal an obsessive attachment to the dead woman. Her threat is confirmed in her psychological torturing of the young Mrs De Winter, with one pivotal scene seeing Mrs Danvers encourage her to jump from a window to her death. Coded through a conflation of evil and excessive lesbian love, Mrs Danvers evokes deviance and danger. In the 1950 film, *Young Man with a Horn*, a doomed romantic storyline between Lauren Bacall's Amy and Kirk Douglas' Rick mobilizes less sinister but nonetheless destructive connotations. The independent Amy is portrayed as a complicated and potentially unstable woman. Before long, her marriage to Rick begins to unravel. When Rick turns to alcohol and neglects his career, his actions are positioned as a direct response to her as failed wife and

deviant woman. Revealing the possibility of lesbian affairs, she tells Rick she plans to go to Paris with another woman. Labelled by the male protagonist as 'filth', Amy is rejected within the narrative both as destructive femme fatale and pathological lesbian. Connotations of destruction and immorality also haunt the association between women in prison and lesbianism. Already coded as deviant, lesbianism might emerge as further proof of a woman's departure from a 'righteous' path. In the 1950 film *Caged*, an innocent heroine is placed in opposition to a 'dangerously aggressive lesbian criminal' (Freedman 1996: 404). As Estelle B. Freedman describes, 'by the late 1950s, women who formed homosexual relationships in prison had become stock cultural characters associated with threats to sexual and social order' (1996: 405).[3]

The dangerous lesbian trope runs through film representations; from the suggestive obsessions of 1950's *All About Eve,* to 1980's *Window*s' 'image of the sadistic lesbian' (Charbonneau and Winer 1981), *Single White Female* (1992) and the 'threat of pathological lesbianism' (Paulin 1996: 43), *Lost and Delirious* (2001) and *Notes on a Scandal* (2006) – obsession, deviance and violence repeatedly emerge. The 1968 film *The Killing of Sister George* depicted another explicitly lesbian character marked by deviance and cruelty. The close of the film sees her alone and miserable. Peter Jackson's 1994 film *Heavenly Creatures* sees two young women develop an intense relationship that shifts from an evocation of creativity and romantic love to a narrative in which they murder one of the girls' mothers. 1992's *Basic Instinct* revolves around the possibility that the bisexual and sexually liberated Catherine Trammell is also a serial killer. As Angela Galvin argues, her bisexuality works as a 'device to illustrate her otherness, her threat and her psychosis' (1994: 231). When lesbian characters began to appear on television, similar conventions were utilized. In one of the earliest fictional television representations, 1961 saw ABC police drama *The Asphalt Jungle* feature a coded lesbian character who was found to be murdering young women when out with their boyfriends. In another early example, 'Flowers of Evil', a 1974 episode of American police drama *Policewoman* (1974–78, NBC), centres on the murder of an elderly woman in a retirement home run by three lesbian women. When it is revealed that not only are they stealing from the people in their care but one of them is the murderer, lesbians once more emerge through danger and immorality.

The sad, sick lesbian

The associations of queerness and pathology have a long history, and ongoing implications for queer lives (for example, a recent government report attested to

the continued use of 'conversion therapy' in the United Kingdom, Government Equalities Office 2018). Whilst concern with the analysis and categorization of sexuality has a longer history (particularly emerging with the rise of sexology in the nineteenth century), as Neil Miller argues, 'as the influence of psychiatry increased in the United States during World War II and the post-war period, the mental health profession began to take an extremely negative stance toward homosexuality' (Miller 1995: 247): 'homosexuality represented a pathology' (Miller 1995: 249). As Barbara Gittings, pioneering LGBTQ+ activist, reflected of the time: 'The sickness label infected everything we said […]. The sickness label was paramount' (in Marcus 1992: 221). Unsurprisingly then, homosexuality as pathology constitutes a central trope in queer representation. An example of this can be seen in the 1961 film *The Children's Hour*, an adaption of the Lillian Hellman play of the same name. When a rumour of lesbianism destroys the reputation of two teachers, the negative connotations of the charge are made clear. Critically, the resolution of the film reveals that for one of the women, Shirley MacLaine's Martha, the rumours reveal a truth. The revelation of her sexuality is marked as tragedy and proclaimed as sickness, as Martha cries as she 'confesses' to Karen (Audrey Hepburn):

> Don't you see? I can't stand to have you touch me. I can't stand to have you look at me. Oh, it's all my fault. I have ruined your life and I have ruined my own. I swear I didn't know it. I didn't mean it. Oh, I feel so damn sick and dirty I can't stand it anymore. (*The Children's Hour*, 1961)

Martha's reaction equates lesbian desire with pathology, evoking what Karen Hollinger describes as the portrayal of lesbianism as 'sordid, depressing, and deviant behaviour resulting either from congenital deformity, arrested psychic development, or pathological gender reversal' (Hollinger 1998: 9–10). In 1963, another of the first television lesbians reiterated this association, when NBC drama *The Eleventh Hour* (1962–64, NBC) featured a neurotic and bad-tempered patient visiting the drama's psychiatrist. The episode's resolve revealed the source of her neurosis to be lesbian desire (*The Eleventh Hour*, 1963).

The dead lesbian

The resolve of *The Children's Hour* sees Martha kill herself, enacting, it seems, her own punishment for her 'sick' transgression.[4] Martha is not alone, however, in ending a queer narrative with death. The resolution of *Rebecca* sees Mrs Danvers die in a fire. Rebecca herself, also coded as sexually transgressive and

the oppositional 'bad wife', is also dead, only the innocent heterosexual heroine survives. In *Basic Instinct*, Catherine Trammel's lover, Roxie, dies. *Single White Female*'s Hedy, who, as Deborah Jermyn suggests, 'represents deviant female sexuality' in an era of feminist backlash (Faludi 1992), is killed at the film's close: 'as the abject she must be expelled' (Jermyn 1996: 265).[5] When supernatural drama series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) saw Buffy's best friend Willow (Alyson Hannigan) embark on a relationship with fellow witch, Tara (Amber Benson) in the show's fourth season (1999–2000), it brought to the screen a significant representation of queer women. The following two seasons saw their narrative provide what Edwina Bartlem describes as 'empowered images of lesbians in the process of coming out, in long term relationships and as part of an alternative family unit' (Bartlem 2003). Despite battles with the network over their representation, the drama portrayed them as a serious, loving and happy couple, albeit one in which the sexual element of their relationship is significantly less explicit than that of the other characters. Critically, however, the nineteenth episode of the sixth season brought the Willow and Tara narrative to a close when Tara was killed ('Seeing Red' 2002), adding another dead lesbian to the media archive. Willow, turning into an evil witch, seeks revenge. Although she later becomes 'good' again and is seen in another queer relationship in a later season, the evil lesbian trope is nonetheless evoked. As Susan Driver argues, 'so rarely is a lesbian depicted as happy and sane that to reiterate a drama of murder and furious revenge in relation to the first and only romantic teenage relationship between girls on television confirms a legacy that dooms lesbians to inevitable unhappiness and madness' (Driver 2007: 62). Thus, from classic Hollywood cinema to the television drama of the 2000s, lesbians and bisexual women are narratively foreclosed through death. As we will see, even in the era of new queer visibility, the dead lesbian trope remains the most persistent of all these conventions.

The lesbian vampire

Death and the lesbian are evoked in a somewhat different context in the lesbian vampire trope. Emerging in various contexts from mythology to literature to pornography, the lesbian as vampire evokes multiple connotations. More powerful than her pathologized sister, the lesbian vampire nonetheless evokes a familiar sense of danger, made further troubling by her supernatural powers. The 1936 horror film *Dracula's Daughter*, for example, posits the seduction and attack of a young woman by the vampire Countess as confirmation of her evil urges. Finding herself incurable, she is ultimately killed at the film's close. Whilst the lesbian vampire

has inspired various analyses, she can certainly be read, as Bonnie Zimmerman suggests, as emblematic of the lesbian threat:

> The lesbian vampire [...] can be used to express a fundamental male fear that women bonding will exclude men and threaten male supremacy. Lesbianism – love between women – must be vampirism; elements of violence, compulsion, hypnosis, paralysis, and the supernatural must be present.
>
> (Zimmerman 1981: n.pag.)

The lesbian as vampire can thus function as a literal manifestation of the symbolic dangers of lesbianism. At the same time, there are pleasures and possibilities in this figure. As Zimmerman suggests, 'the myth of the lesbian vampire [...] carries in it the potentiality for a feminist revision of meaning' (Zimmerman 1981: n.pag.).

The 1990s: TV comes out

The 1980s and 1990s saw a new visibility of queer lives in the form of the New Queer Cinema Movement (Rich 2013). Films such as *Poison* (Haynes, 1991), *Swoon* (Kalin, 1991) and *Paris is Burning* (Livingston, 1990) brought LGBTQ+ visibility to the screen in radical new ways, characterized by 'a socio-critical oppositionality that was distinctly queer' (Aaron 2006: 34), albeit dominated by a focus on white, gay men (see Pick 2004; Parmar 1993).[6] In the 1990s, new forms of visibility of lesbian, bisexual and gay characters and imagery also began to emerge across various forms of media, but in particular on television. Indeed, Ron Becker describes American television in this period as 'obsessed with gay-ness' (Becker 2006: 3):

> Between 1994 and 1997 [...] well over 40 percent of all primetime network series produced at least one gay-themed episode; nineteen network shows debuted with recurring gay characters; and hit shows like Roseanne, Friends, and NYPD Blue (to name but a few) seemed to include gay jokes and references to homosexuality every week.
>
> (Becker 2006: 3)

For Becker, however, these representations suggest a 'straight panic' in the face of increasingly visible LGBTQ+ activism. Describing the 'growing anxiety of a hetero-sexual culture and straight individuals confronting this shifting social landscape', an increase in lesbian and gay representation might constitute attempts to manage these concerns. Thus, Becker suggests the increase in visibility in this period might

reveal 'a nation more nervous about the future of Straight America than interested in the future of Gay America' (Becker 2006: 5). Steven Seidman also notes the significance of this period, arguing that the 1990s saw the 'polluting stereotypes' of the deviant homosexual undergo 'a striking change' (Seidman 2002: 14).

The adaptions of Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit* (1990) and Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City* (1993–94, Channel 4 and PBS) brought the representation of queer lives and politics into the mainstream. In British soap opera, *Emmerdale*'s Zoe Tate (Leah Bracknell) came out in 1993: 'becoming the first lesbian character on a UK soap' (Richardson et al. 2013: 73). It wasn't until 1995, however, that the drama aired its first lesbian kiss, when Zoe began dating Emma Nightingale (Rachel Ambler). In 1994, *Eastenders* introduced a rare representation of a lesbian woman of colour in Della Alexander (Michelle Joseph). Della and her girlfriend Binnie's (Sophie Langham) storyline received significant complaints, however, and they were written out of the soap the following year. In 1996, hit US sitcom *Friends* aired the wedding of recurring characters Carol and Susan, and 'provided network television with its first lesbian wedding' (Kessler 2005: 135). In 1999, British drama *Bad Girls* (1999–2006) was first broadcast, reworking the deviant lesbian in prison trope through a convergence of 'explicit feminist politics and narrative subversions' (Herman 2003: 156), homonormativity (Herman 2003) and 'modern lesbian-chic' style (Millbank 2004: 163). In these examples, we see both the influence of queer politics and activism and the tensions of mainstreaming. The 1990s saw the mobilization of not only new possibilities of visibility, but also new iterations of representational tropes: most centrally, lesbian chic and the temporary lesbian.

Lesbian chic

Despite the negative coding and narrative punishments, the queerness of stars like Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo always played into their appeal, and the danger of the lesbian figure has long evoked a sexy, if threatening, allure. The 1990s saw this allure made explicit. Ann Ciasullo argues that, by the early 1990s, lesbianism had become commercially desirable, culminating in what she describes as '1993, the year of "lesbian chic"' (Ciasullo 2001: 582). Indeed, the emergence of lesbian chic was marked by a number of mainstream publications. May saw *New York Magazine* declare the arrival of 'Lesbian Chic: The Bold, Brave New World of Gay Women', whilst *Newsweek*'s June 21st edition used an image of two smiling women for its front-page feature on 'Lesbians'. In August, a *Vanity Fair* cover brought more erotic connotations to the newly visible lesbian when it pictured supermodel Cindy Crawford and lesbian musician k.d. lang

in a 'sexy' butch/femme pose. The terms 'butch' and 'femme' (or fem) refer to queer women's cultural codes with roots in the lesbian bar culture of the 1940s and 1950s (although versions of butch/femme codings have much longer histories). Butch and femme identities encompass, but are not necessarily limited to or fixed to, style, appearance, behaviour, roles, relationships and sexual behaviour. Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis describe 'butch-fem roles' as 'a deeply felt expression of individual identity and a personal code guiding appearance and sexual behaviour […] a system for organising social relationships and delineating which members of the community could have relationships with whom' (Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis 1992: 62). These codes are evoked and played with in this image, although the femme role is a performative one here. More broadly, however, it was the butch who was absent from this media moment, as lesbian chic was dominated, as Ann Ciasullo argues, by 'images of a white femme body' (Ciasullo 2001: 595–96). Lesbian and bisexual women of colour, butch, gender non-conforming, working-class queers and other marginalized groups remain largely invisible in this period.

Tracking this tendency Ciasullo notes the working-class cultural history of the butch lesbian; a history at odds with the middle-class norms of lesbian chic. Furthermore, Ciasullo argues, 'the butch body […] cannot be "de-lesbianized"; because her body is already and always marked as lesbian, she is more visible than the femme – and thus, if represented, more "lesbian" than the femme' (Ciasullo 2001: 602). Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis argue that 'the extreme seriousness of masculinity for butches is based in their usurping of male privilege, their assertion of women's sexual autonomy, and their defending of a space in which women could love women' (Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis 1992: 77). Butchness thus carries a threat to a hetero-patriarchal social order that is not easily subsumed into this commercially desirable iteration. Considering the character of Cleo in the film *Set It Off* (1996), portrayed by Queen Latifah, Ciasullo notes that 'it comes as no surprise that one of the few butch lesbians to appear on this landscape is Black' (Ciasullo 2001: 597). This character mobilizes a working class, Black butch lesbian, conflating the codes through which she is made counter to the desirable white femme. Ciasullo summarizes, in this media context: 'the femme body is necessarily a white body, so a Black lesbian cannot be a femme' (Ciasullo 2001: 579). Thus, lesbian chic mobilizes through an intersectional structure of representability, reiterating gendered, classed and racialized exclusions.

Whilst 'lesbian chic' clearly speaks to an appropriative male-gaze, it also targets the lesbian as consumer. Whilst women have long been recognized as consumers, that recognition has been, as Martina Ladendorf argues, 'closely intertwined with heterosexuality' (Ladendorf 2010: 270). Thus, the lesbian as consumer had, up to this point, remained invisible; as Danae Clark argued in

1991, 'lesbians have not […] been targeted as a separate consumer group within the dominant configuration of capitalism' (Clark 1991: 181). Clark outlines the reasons for this invisibility as (1) 'lesbians as a social group have not been economically powerful' and (2) 'lesbians have not been easily identifiable as a social group', alongside a general disinclination on the part of advertisers to 'identify lesbians as a social group for fear their products will be associated with homosexuality' (Clark 1991: 182). This period saw this change, however, as advertisers began to recognize and utilize the lesbian and gay consumer. Initially focused on the white, single and affluent gay man, the lesbian woman too began to be recognized as having valuable 'wage and class standing' (Clark 1991: 182). Thus, the visibility of the lesbian figure increases during this time, but does so, to some extent, as Lizzie Thynne argues to '[serve] particular ends in the television economy and wider consumer market' (Thynne 2000: 202). In what Claire Whatling describes as a 'liberal colonisation' (Whatling 1997: 13), moves towards lesbian and gay rights and visibility are reworked on consumer terms. For Jeanne Scheper, the emergence of a queer market represents a move to manage the counterpolitics of the previous decade: 'the corporate recognition of gay consumer markets was a reactionary response to an era in the 1980s of queer militant activism' (Scheper 2014: 439), assimilating and thus closing down critique. For Susan E. McKenna, lesbian chic emerges in relation to postfeminism: 'both lesbian chic and postfeminism are regulated through a traditional, yet highly sexualised, feminine appearance and behaviour that is constructed through consumer ideals, an erasure of difference, and by the oppositional positioning of unattractive and militant feminists' (McKenna 2002: 289). As I will argue throughout, these discursive manoeuvres are developed, and complicated, in the move towards the lesbian normal.

The temporary lesbian and the lesbian kiss episode

On fictional television, the emergence of lesbian chic brought new representational tropes: in particular the temporary lesbian and what came to be known as the 'lesbian kiss episode'. In February 1991, American legal drama *L.A. Law* (NBC) featured the first kiss between two women on US commercial network television in the episode 'He's A Crowd'. Whilst one of the characters identified as bisexual, a relationship never developed and the following series saw her in a relationship with a man. The other character quickly reiterated her heterosexuality, before being written out of the drama at the end of the series. Whilst a bisexual character might of course have a relationship with a man, it is the repeated pattern of heterosexual return that makes this problematic.

In the United Kingdom, 24 December 1993 saw Channel Four's Merseyside soap opera, *Brookside*, air the first pre-watershed kiss between two women on British TV. *Brookside* was a peak-time soap opera, beginning its 21-year run on the public service broadcasting channel's launch night on 2 November 1982. Whilst later years saw it fail to maintain the high ratings of other British soaps (*Brookside* was cancelled in July 2003), in the early 1990s *Brookside* was one of the UK's four main soap operas, along with *Eastenders*, *Coronation Street* and *Emmerdale*. Distinctive for its often-controversial storylines and issue-led narratives, *Brookside* is also notable for its depiction in 1985 of the first openly gay character on a British soap opera, Gordon Collins (Nigel Crowley/Mark Burgess). Eight years later, the Jordache family were introduced. When Mandy Jordache (Sandra Maitland) and her children, Beth (Anna Friel) and Rachel (Tiffany Chapman), first appeared in *Brookside* they were in hiding from Mandy's husband and her children's father, Trevor (Bryan Murray). Violent and abusive towards Mandy, it emerged that Trevor had also sexually abused Beth as a child. In a hard-hitting domestic abuse storyline, a violent attack on Beth culminated in Trevor's death. In the seven months that followed his death and preceded the lesbian kiss, Beth Jordache was established as a popular and sympathetic character. In 1993, the United Kingdom was fourteen years into a Conservative government; Section 28 had just been re-instated and the US President Bill Clinton had announced the 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' policy regarding homosexuality in the American military. Yet in the Christmas episodes of 1993, a key slot in the soap opera calendar, Beth Jordache kissed her best friend, Margaret Clemence (Nicola Stephenson) ('Baptism' 1993).

Beth and Margaret's kiss led to the first relationship between women on a British soap opera. Whilst this was a significant moment in lesbian and bisexual visibility, however, the couple's relationship was brief and Margaret Clemence exited the show in April 1994, with the character leaving to join her ex-boyfriend in Bosnia. Beth's subsequent relationship with her college lecturer, Chris Myers (Marie Francis), ended in July 1994, and the following year saw her on trial for the murder of her father before her eventual off-screen death in prison. The now iconic Brookside kiss was a striking televisual moment, but, as possibilities for lesbian lives go, not the most hopeful trajectory. Furthermore, that Beth ends her narrative arc firstly in prison, and then dead, evokes the representational history of the deviant and dead lesbian.

In this and other examples lesbianism becomes visible, and indeed viable, but does so in the context of what Whatling refers to as 'the dominant narrative of compulsory heterosexual recuperation' (Whatling 1997: 80), or, as in the case of Beth, expulsion. For Margaret and many others, however, lesbian desire repeatedly emerges with connotations of temporariness and/or inauthenticity. Often mobilized through the teenage or young lesbian, the conflation of maturation

and heterosexuality reproduces the heterosexual future as a 'central organising index of social membership' (Berlant and Warner 1998: 555). When Rachel's college friend appears in *Friends*, for example, an episode arc revolves around their college kiss (*Friends*, 2001). Rachel's heterosexual future, however, is never in question. As Beirne argues, such narratives posit 'letting go of the possibility of a romantic/sexual relationship with [the] desired best friend' or other woman as a natural maturation process and 'necessary in order to obtain self-respect and stability' (Beirne 2012: 260). Early 2000s teen drama *The O.C.* (2003–07) functioned similarly when central character Marissa had a brief relationship with the bisexual Alex, before returning to her 'true love' Ryan. The shows' mobilization of experimental lesbianism and 'inevitable heterosexuality' works, Alison Burgess argues, 'to reconfirm heteronormative and homophobic discourses of sexuality' (Burgess 2008: 226). Such narrative interludes tend to be well publicized, functioning as titillating ratings boosters that reproduce lesbianism as sexualized performance (see also *Ally McBeal*). Similarly, whilst the hit comedy-drama might offer queer/feminist pleasures, HBO's *Sex and the City*'s brief excursions into lesbian and bisexual representation can be read as '[affirming] lesbian stereotypes and heteronormative ideas about female sexuality' (Adkins 2008: 109). When Samantha has a brief relationship with the sensual Brazilian artist Maria Diega Reyes (Sônia Braga), the intersections of racialization and sexualization converge. This relationship functions as a brief interlude, however, and Samantha returns to relationships with men. Again and again, as Mayne articulates, 'a lesbian moment may be visible briefly, but the moment is tenuous' (2000: 100).

Notably, the temporary lesbian trope has a longer history in the figure of the 'tomboy'. Barbara Creed describes the tomboy as 'the central image used to control representations of the potentially lesbian body' (Creed 2013: 88). Like the temporary lesbian, the tomboy is mobilized as 'a liminal journey of discovery in which feminine sexuality is put into crisis and finally recuperated into the dominant patriarchal order' (Creed 2013: 88). Such is the case for Doris Day's Calamity Jane, for example, who Creed describes as 'the quintessential tomboy in love with another woman' (Creed 2013: 88). Similarly, the previously mentioned Queen Christina, initially represented wearing men's clothes and flirting with Countess Ebba, 'falls in love, throws off her mannish trappings, gives up the Lady Ebba and redirects her erotic desires towards the Spanish ambassador' (Creed 2013: 95).

'Yep I'm gay': Ellen comes out

Four years after *Brookside's* lesbian kiss, *Ellen* aired its iconic coming out episode. *Ellen*, Ellen DeGeneres' ABC sitcom, ran from 1994 to 1998. *Ellen's* plot centred

on the life of Ellen Morgan, played by DeGeneres, an LA bookstore owner. During the first three seasons the central character's love life was largely used for comedic material; unsuccessful (heterosexual) dates were her only romantic encounters. At the same time, DeGeneres' own sexuality largely constituted an 'open secret' (Reed 2005: 23), meaning a lesbian subtext was implicitly coded into the character. Nonetheless, the absence of any public acknowledgement meant that this media figure was open to heterosexual, or asexual, readings, while lesbianism maintained the absent presence of the subtext. As the series progressed, however, the sitcom began to deliberately play on its lesbian coding. When a visual gag in episode three of season four saw Ellen literally coming out of a closet, for example, the playful connotation was clear ('Splitsville, Man' 1996). In the summer of 1996 DeGeneres and the show's producers began to negotiate the possibility of a more public declaration of her sexuality. In 1997, DeGeneres own coming out on the cover of *Time* magazine was followed by the televisual coming out of Ellen Morgan in 'The Puppy Episode': 'one of the most watched (42 million viewers) and talked about episodes in American television history' (Herman 2005: 9). The episode, which culminated in a 'literal amplification' of lesbian visibility (Herman 2005: 16) when Ellen accidentally declares 'I'm gay' through a loud speaker at a crowded airport, brought Ellen DeGeneres/Morgan into the realm of the public lesbian figure ('The Puppy Episode' 1996). As a successful sitcom star with a large following, Ellen's coming out was a powerful one. As Candace Moore argues, it constituted her as 'arguably the woman whose performance of gayness has most saturated the public sphere' (Moore 2008: 22).

Emerging into the context outlined above, Ellen's coming out was in part possible because of the newfound desirability of the lesbian figure. In the case of Ellen, however, her 'real-life' sexuality is at odds with the lesbian as temporary titillation. The heterosexual resolve or extra-textual knowledge is absent here, making this a more complex visibility to enact. Steven Seidman described the simultaneous attempt in this period to move away from the deviancy of previous representations, epitomized in what he describes as 'the rise of the "normal gay"' (Seidman 2002: 14). DeGeneres' coming out epitomizes the normal gay coding. On the iconic *Time* cover that marks her coming out, DeGeneres is pictured centrally. Positioned in a crouched position, she poses as if to talk to a child. Her body is openly facing the reader, mirroring the openness of her statement. Smiling broadly into the camera, DeGeneres looks directly at us. As she does so, we are positioned so as to identify with her; her look tells us, 'I am you, I am not different'. Her pose is casual and naturalized; the language of the headline is familiar and conversational, 'yep, I'm gay'. The national fantasy of the all-American star is coded into the image. On a red, white and blue themed cover, DeGeneres appears with softly styled blonde hair, blue eyes and shining white teeth. Her black clothing and white

shoes are nondescript and inoffensive. Every detail of DeGeneres' image is coded so as to deny the legacy of the threatening lesbian figure. The casual safety of her crouch and the modest gloss of her physical appearance mobilize Ellen through a discourse of 'the normal'; a 'normality' shaped by white, middle-class femininity. Refusing the connotations of the perverse, this is an image of non-threatening desexualization. She is neither butch nor femme and she appears alone; she may be 'gay', but there is no actual lesbian relationship here to contend with. In this de-fetishized figure, lesbianism becomes visible, and powerfully so, but it does so in the form of a careful navigation of all that might imply.

The coming out of Ellen DeGeneres remains one of the most high-profile and significant moments of TV visibility; the very fact that it was marked by a *Time* cover speaks to the significance of this event. Nonetheless, the means by which it emerged made visible a version of the lesbian figure that is bound to deny her legacy and social threat and, in doing so, the possibility that she is anything other than 'normal'. The struggle to claim belonging for this queer figure proved, however, unsustainable. After the initial furore of the coming out event, ratings dropped and *Ellen* was cancelled (Dow 2001: 124). As Moore notes, DeGeneres' 'career all but collapsed not long after the glow of her public coming-out party died down' (Moore 2008: 18) and it was not until the following decade that her current success began to re-emerge. In the early 1990s DeGeneres' unambiguous, if cautious, sexuality became untenable. As Anna McCarthy argues, 'although the network could support queer television as a spectacular media event, it could not sanction a lesbian invasion of serial television's more modest form of history making, the regularly scheduled weeks of televisual flow' (McCarthy 2001: 597). In the 1990s, even the all-American 'normal gay' was a precarious and unsustainable figuration.

Queer as Folk: *Pride and patriarchy*

In 1999, UK TV's Channel Four aired a programme that then executive, Michael Jackson, described as 'a signature show that would help to develop the channel's distinctive place in British broadcasting for radical, experimental, minority television' (in Munt 2000: 531).[7] The minority television in question was Russell T. Davies' controversial drama *Queer as Folk*. Running for two series in the United Kingdom (1999–2000), and five in the subsequent US/Canadian re-make (2000–05), *Queer as Folk*, created by Russell T. Davies, was radical in its queer influenced foregrounding of homosexuality. Based around Manchester's gay village, the central cast was made up of almost exclusively gay, lesbian and bisexual characters. Its central protagonist Stuart (UK)/Brian (US), a sexually active gay man, was joined in the core cast by friends Vince (UK)/Michael (US), Alexander

(UK)/Emmett (US) and Phil (UK)/Ted (US),[8] the teenage Nathan (UK)/Justin (US), and lesbian couple Lisa and Romey (UK)/Melanie and Lindsay (US). In the social context and representational history into which this emerges, *Queer as Folk* marks a radical departure; marking, as Thynne argues, 'a major shift in the representation of homosexuality on prime-time television' (Thynne 2000: 208).

Critically, however, the radical visibility of *Queer as Folk* is, as Didi Herman argues, 'is overwhelmingly malecentered' (Herman 2003: 143). Whilst both series include a lesbian couple, they remain marginal in relation to the gay male characters. Their screen time and narrative framing clearly positions them as secondary characters. Furthermore, lesbian visibility in *Queer as Folk* emerges in the context of the family. In both dramas, lesbians emerge in the realm of the domestic, with both couples' central narrative being that of motherhood and the development of their family. The timescale of the US version allows for more development of these characters, but this too remains largely in relation to the family. In comparison to the explicitness of the sex between the male characters, so fundamental to the show's narrative identity, sex between women is rarely depicted.[9] The few times that it is depicted are repeatedly interrupted, often by a crying baby. Thus, Beirne describes lesbian sexuality in *Queer as Folk* as both 'temporally and representationally limited' (2008: 100). It is also *spatially* limited, with the queer spaces of *Queer as Folk* (nightclubs, cafes, pride marches and so on) inhabited notably less by the lesbian characters. Thus, Beirne argues, *Queer as Folk* 'enacts heteronormative patriarchal discourse even as it queers it, by maintaining gender distinctions that privilege male narratives and sexuality over female ones' (Beirne 2008: 99). Thus, even within explicitly queer TV, the terms of visibility retain particular gendered standards, tied to norms of femininity, motherhood and domesticity.

The lesbian gaze

In this summarized history of lesbian, bisexual and queer women's representation, we see long-standing tropes of deviance and danger, sexiness and impermanence. As this book will go on to consider, these tropes continue to shape representation, as new visibility disrupts, reorganizes and, sometimes, simply repeats old patterns. Critically, however, it is important to note that queer visibility in popular culture has always emerged both explicitly and implicitly: in what is on screen and the ways in which that is interpreted and taken up by audiences. There is what Jackie Stacey describes as, 'a more complex and contradictory model of the relay of looks on the screen and between the audience and the diegetic characters' (Stacey

1994: 115) to consider. Women, queer people and other marginalized audiences have long found ways of reading against the grain, creating spectatorial pleasures despite the limitations of dominant culture (see hooks 1992). As Belinda Budge and Diana Hamer argue, by engaging in appropriative viewing practices, 'lesbians have always found ways to "read between the lines", projecting our fantasies of desire and identification onto heterosexual narratives and mainstream female icons' (Hamer and Budge 1994: 2).[10] In the 'fantasy space between film text and interpretation' (Stacey 1994: 115–16), the possibilities that open up 'between visibility and invisibility' (Mayne 2000: xviii), queer cultural codes are written into the representational sphere. Indeed, codes and 'signifying strategies' have come to take on an autonomy of significance that constitutes, as Chris Straayer notes, 'a lesbian aesthetic that is subjective but not idiosyncratic' (Straayer 1990: 50). Without implying a homogenous lesbian spectator, tropes have emerged not only in representation (for example, the evil, dead, pathologized lesbian) but also in spectatorship. Within examples that range from heterosexual romances to the damning narrative of the deviant lesbian, lesbian and queer spectators have found alternate ways of viewing. Queer women's desire might thus be found in narratives both aware and unaware of their lesbian codings. In character tropes such as the femme fatale of film noir, and her seductive rejection of conventional 'feminine' boundaries, and various outsiders, rebels and tomboys, queer identifications have been found. Thus, for example, whilst the tomboy trajectory might work to close down queer possibilities, it does so by 'first offering the female spectator a series of contradictory messages which may well work against their overtly ideological purpose' (Creed 2013: 88). Similarly, in moments of intimacy as small as gestures and 'looks', there are, what Straayer describes as, 'sites of negotiation between texts and viewers, shifts in the heterosexual structure which are vulnerable to lesbian pleasuring' (Straayer 1990: 50). In particular, Straayer foregrounds the power of 'the lesbian look of exchange and female bonding' (Straayer 1990: 50). Friendships between women on screen, as well as extra-textual connotations, all constitute an extended archive of queer women's media. To return to the influence of the Motion Picture Production Code, White argues that alongside its conservative regime, the code might have had a broader set of effects:

> Arguably, the code thus instituted a regime of connotation. If it was intended to help the movies instruct the public in middle-class, even traditionally 'female', morals, in the process it taught viewers how to read in particular ways. If homosexuality dare not speak its name in the classical cinema, the visual medium allows for other signifying strategies.
>
> (White 1999: x)

In this account of lesbians on television, then, other examples, from the women of *Charlie's Angels* (1976–81) and *Cagney and Lacey* (1981–88) to *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995–2001) – where the subtextual relationship of Xena and her sidekick Gabrielle was recognized by fans and producers alike – might join this archive of queer women's representation. The significance of audiences' desires and imaginations continues, as queer fandoms attest. Even in the era of new queer visibility, the active spectatorship of queer audiences is central to the story of lesbians on television.

NOTES

1. Queen Christina was a seventeenth-century Swedish queen, rumoured to have been a lesbian (see Waters 1994).
2. See B. Ruby Rich 'Maedchen in uniform: From repressive tolerance to erotic liberation' and Veronika Mayer 'Lesbian classics in Germany? A film historical analysis of Mädchen in uniform (1931 and 1958)' for further analysis of the film in the sociohistorical context of the Weimar Republic (Rich 1981; Mayer 2012).
3. It is important to note here that this setting continues to be mobilized as key site of lesbian representation; the all-woman environment leaving clear space for both subtext and explicit lesbian connection (see Mayne 2000). This association is a complex one and has given rise to a variety of representations and readings. See, for example, the very different connotations of TV's *Bad Girls* (1999–2006) (see Herman 2003) and Netflix drama *Orange Is the New Black* (2013–).
4. Shirley Maclaine has since reflected on this film, expressing regret that they 'didn't do the picture right' (*The Celluloid Closet*, 1995).
5. Note that Jermyn's analysis, nonetheless, provides an appropriative account of this figure.
6. It's important to note, however, Pratibha Parmar's critique of Rich's framing of the newness of new queer cinema, noting that 'queer cinema has been going on for decades'. Parmar also points to the 'absence of a whole litany of lesbian filmmakers who aren't referenced in Rich's account', and notes the marginalization of 'queers of colour' in lesbian and gay film festivals (Parmar 1993: 174–75).
7. It is also important to note that Channel Four, in relation to other British broadcasters, has been the most willing to branch into such territory (see Tropiano 2002: 137). Natalie Edwards notes, in an article tracking its representational politics, that Channel Four has 'at least attempted to articulate a response to the viewing needs and desires of an increasingly visible queer community, if only by acknowledging that such a community exists and should be represented in a percentage of its shows' (Edwards 2009: 1).
8. Note that Phil's character was killed off early on in the UK version, but survived the same drugs overdose in the US version.

9. It is not until Episode 12 of the first season of the US version that we see a full lesbian sex scene (and we only see this when Melanie has an affair), and such scenes are virtually non-existent in its UK predecessor. Admittedly, this shifts somewhat in later seasons (US), with the sexual element of their relationship gaining more airtime – a deliberate 'corrective' perhaps to the criticized lack of lesbian sexuality that came before it (see Beirne 2008).

10. This approach was also influenced by the work of Black feminist writers, such as bell hooks' 'The oppositional gaze' (hooks 1992).

2

'The way that we live and love': *The L Word* and the tensions of visibility

It's January 2004 and on screen, the opening shots of a new drama show a sequence of establishing shots of Los Angeles, USA: the iconic Hollywood sign, streets lined with palm trees, skyscrapers and busy highways. Cutting to moving shots down city streets, the camera pans a leafy suburban street. Entering one of the affluent homes we see a young-ish, white man arranging furniture in an airy living room, before cutting to the bedroom of (what we will soon learn is) his neighbour's house. Here, the shot pans upwards from the bottom of a bed to frame two sleeping figures, whom we quickly recognize as two slim, conventionally attractive women, one of the women is white and the other biracial. Wrapped in cream sheets with their arms resting on each other's bodies, the scene evokes gentle intimacy and stylish comfort. Cutting back to the man as he changes his clothes, we then return to the women's house, this time in the couple's bathroom. A medium shot of the blonde, white woman from the bed scene frames her as she smiles to herself in the mirror, an ovulation stick in her hand. Looking at the stick she laughs to herself and calls out: 'Bette, come here'. The other woman, Bette, enters the frame and the pair state, in awed voices, that the woman holding the stick, Tina, is ovulating. The camera stays close to the two characters as Bette pulls the blonde woman into an embrace and murmurs, 'let's make a baby' and they begin to kiss ('Pilot' 2004).

These are the opening shots of Showtime's *The L Word* (2004–09), a drama series that remains a notable, if contested, example of queer women's representation on screen. These opening scenes speak both to ongoing tensions around lesbian visibility, image and the gaze, and to the particular sociopolitical context into which the programme emerged. As this chapter will explore, both sets of concerns are central to analysis of this show, and its place in the archive of contemporary queer visibility. *The L Word*'s theme tune proclaims: 'this is the way […] that we live and love'. Indeed, the drama imagines ways of living queer lives in the mid to late 2000s in the United States. In doing so it navigates various influences and perspectives, making complex, and at times conflicted, claims for what

that might look like. These were, in various ways, changing times for LGBTQ+ lives and representations, and *The L Word* mediates the messy tensions of those changes. Nonetheless, with its ensemble cast of predominantly lesbian characters and its rarely televised content, as Marnie Pratt suggests, 'it cannot be denied that *The L Word* is ground-breaking television' (Pratt 2008: 138); offering a still unsurpassed scale of queer women's representation, and capturing the tensions of a critical moment in LGBTQ+ rights.

The L Word: *'A mini-series of one's own'*

By the late 1990s *Ellen* (1994–98) had been cancelled and, whilst lesbian chic continued to hold commercial power, lesbian representation in the media still evoked controversy. When producer/screenwriter Ilene Chaiken first pitched a drama that focused on the lives of lesbian and bisexual women to US premium cable channel Showtime, it was rejected (Pratt 2008). The subsequent success of *Queer as Folk* (Showtime, 2000–05) and *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998–2004), however, proved to the network that an all-female cast and an LGBT focus could draw ratings (Pratt 2008). Thus, on 18 January 2004, ten years after Brookside's lesbian kiss, the pilot episode of *The L Word* aired; becoming 'the first – and so far, only – attempt to make lesbians, and to a lesser extent bisexual women, the centre of attention' (Warn 2006a: 3). Marketed as both the 'first US television series to represent a lesbian community' (McFadden 2010: 421) and 'as a successor to HBOs soon to depart hit femme dramady, *Sex and the City*' (Akass and McCabe 2006: xxv), *The L Word* balanced an appeal to a lesbian market and a broader audience with its tagline of 'Same sex, different city'.

Set in LA's upscale West Hollywood, the series revolves around the lives of a group of lesbian and bisexual women; women who, as Kim Akass and Janet McCabe describe, 'like our gals from Manhattan […] all are thin, all enjoy material comfort, and all have impeccable sartorial style' (Akass and McCabe 2006: xxv). The first season introduced as its central characters Bette Porter (Jennifer Beals) and Tina Kennard (Laurel Holloman) of the ovulation scene, their circle of friends Alice Pieszecki (Leisha Hailey), Shane McCutcheon (Katherine Moennig), Dana Fairbanks (Erin Daniels) and Marina Ferrer (Karina Lombard), Bette's sister Kit Porter (Pam Grier), next door neighbour Tim Haspell (Eric Mabius) and his girl-friend (at least initially) Jenny Schecter (Mia Kirshner) – it is Jenny's imminent arrival that is the cause of Tim's furniture arranging in the opening scenes. *The L Word* fast achieved commercial success: becoming 'one of the Showtime Network's most highly rated programmes' (McFadden 2010: 421), the fastest renewed series in Showtime's history (Pratt 2008) and the longest running Showtime series to date

(Ladendorf 2010: 266). Running for six seasons until March 2009, *The L Word* also, as Moore and Kristen Schilt note, '[broke] new ground as the first series written and directed primarily by queer women' (Moore and Schilt 2006: 159). Based on Chaiken's own experiences as a young lesbian woman in LA, *The L Word* production team included a number of women associated with lesbian and queer representation and, in a number of cases, the New Queer Cinema movement of the 1990s. Alongside Chaiken, the writing and production team included Rose Troche and Guinevere Turner, writers, director (Troche) and star (Turner) of cult lesbian film *Go Fish* (1994); Elizabeth Ziff from the band Betty, known for their LGBTQ+ following and activist politics; Angela Robinson (*Girl Trash, D.E.B.S*); Alexandra Kondracke (*Girl Trash*) and Kim Steer (*Better than Chocolate*). Guest directors included Lisa Cholodenko (*High Art*, *The Kids Are Alright*), Kimberly Peirce (*Boys Don't Cry*) and Mary Harron (*I Shot Andy Warhol*). These connections and their extra-textual connotations lent *The L Word* a certain authenticity, largely absent from preceding representations (Ladendorf 2010: 272). Whilst Leisha Hailey was the only publicly 'out' lesbian of the central cast, *The L Word* featured guest appearances and recurring roles from a number of openly queer, lesbian and bisexual actresses; most notably Jane Lynch, Alexandra Hedison, Sandra Bernhard, Clementine Ford and Guinevere Turner. Also within the central cast Laurel Holloman had starred in Maria Maggenti's New Queer Cinema era film, *The Incredibly True Adventures of Two Girls in Love* (1994) and, as an Autostraddle article notes, Kate Moennig's 'sexual orientation has always been a bit of an "open secret" ' (Riese 2016: n.pag.).

To a certain extent, as Samuel A. Chambers suggests, '*The L Word*'s significance lies in its very existence' (Chambers 2009: 85). For all its contradictions and for all the critiques (and there were many), *The L Word* constitutes, as Moore and Schilt propose, 'a gesture that arguably has revolutionary cultural repercussions' (Moore and Schilt 2006: 159). *The L Word* constitutes something unique as it makes visible a range of lesbian and bisexual figures in a queer women-centric social world. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick noted at its start:

> The series should make a real and unpredictable difference in the overall landscape of the media world. Palpably, the quantitative effect of a merely additive change, dramatizing more than one lesbian plot at a time, makes a qualitative difference in viewers' encounter with social reality. The sense of the lesbian individual, isolated or coupled, scandalous, scrutinised, staggering under her representational burden, gives way to the vastly livelier potential of a lesbian ecology.
>
> (Kosofsky Sedgwick 2006: xxi)

Early reviews similarly note the significance of a collective of lesbian figures. Stacey D'Erasmo of *The New York Times* described *The L Word*'s arrival as 'a

breakthrough', quipping that: 'a mini-series of one's own is progress, undeniably' (D'Erasmo 2004: 26). Jennifer Beals echoes Sedgwick's reading of the social implications of the programme:

> When society fails to tell your story, it sends the unspoken message that your story is not worth telling […]. Being part of *The L Word* allows me to offer up some sort of mirror, however imperfect, to people who may have never before seen themselves represented, and that is very fulfilling. And in a country and culture so dominated by media, by the manipulation of words and stories, sharing the stories of people whose narratives have been historically ignored is a radical act – an act that can change the world and help re-write history.
>
> (Beals 2005 in Warn 2006b: 197)

Indeed, the representations of *The L Word* can be considered a radical act. Certainly, the scale and range of characters and storylines included here far exceeded what had been seen before, and, in many ways, what has been seen since. Speaking to the possibility of a reboot in June 2017, Chaiken reflected: 'when we went off the air in 2009, I think a lot of people thought, Okay, the baton is passed now, and there will be lots of shows that portray lesbian life. There's really nothing' (Chaiken in Stack 2017: n.pag.). *The L Word*'s portrayal of lesbian life certainly stands out as an unprecedented moment in lesbian visibility. Visibility, however, always brings tensions, as it makes visible particular versions of what it purports to represent and what it, in turn, comes to be representative of. This chapter explores *The L Word*'s portrayal, mapping the version of lesbian life it makes visible and arguing for both the significance of its gendered, classed and racialized limits and the more radical moments of queer feminist representation it (inconsistently) offers. *The L Word* mediates complex and contradictory social struggles shaped both by the concerns of the period in which it aired, the 2000s, *and* the queer politics and cultural shifts of the preceding decade. This chapter will explore tensions, possibilities and contradictions opened up in this text and its mediation of critical shifts in LGBTQ+ politics and social lives: a project that would be taken up in the visibility of the following years.

Love and legislation: The politics of The L Word

The 1990s were a complex period for sexuality politics in the United Kingdom and United States, marked, as Galvin argues, by both 'significant steps towards equality' and 'backlash' (Galvin 1994: 219). The HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s had a dramatic and lasting effect on homosexuality in the public sphere.

On one level, the public homosexual emerged in the 1980s as a newly 'validated' deviant. In the context of the liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s, the 1980s and 1990s saw HIV/AIDS mobilized as justification for increased regulation and re-validation of social prejudice (Trimble 2009: 58). At the same time, however, this period saw the development of what Ken Plummer describes as 'communities of support, care and activism' (Plummer 1992: 149). As LGBTQ+ and queer politics, theory and activism worked to reconstitute the pathologized homosexual figure, the struggles of the 1980s and 1990s also mobilized counterpublic possibilities of intimacy, kinship and community. Even more complexly, as Berlant suggests, 'the defining issue' of HIV/AIDS arguably transformed 'national sexual culture': it 'forced a generation of sexual subjects to become conscious of a much larger variety of life practices, and to see that these constitute a field of choices and identifications ordinary people make' (Berlant 1997: 16). Thus, as Stacey suggests of the UK context, 'the construction of sexuality in Thatcher's Britain must be seen as a constant struggle, where the attempts to control and suppress may produce the opposite effects' (Stacey 1991: 303). With the development of new lesbian and gay organizations such as ACT UP (1987), Queer Nation (1990) and Outrage (1990), moves towards an unapologetic celebration of queer lives developed a counterpolitics to the conservative backlash. This was a politics that 'celebrated a rubric of pride' (Munt 2000: 533), calling for public declarations of 'outness' and a rejection of the closet. As Lisa Walker writes, 'demanding visibility has been one of the principles of late 20th century identity politics […] if silence equals death, invisibility is non-existence' (Walker 2001: 1). *The L Word* constitutes a form of televisual 'outness', and, as I will go on to discuss, a concern with visibility runs through the series. Whilst the dominant form of visibility mobilized here was, as many have argued, limited in its body politics, the drama is simultaneously more complexly infused with the concerns of queer visual culture and activism. An episode in Series 5, for example, dramatizes the queer politics of outing when central character Alice outs a publically homophobic basketball player. Indeed, from the connections of the production team to New Queer Cinema to the inclusion in the opening credits of the photographs of queer artist Catherine Opie, to the characters' participation in community activism, *The L Word*'s visibility politics also exceed these limitations and evoke the queer politics of the 1990s. As Michelle Aaron argues, in various ways, *The L Word* also emerges 'an AIDS-era cultural product' (Aaron 2006: 37).

As the opening scenes suggest, however, *The L Word* also mobilizes other debates and directions in LGBTQ+ politics: most notably, questions of marriage, motherhood and military. Indeed, it was also in the 1990s that the question of same-sex marriage began to emerge more visibly in public debate. Over the subsequent years, the same-sex marriage campaign mobilized lesbian and gay couples

through discourses of marriage and family, and the path to legislative change took shape. Nonetheless, these were also times of struggle for progressive politics, and an era of significant backlash and political tensions. Republican George W. Bush was voted into presidential office in 2001, where he would remain throughout *The L Word*'s run until 2009. Bush stated his position against gay marriage on multiple occasions. *The L Word* makes various references to this context, commenting, at various points, on Bush's presidency, Proposition 8 and women's rights. The complex and contested notion of freedom of speech is also emphasized, in particular through Bette who is characterized as 'championing the first amendment and role of art' (Heller 2006: 59). The context of the Bush presidency and the feminist standpoint of the drama are explicitly engaged with in the cameo appearance of feminist activist Gloria Steinem ('Lacuna' 2005). Steinem makes a speech at a function the characters attend, speaking out against the 'guy in the White House' and the contemporaneous 'backlash against all the great social justice movements'. Steinem's speech is a rallying call to 'to keep going and do it more and better' ('Lacuna' 2005). Earlier in the episode, the characters and Steinem raise a toast to 'choice' ('Lacuna' 2005). These various influences and changing social contexts infuse the drama's depiction of lesbian lives in the United States in the mid-2000s. Critically, central characters Bette and Tina do indeed go on to 'make a baby', and end the series engaged to be married. In this they capture the social shifts and symbolic concerns of both the 1990s and the following decade. *The L Word* is complexly infused with queer politics and rights-based claims for inclusion.

Motherhood, monogamy and marriage

In 1989, the *New Republic* published an article by conservative political journalist Andrew Sullivan titled: 'Here comes the groom: A (conservative) case for gay marriage'. In making the conservative case, Sullivan positions himself in opposition to what he terms 'the Stonewall generation' (Sullivan 1989: 22), who, he describes, '[cling] to notions of gay life as essentially outsider, anti-bourgeois, radical' (Sullivan 1989: 22). However, both conservative and queer responses should be considered in the context of the AIDS crisis, an era in which social and legal recognition took on particular significance in a variety of ways. This period also saw what Jackie Stacey describes as the 'increased pathologization of homosexuality, associating it with promiscuity, disease and a risk to both public health and morality' (Stacey 1991: 285). With marriage signifying all that mainstream homophobic discourse suggested gay sexuality was not – monogamous, respectable, safe, 'normal' – the move towards marriage emerges for Butler as in part a 'shamed response' to the AIDS crisis (Butler 2004: 115). Certainly, in reassuring a heteronormative social world that the queer figure is 'not as abject as

one might have assumed, or at least that he or she is trying valiantly not to be so abject' (McRuer 2006: 85), marriage might offer a means by which to gain desirable and, indeed, necessary, forms of recognition, rights and acceptance. Indeed, Sullivan mobilizes gay marriage 'in the wake of AIDS' as 'a genuine public health measure', arguing that 'since AIDS to be gay and to be responsible has become a necessity' (Sullivan 1989: 22).

In 1990 in Hawaii, three gay couples applied for marriage licences, beginning a landmark case in the history of same-sex marriage legislation. The requests were denied, and in 1991 the couples filed a law suit, Baehr v. Lewin (subsequently Baehr v. Miike). In 1993, Hawaii's high court ruled that the exclusion of same-sex couples from marriage was discriminatory. Also in 1993, a mass gay wedding was staged during the 'March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation'. During the 1992 presidential election campaign, the question of homosexuality and the military came to the fore, with then candidate Bill Clinton stating his intention to lift the ban against gay people serving in the US military. Duggan's influential conceptualization of 'homonormativity' emerges out of this context. Duggan argues that the 1990s and the 'cultural front of neoliberalism' (Duggan 2002: 177) mobilized a complex reorganization of gender, sexuality and state. For Duggan, the late 1990s and early 2000s saw the rise of 'a new homonormativity': a 'new sexual politics for neoliberalism in the new millennium' (Duggan 2002: 179) in which sexual norms are radically reworked. As elements of lesbian and gay movements shift towards a politics organized around inclusion in mainstream institutions and society, forms of belonging are offered on limited terms. These terms, however, work to maintain 'dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions' (Duggan 2002: 179). In their complicity with 'a dramatically shrunken public sphere and a narrow zone of "responsible" domestic privacy' (Duggan 2002: 182), they enable a neo-liberal appropriation of queer struggles. Furthermore, they obscure continued and re-energized exclusions and exploitations; inclusion is made personal responsibility. This shift, Duggan argues, works to produce 'a demobilised gay constituency and a privatised, depoliticised gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption' (Duggan 2002: 179). Nonetheless, this period also saw social and legislative shifts against gay rights. The Baehr v. Lewin/Miike cases would run throughout the 1990s, and were met with considerable backlash. As Berlant describes, in the face of these shifts, heterosexuality 'had to become newly explicit' and work to secure 'this crisis of national futures' (Berlant 1997). 1994, Duggan notes, 'set a record for antigay initiatives in the United States' (Duggan 1994: 1). Indeed, now in office, the Clinton administration instituted the 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' policy in February 1994, and in 1996, the Defence of Marriage Act, or DOMA, was signed into federal law.

The 2000s, however, saw the tide begin to turn on LGBTQ+ rights, and 'equal marriage' campaigns become increasingly visible in public debate. In 2001, The Netherlands became the first country in the world to legalize same-sex marriage. In the United States, Massachusetts became the first US state in 2003 to legalize same-sex marriage and, in the same year, the US Supreme Court finally struck down the country's remaining Sodomy laws. In 2004, the same year that *The L Word* first aired, San Francisco mayor, Gavin Newsome, and other city officials began issuing marriage licences to gay couples against the existing state law; a move that Walters describes as when 'the rollercoaster ride that has been gay marriage really began' (Walters 2014: 183). Over 4000 marriage licences were granted, including one to long-term activists Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, all of which were, however, subsequently deemed void by the Supreme Court of California. The California case received much press attention, and became symbolic of the struggle for equal marriage legislation. Same-sex marriage was briefly made legal in California in 2008, but banned only a few months later by the passing of Proposition 8, limiting marriage to 'between a man and a woman' once more.

As the opening scenes suggest, one of the central narrative preoccupations of *The L Word* is that of long-term couple, Tina and Bette. As the series begins, they are introduced as a happy, successful, wealthy couple, although the audience soon learns they are having relationship issues and seeing a couples' counsellor. As the opening scenes suggest, the first two seasons speak to the broader social context in their depiction of Bette and Tina's experience of having a baby: a narrative that encompasses sperm donation, miscarriage, prejudice, pregnancy and co-parenting, and mobilizes notable images of lesbian/bisexual motherhood. For Chambers, the scene described at the start of this chapter reproduces 'the hundreds of scenes from movies and television in which the wife happily discovers that she is pregnant, or the recently married couple heroically decide to do the most romantic thing of all, "make a baby"' (Chambers 2009: 87). In doing so, he argues, it mobilizes a version of the lesbian family that reassures in its recourse to normativity. The multiple scenes throughout the series run in which we witness Bette and Tina caring for their child arguably reiterate the centrality of the family, anchoring this queer family in conventional intimate bonds. Pei-Wen Lee and Michaela Meyer similarly argue that 'what is at stake with Bette and Tina's child is […] a political web in which queer individuals are encouraged to adopt heterosexual values as central to their lives and relationships' (Lee and Meyer 2010: 247). Indeed, this is, in one sense, a homonormative mediation of middle-upper class lesbians as they establish a conventional-in-all-but-its-queerness family life.

Initially positioned as the drama's central 'happy couple', however, Bette's affair in the first season brings their relationship to an end, at least temporarily. As Lisa Merri Johnson argues, this storyline might be read as 'reiterating scripts

of possession and betrayal from the hetero world' (Johnson 2006: 116), idealizing long-term monogamy and rejecting alternative relationship models. For Michele Aaron, Bette's initial failure to sustain a monogamous relationship is punished and individualized within the narrative: 'repentance will saturate her characterization for almost the entire second season: the pained strained face of temptation in season one turning into the near hysteria of her purgatory in season two' (Aaron 2006: 35). Other digressions from the monogamous norm might be read in a similar manner. When Tina attempts an open relationship, for example, it is framed as a brief and unsuccessful phase in her ultimate return to Bette. When Bette meets polyamorous artist Jodi Lerner (Marlee Matlin), she convinces her to abandon polyamory in favour of a monogamous relationship and central (albeit temporary) romantic narrative (and subsequently leaves her to return to Tina). The backwards and forwards of the Bette and Tina narrative runs through the drama's six seasons. When Bette and Tina reunite for the final time in the sixth season, the dialogue repeatedly evokes the inevitability of a 'true love' romance trope: 'It feels like I'm coming home' (Bette, 'Liquid Heat' 2008); 'I've always been in love with her' (Tina, 'Life Cycle' 2008); 'you guys, you know, you belong together [...] you always have' (Alice, 'Life Cycle' 2008). This conventional evocation of love, intimacy and relationships works in part to produce what Johnson describes as an 'uncritical allegiance to cultural norms of couplehood' (Johnson 2006: 116). Yet, she argues, the 'compulsory monogamy' of *The L Word* ignores the fact that 'a significant community of lesbians has been devoted to polyfidelity for many years, along with remaining committed to carrying on a history of lesbian-feminist critiques of marriage and monogamy' (Johnson 2006: 131). Such critiques are largely absent from *The L Word*'s fictional universe, which seems, in Bette and Tina's narrative future, to instead invest in a new era of homonormative inclusion.

At the same time, *The L Word*'s ensemble of characters is portrayed as a community that encompasses kinship, intimacy and desire – characters variously offer care and support as friends and family, share and create homes as housemates and partners, have sex as temporary lovers and long-term partners, party together, eat together, argue, co-parent, take care of each other when they're sick, work together and drop in and out of each other's homes. In this sense, *The L Word* mobilizes a chosen family (Weston 1997) and imagines a form of queer intimacy and connectivity. Furthermore, the family discourse of Bette and Tina might itself evoke more complex possibilities. Firstly, Bette and the couple's daughter, Angelica, are biracial, disrupting the whiteness of the visual codes of the same-sex marriage/ family campaigns. Secondly, the extended unit that emerges around them – their friends, Bette's sister Kit, and their nanny – arguably posits a broader notion of family. The final episode of the second season closes with Angelica's birth and her introduction – by Bette 'the new, and crucially non-biological, mother'– to

the surrounding characters (Aaron 2006: 37). For Aaron, this short scene 'queers the family, the final frontier of normativity, in a gesture that is more than oppositional, it's downright revolutionary' (Aaron 2006: 37). Thus, in re-imaging family life through the lesbian couple, *The L Word* might work to mediate a shift in the terms through which the family is constituted. Berlant and Warner argue that the symbolic 'family form' functions 'as a metaphor of national existence' (Berlant and Warner 1998: 549). In Angelica, the 'American child', icon of national futurity (Berlant 1997: 6), is both re-centralized and queered, emerging not through the frame of the heterosexual reproductive family but through a lesbian couple and community.

Alternative relationship models also emerge in *The L Word* in ways that might evoke what Berlant and Warner describe as the 'radical aspirations of queer culture building': 'the changed possibilities of identity, intelligibility, publics, culture, and sex that appear when the heterosexual couple is no longer the referent or the privileged example of sexual culture' (Berlant and Warner 1998: 548). Jenny, for example, is portrayed as exploring her identity as a queer woman, having open relationships, practising BDSM and having casual sex. Marina is shown in a long-term polyamorous relationship and Shane repeatedly rejects long-term monogamy. These narratives are less central than the Bette and Tina romance, and they do not always end well. Nonetheless, they do propose a variety of ways of experiencing and imagining love, intimacy and desire.

Notably, however, Season 6's final romantic reunion sees the same-sex marriage debates of the period explicitly emerge, as Bette and Tina are engaged to be married and ready to leave West Hollywood for a new life together in New York. Their romantic resolve and future narrative sees them leave the lesbian community of *The L Word* to live a new life as a married couple. In Bette and Tina's evocation of the narrative closure of marriage, and the necessary end to the chosen family, *The L Word* closes down the possibility of queerer futures and mediates a version of the lesbian good life constituted through the 'gay equality rhetoric' (Duggan 2002: 179) of homonormativity. Marlon Bailey argues that the equal-marriage campaign is one in which 'white lesbian and gay leaders trot out some well-heeled homosexual couple who own their own homes, have six figure salaries, and live the American dream' (Bailey in Bailey et al. 2008: 118). Meanwhile, he argues, 'black people, especially black queers, have never been able to rely on the state to see us as equal citizens entitled to the rights and privileges granted to our white counterparts' (in Bailey et al. 2008). Priya Kandaswamy argues that 'the erasure both of the history of racial violence out of which the United States was built and of the persistence of that violence today is a necessary precondition for the narrative of gay marriage as inclusion', conceptualizing gay marriage as part of a 'nation-building project' that imagines 'the US as a multicultural, inclusive, color-blind

democracy' whilst securing existing inequalities (Kandaswamy 2008: 715). Whilst Bette and Tina mobilize an inter-racial couple in the predominantly white archive of same-sex marriage imagery, they certainly evoke the 'well-heeled homosexual couple' of Bailey's account. Furthermore, as they emerge as representative of the new homonormativity, symbols of liberal inclusion and neo-liberal success, the tensions of this national project are obscured.

'Don't Ask, Don't Tell'

The introduction of Tasha (Rose Collins) in Season 4, and her relationship with central character Alice, works to mediate the political struggle over the US military policy of 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell'.[1] The character, a Captain in the American military, is positioned in opposition to the anti-war, openly lesbian, femme figure of Alice. At this point in the narrative Alice is employed as a panellist on a TV talk show, on which she talks publically about both her sexuality and the politics of outing. When the storyline sees Tasha investigated and put on trial for homosexual conduct, the couple's struggles work to mediate a set of broader debates. Discourses of patriotism and duty are mobilized through Tasha's 'unquestioning commitment to fight the war in Iraq to *protect* her country' (Burns and Davies 2009: 183). Unlike Alice's, her response to 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' (DADT) evokes a homonormative account of inclusion and belonging:

> I am not fighting to allow gays to serve openly in the military. I am not even trying to overturn 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' […] I'm fighting to stay in the military. I've worked my whole life for this, Alice.
> ('Look Out, Here They Come!' 2008)

In this sense, this lesbian military figure evokes Jasbir Puar's account of homonationalism: 'a collusion between homosexuality and American nationalism that is generated both by national rhetorics of patriotic inclusion and by gay and queer subjects themselves' (Puar 2007: 39). At the same time, as Scheper argues, the narrative also works to produce 'a representational politics in which black butch female subjectivity can be representative of gay civil rights and the nation' (Scheper 2014: 446). With Tasha at the centre of this narrative, the terms of the DADT debate are shifted to include 'a fictional African American lesbian': thus, 'the publically available knowledge about the effects of the policy and its disproportionate impact on women of color' are expanded (Scheper 2014: 438). This narrative is contradictory in its effects. When Tasha ultimately outs herself at the trial, she does so through a frame that both disrupts and makes a claim for homonormative inclusion. When the narrative resolves with Tasha and

Alice kissing in the public space of the military base, the image re-imagines the iconic 1945 picture of a soldier kissing a nurse; reworking it through the lens of an interracial butch/femme couple ('Lay Down the Law' 2008). Scheper argues, 'the show inscribes Tasha and Alice in a timeless, utopic, fantasy of coupling and homonationalism: a (lesbian) kiss that embodies the (new) nation' (Scheper 2014: 445). This narrative works to complicate public discourses of nation and intimacy through the multiple positioning of Tasha and Alice, however. In its representation of 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' it simultaneously reveals the exclusions of national institutions, proposes a counterpublic anti-military discourse and makes a rights-based claim for inclusion. The national fantasy evoked in the imagery and language of this storyline is expanded in this setting, yet, as Puar's critique suggests, mobilizing the lesbian or gay figure through the military has complex implications.

The L Word's mobilizations of marriage, relationships, motherhood and military locate the programme in the sociopolitical context of its era. Clearly, the drama situates itself within rights-based discourses, making the case for social and legislative change. Bette and Tina navigate family life as LGBTQ+ families were mobilized on both sides of the public debate. Their parenting of Angelica and their marriage plans imagine lesbian inclusion in the normative institutions of public life. Tasha's narrative takes a clear stand against DADT, and portrays, if complicates, the lesbian as national citizen. At the same time, the version of lesbian 'living and loving' mobilized here resists a simple inclusion narrative. Through the ensemble of characters, multiple forms of intimacy, desire and family are made visible, and political critique opened up. *The L Word*'s sociohistorical context and cultural influences are visible in the multiple strands of its imagined lesbian universe. In the complex convergence of its influences, *The L Word* both mobilizes and exceeds the homonormative. However, from the polyamorous Marina to Bette and Tina's lesbian mothers, there are critical limits to the lesbian subjects included in this struggle.

Lipstick lesbians: The body politics of The L Word

As Pratt notes, 'without a doubt, the most highly critiqued aspect of the show (by fans and critics alike) is the appearance of the main characters' (Pratt 2008: 140). These characters represent a relatively homogenous cast coded through beauty, glamour, whiteness and middle-upper-class lesbianism. Whilst, as Jennifer Vanasco suggests, the glamour of *The L Word* might work as 'the best publicist that the lesbian community can have' (Vanasco 2006: 183), a number of commentators expressed concern over the heightened femininity of the distinctly classed lesbians of *The L Word*. Whilst the glamorous lesbian might be read as a reconstitution of

the lesbian figure in a more varied form – 'both women who […] follow or do not follow the lesbian style codes, are here positioned as potential lesbian subjects' (Ladendorf 2010: 275) – there are limits and absences in these images too. Indeed, the body politics of *The L Word* has been critiqued in five central ways. Firstly, for the lack of diversity in its central cast, who are predominantly white, able-bodied, slim and conventionally attractive. Secondly, and connectedly, as signifying an image of 'woman' as object; 'reifying the representation of all women as existing under the purview of the scopophillic male gaze' (Wolfe and Roripaugh 2010: 5). Thirdly, as defusing the threat of the lesbian figure; connoting lesbian-chic through 'a conventional and thus non-threatening figure […] promoted to mainstream audiences as a glamorous, eroticised foil to the stereotypical frumpy, man-hating, and now deeply passé lesbian of the 1970s' (McFadden 2010: 422). Fourthly, as utilizing lesbianism for commercial ends. Fifthly, as mobilizing an unmarked queer figure and thus 'a discursive displacement of lesbian identities' (Ladendorf 2010: 275). As the discussion of lesbian chic in the previous chapter suggested, these concerns speak to ongoing debates in representations of queer women.

The glamorous femme/ininity of *The L Word*

The femme lesbian holds her own distinct place in lesbian and queer cultures and histories (see Nestle 1992; Munt 1998; Harris and Crocker 1997). Whilst the figure of the butch is more visible, the two have historically functioned in relation to one another. As Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis note in their history of the working-class lesbian community of Buffalo, New York, 'social life was unimaginable without both' (Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis 1992: 17). The femme lesbian occupies a complex position, tied to the tensions of her ability to 'pass' as heterosexual and her contested relation to feminism and its critique of norms of femininity. As Leanne Dawson argues, however:

> While the femme may sometimes be considered not queer enough if her surface text is read as heteronormative and allows her to 'pass' as straight, the femme's desire is queer and there is room for non-normative politics and life schedules, departing from the focus on repetition and futurity, instead opening up a queer temporality.
>
> (Dawson 2019: 88)

In media representations, such as *The L Word*, however, the queerness of the femme is mobilized alongside other, less disruptive, connotations. The femme figure is, as Ciasullo argues, 'representable not only because she is desirable but also because she is perceived as "inauthentic"' (Ciasullo 2001: 599). Beirne makes

a similar argument, noting that, 'from sexological discourse to pop cultural representations and even within queer culture itself' there is a tendency to conceptualize 'the real or authentic lesbian' as more masculine presenting, equating femininity with sexual fluidity, i.e. potentially heterosexual (Beirne 2008: 69). The conflation of femininity and heterosexuality also emerges in the extra-textual connotations of these representations, hence the significance of *The L Word* actresses' sexuality. With queer characters often performed by heterosexual actors, the public lesbian figure emerges with the possibility of heterosexuality always potentially inscribed. Thus, as Beirne argues of *The L Word*, 'the seemingly deliberate casting of mostly heterosexual actresses […] [reinforces] hegemonic perceptions of lesbian sexuality as a liminal, mobile state, easily returned to heterosexuality' (Beirne 2006: 13). The familiarity of these heterosexual figures and the knowledge that their lesbianism can be considered a performance adds another layer to these complex figures. Whilst they emerge as lesbian or queer within television programmes, advertisements and fashion spreads, the broader cultural space in which they exist can work to affirm their heterosexuality. Indeed, the conventions of celebrity mobilize the women who play these roles through hetero-patriarchy, offering space for the confirmation of heterosexual desirability. Countless photoshoots for men's magazines feature actresses playing lesbian characters, with their roles mobilized as sexy titillation. Thus, the lesbian figure is made open to reconstitution on heterosexist terms. Dawson describes this process in relation to film representation as 'femmeinization': 'a means of rendering lesbianism more acceptable to a mainstream audience by making queer women fit accepted heteronormative codes of female desirability, thus turning them femme, which may simultaneously heighten objectification and sexualisation' (Dawson 2012: 38). Furthermore, the popular iterations of the femme lesbian are, as Ciasullo argues, structured through class and race, mobilized through the visual codes of white, middle-class femininity.

Critically, the visibility of the feminine lesbian emerges at the expense of other figurations. As Farr and Degroult argue, 'the lesbian body is made "consumable" by minimizing the number of overt references to butch lesbians' (Farr and Degroult 2008: 432). This is the case in *The L Word*, where butchness is marginalized in favour of the glamorous femme, or femme/inine. Whatling uses 'femm*e*ininity' to describe a form of representation and spectatorship in which femininity might 'fight back' against 'passive eroticising objectification', and differentiates the femme from the 'feminine lesbian' (Whatling 1997: 69–70). At the same time, what I am describing as the femme/inine exists at a site of slippage, in which the femme might be subsumed by the feminine. Critically, whilst the femme does not exist solely in relation to the butch, her repetition and the absence of the butch allows the femme's working-class lesbian cultural history to be obscured. The commercial context of the period inevitably constrains the visibility of butch figures,

as Beirne argues, 'in the visual popular cultural form of television, the butch lesbian poses an even greater threat as her visible dissimilarity with normative conventions of femininity calls into question the naturalised relationship between women and "feminine beauty" which advertisers are so keen to promote' (Beirne 2007b: n.pag). However, the premise of the show makes such choices particularly significant. After all, as Malinda Lo notes, 'butchness has been and always will be an important aspect of lesbian life and culture; to ignore that is to deny reality' (Lo 2004b). The glamorous femme/ininity of *The L Word* thus emerges as a site of tension, both evoking 'a femininity that rejects and actively works against elements of cisheteropatriarchy' (Dawson 2019: 95) and the object of the male gaze. In its dominance on screen, it comes to constitute the contemporary lesbian subject, arguably consigning other figurations to a past from which they too, in fact, emerge. Nonetheless, the ensemble cast and representation of lesbian community in *The L Word* does make space for a range of representations rarely seen in the programme's predecessors. Whilst most critiques agree that butchness is, at the very least, marginalized in the glamorous femme/ininity of *The L Word*, butchness and androgyny do appear, albeit as complex and often unstable signifiers. Similarly, as the following sections will draw out, *The L Word* does include representations of queer women of colour, but these representations remain limited in scale, screen time and characterization.

'You're looking very Shane today': Androgyny and ambiguity in *The L Word*

In one section of the opening credits of *The L Word*, the character that audiences will recognize as Shane – and whose look arguably became the most iconic of the drama – appears. In masculine-coded dress, Shane leads an anonymous woman into a men's toilet cubicle, presumably for a sexual encounter. This image, repeated at the start of every episode, captures the ambiguous coding of this figure. Evoking female masculinity, she enters a men's bathroom, referencing a space with cultural significance for gay, butch and transgender figures (Halberstam 1998: 20). The gendered bathroom evokes a space of (mis)recognition, danger, desire and passing. At the same time as she evokes masculinity, however, she does so marked with feminine codes of appearance: styled hair, dark eye make-up and pouting made-up lips. Entering it with another woman, Shane is marked as queer; furthermore, as queer and sexually active. As spectator we become voyeur, led into this moment along with the unknown woman. As she enters the bathroom, however, the spectator is left behind and our ability to read this moment is foreclosed. The identity of the woman is never revealed and what happens behind the door remains unseen.

Shane herself is a similarly unclear figure. When the first season of *The L Word* aired, Shane McCutcheon was the only member of the central cast to connote a

butch sensibility. Shane is portrayed by Kate Moennig, whose other roles as lesbian and transgender characters and work with LGBTQ+ organizations offer an extra-textual coding to this character. With her messy (albeit carefully styled) hair, her outfits of shirts, vests and tight jeans, and her androgynous figure, Shane cut noticeably through the femme/ininity of the rest of the characters. As Moore and Schilt note, 'within the WeHo logic of *The L Word*'s fictive, butch-lite universe, the concept of "butch" is played out through the character of Shane, with her typically male name, androgynous rail thin body and husky voice' (Moore and Schilt 2006: 160). This description, however, gestures towards the relativity of this coding. Although her appearance departs from that of the rest of the central cast, it remains ambiguous; evoking markers of butchness, androgyny and femininity. For Lo, challenging the lack of the signifying butch haircut, this slippage suggests a 'fear of allowing […] markers of female masculinity on screen' (Lo 2004b: n. pag.). Moore and Schilt, however, propose a different reading of Shane as a more deliberately ambiguous figure. They argue that Shane might evoke an 'inbetweener' image; '[adopting] a mid-continuum, postmodern dyke identity that takes from both femme and butch styles, presentations and roles at will' (Moore and Schilt 2006: 162). As such, Shane might emerge as a lesbian figure that rejects a fixed butch or femme position in favour of a position of fluidity. In this sense, Shane's ambiguous connotation of butch might mobilize gender as a site of slippage; a coding familiar in queer culture, but less so in mainstream media in this period.

Trans visibility and transphobia in *The L Word*

The introduction of drag king Ivan Aycock (Kelly Lynch) in the penultimate episode of Season 1 initially appeared to broaden *The L Word*'s engagement with gender and sexuality. Ivan brought the queer art of drag to the world of *The L Word* and a queer cultural figure to the television screen. Characterized by old-fashioned charm and retro style, Ivan's performance playfully evokes gendered norms. In this and the following season, Ivan goes on to develop a relationship with Kit Porter. Kit, identifying as heterosexual, is seduced by Ivan's performance of 'gentlemanly' romance. The Ivan and Kit narrative plays out with Ivan emerging as Kit's protector, encouraging the alcoholic Kit to stop drinking, for example. For McCabe and Akass, Ivan thus 'embodies a contradictory fantasy; one that animates a standard heterosexual rescue fantasy while simultaneously offering a theoretically challenging and potentially revolutionary representation' (McCabe and Akass 2006: 150). In the final episode of the season, Ivan's evocation of performative gender is foregrounded in the lip synching serenade of Leonard Cohen's 'I'm your man'. With Kit swooning against a car as Ivan performs the song, this sequence evokes the conventional and the disruptive. Indeed, the relationship is shown to complicate

Kit's understanding of her sexuality. Positioned so as to identify with her, the spectator too is led to question this encounter with gender and desire. Furthermore, Ivan's gender identity is initially uncertain. To Bette, Kit's sister, Ivan appears as a traditional butch lesbian: 'she is fully courting you old school' ('Limb from Limb' 2004). Kit refers to Ivan as he and tells Bette: 'The way I see it, Ivan is the one who gets to say whether he's a man or a woman. And he's been telling me he's more of a man' ('Life, Loss, Leaving' 2005). In another conversation, Ivan states a lack of preference ('Locked Up' 2004). For Lo, the introduction of Ivan suggested a commitment 'to representing diversity in the lesbian community in addition to messing with viewers notions of gender' (Lo 2004b: n.pag.). Arguably, the character of Ivan offers a meaningful representation of gender fluidity and non-binary identity.

Ultimately, however, this romantic narrative, and the drama's potential expansion of its representation of gender, is denied a happy ending. In the first episode of the second season, their relationship comes to an end when Kit is shown unexpectedly walking in on Ivan getting dressed; the camera lingers on the prosthetic penis lying on a bedroom surface, and Ivan, unaware they are being observed, long hair loose, putting on a chest binder. In an uncharacteristic move, Ivan physically pushes Kit from the room and shouts at her to leave ('Life, Loss, Leaving' 2005). Kit and Ivan's relationship thus over, Ivan is seen only briefly in the following episodes. In a final narrative twist, Ivan's penultimate appearance reveals him to have been in a long-term polyamorous relationship with another woman (who states her dislike for lesbians) all along. In the character's resolve, as Moore and Schilt argue, 'the Ivan who is fluid in gender identity disappears' (Moore and Schilt 2006: 167), re-framed as a transgender man. Critically, this narrative resolve simultaneously positions him as an unsympathetic character, and marks his rejection from the internal world of the narrative. As Pratt argues, 'the sudden dismissal of the character and the way in which this was executed treats transgender individuals as disposable and unworthy of the community' (Pratt 2008: 142). Whilst Ivan might have meaningfully represented a non-binary trans character, or a transgender man, these are made impossible subject positions within the narrative world of *The L Word*, from which he can only be expelled.

The third season of *The L Word* continued the drama's problematic attempts at trans representation with the introduction of Max (Daniele Sea). Notably, the character was first introduced as Moira and coded as a working-class butch lesbian, in a move that initially appeared to be a response to the critiques of *The L Word*'s limited representations of middle-class, femme/inine lesbian and bisexual women. Of the character's imminent arrival, Ilene Chaiken stated: 'She's our first real butch on the show – a fabulously attractive butch, but nonetheless a real butch' (in Lo 2006). In the character's first episodes, butchness was referenced in appearance, characterization and dialogue, as was class difference, seemingly

mobilizing the working-class butch figure so often absent from media representations (Ciasullo 2001). Arriving in West Hollywood as Jenny Schecter's new lover, Max's first interactions with the central cast position the character as a butch lesbian, with Max telling Carmen (Shane's girlfriend) and Jenny: 'You girls just relax and let us butches unload the truck' ('Lobsters' 2006). Carmen and Shane – with whom the audience is positioned through their familiarity as central characters – respond with laughter and, later, criticism. The butch lesbian is situated as out of place and old fashioned, mobilized in opposition to the glamorous, cosmopolitan lesbians of the drama. As Reed suggests, in a move that speaks to broader tensions in feminist/LGBTQ+ politics and representations: 'Butch is defined in this context as rigid, male-identified, passé, from a different time and place' (Reed 2009: 173). Later in the same episode Max is introduced to the rest of the core characters at a dinner scene set at an exclusive gourmet restaurant, and is shown to struggle both to afford the meal and comprehend the deeply classed conventions of the experience. In turn, the friendship group is less than welcoming: there are barriers, it seems, to membership of this chosen family. This scene makes the middle-class habitus of the drama uncomfortably visible, arguably raising a critical dialogue that responds to the class critique of the series. At the same time, as in the previous scene with Shane and Carmen, the shifting sympathies and identificatory framing risk negating the legitimacy of this class critique. The character's traditional mobilization of the butch role and awkward attempts at conversation during the dinner shift what is opened up here from class critique to personal lack. Whilst the central characters are revealed to be somewhat alienating in their affluence, Max's positioning as old fashioned, inexperienced and uninformed makes the character 'an object of scrutiny, ridicule, embarrassment and shame' (Jonet and Williams 2008: 159). As the series progresses, however, Max begins to adapt to the habitus of *The L Word* setting, losing his class identification and slipping easily into its conventions. Class is thus mobilized in *The L Word*, but contradictorily and, to some extent, temporarily, overcome by flexible adaptability.

A few episodes after their arrival, Max comes out to Jenny as a transgender man. Beirne argues:

> It was not long before it became apparent that *The L Word* intended to use Sea's character as a counter to more than one critique of their representational strategies, selling the character as both a butch woman and a transgender man, which resulted in disastrous portrayals of both.
>
> (Beirne 2007b: n.pag)

Indeed, whilst trans representation would make an important and necessary contribution to a show centred on an LGBTQ+ community, the narrative trajectory

of this character raises a number of critical issues. Once Max comes out as trans, he takes un-prescribed testosterone and begins to exhibit aggressive and stereotypically masculine behaviour, particularly towards Jenny. Jenny's challenges to this behaviour, whilst legitimate, work to (again) position our sympathies against Max. As Max begins to identify as heterosexual, his relationship with Jenny comes to an end. Jenny tells Max: 'you identify as a straight man, so there's the mismatch. Because you want me to be the straight girlfriend to your straight guy and I identify as a lesbian who likes to fuck girls' ('Legend in the Making' 2007). There is an accusatory tone running through Max's narrative that positions his actions as a form of betrayal, of Jenny but also of the lesbian community and an essentialist notion of 'womanhood'. In another scene, Kit sorrowfully accuses Max of 'giving up the most precious thing in the world [...] being a woman' ('Lead, Follow, or Get Out of the Way' 2006).

Later seasons mark another shift for this character as Max begins to identify as a gay man. Continuing his transition with the help of a support group and prescribed testosterone, he begins to be positioned as a more sympathetic character. In the final series Max's closing narrative sees him happily in a relationship with Tom (Jon Wolfe Nelson). In a final dramatic twist for this character, however, Max is revealed to be unexpectedly pregnant. This pregnancy mobilizes contemporaneous debates over biology, gender and family and recalls the highly publicized pregnancy of Thomas Beatie, a transgender man who gave birth to a daughter in 2008. Mediating these critical debates, however, Max is once more the bearer of a complex set of representations. On the one hand, what emerges here is a radical representation of a pregnant man that challenges gendered norms. At the same time, the internal narrative portrays Max as deeply unhappy and, ultimately, abandoned by his partner. In the scene prior to Tom's departure, Tom and Max are shown preparing to go to bed. A sequence of shots shows Max undress. Framed as a reflection in a window, the camera is positioned so as to see from Tom's perspective. The scene then cuts between Max removing his clothes, binder, and prosthetic penis to reveal his bare breasts and pregnant body and a close up of Tom's face. His sad expression and the framing of this scene position us in an identificatory position with Tom just prior to his departure ('Leaving Los Angeles' 2009). Whilst hegemonic norms of reproduction are troubled in the messy unravelling of this narrative, doing so is ultimately marked by misery. The unhappy resolve seems to read as a coded punishment for Max, who has repeatedly betrayed the femme/inine lesbian culture so celebrated in the drama. Critically, neither Danielle Sea nor Kelly Lynch (Ivan) identify as trans, making *The L Word* one of many examples of the problematic and much critiqued practice of cisgender actors portraying transgender characters.

Queer women of colour and the racialized limits of *The L Word*

The whiteness of *The L Word*'s femme/inine coding is a key point of contention for the drama, and the version of lesbian lives and loves it makes visible. The original central cast was predominantly white, with the exception of Jennifer Beals as biracial Bette Porter and Pam Grier as secondary character Kit Porter. As a central character, Bette was always significant in making a lesbian woman of colour central to the narrative, mobilizing representations rarely seen on television up to this point – for example when Bette and her partner Tina argue over whether or not to use a Black sperm donor, and the subsequent emergence of the lesbian figure as queer women of colour and mother. In the case of Kit, however, whilst she might, as McCabe and Akass argue, connote 'an icon on the border, someone who defies limits and challenges representational certainties' (McCabe and Akass 2006: 145), the narrative nonetheless positions her through distinctive racialized tropes. The daughter of divorced parents, an alcoholic single mother who is estranged from her son and an ex-RnB singer, as McCabe and Akass suggest, 'there is no getting away from the fact that on the surface at least Kit appears an old-fashioned stereotype' (McCabe and Akass 2006: 145). Racialized tropes appear elsewhere in *The L Word*, for example in Season 1's two other central women of colour: Yolanda, described by Taylor as reiterating the 'angry black woman' trope (Taylor 2004), and Candace Jewel, with whom Bette has an affair. Candace is, of course, soon rejected in favour of the central romance of Bette and Tina.

   When Sarah Shahi joined the cast in Season 2 to play Carmen, the show's first Latina character, critics both celebrated her presence and questioned her late arrival: 'It wasn't until season two that a Latina character, Carmen de la Pica Morales (Sarah Shahi) was introduced – and this on a show set in Los Angeles, where 46% of the county's residence are of Hispanic or Latino origin' (Lo 2004a: n.pag.). Furthermore, Shauna Swartz noted, 'the addition of yet another character who is conventionally feminine, unusually good looking and capable of passing as straight – departing from the mould only in that she is a woman of colour, one of just three in a large ensemble cast' (Swartz 2006: 177). Notably, Shahi, a former Dallas Cowboys cheerleader and Texas beauty queen, is in fact of Spanish and Iranian heritage. In the context of an industry in which 'few specifically Latino roles exist […] and that Latino actors, along with other non-white actors, are so frequently overlooked for parts where ethnicity goes unspecified' (Lo 2004a: n.pag.), such casting is clearly problematic. Furthermore, the representation of Latino culture through this character and her family garnered criticism, as Lo summarizes: 'a well-intentioned but somewhat clumsy introduction to Latino culture, featuring overgeneralisation and an unfortunate reliance on stereotypes' (Lo 2004a: n.pag.).

When the character of Tasha Williams (Rose Rollins) joined the show in Season 4, *The L Word* introduced another figure that responded to a multiple fan criticism: this time mobilizing an intersectional portrayal of a Black, working class and masculine of centre figure. Like Max, Tasha is coded as both butch and as less connected to the upper/middle-class glamour of West Hollywood. As a motorcycle driving, beer drinking, soldier in the US army, Tasha's butch coding is to some extent overt. Yet, whilst Tasha is undoubtedly a far butcher figure than is the norm in *The L Word*, this too remains flexible. To return to Lo's critique of hairstyle, we might also note that, whilst Tasha's hair is rarely styled in an overtly feminine way (particularly in relation to girlfriend Alice), she nonetheless does have long hair simply tied in a ponytail: perhaps not the butch haircut Lo had in mind. This detail may seem insignificant, but it allows this figure to exist in relation to norms of femininity. Indeed, Rollins herself worked previously as a model; as Burns and Davies note, 'Tasha's performance of masculinity on *The L Word* sits alongside off-screen interviews in which she identifies herself as heterosexual and alludes to her successful modelling career' (Burns and Davies 2009: 183). As a butch-coded lesbian woman of colour, however, Tasha does disrupt the white femininity of the lesbian figure. Furthermore, as Marlon Rachquel Moore notes, when we are first introduced to this character we also meet 'a group of lesbians of color', however: 'once Tasha begins to date Alice […] she is plucked out of that community of color and immersed in the white setting for the duration of the romantic relationship' (Moore 2015: 209). As with Max and the show's class politics, these moments of more intersectional visibility are only possible temporarily. Ultimately, they are subsumed in favour of the dominant white, middle-class universe of the show. Yet, for Muñoz, the 'race plots' mobilized through *The L Word* characters do not fully work to neatly 'contain or manage race' (Muñoz 2005: 102). Thus, for all their limitations, they might 'keep *The L Word* from slipping into a mode of neoliberal-ism in which race is sidelined' (Muñoz 2005: 102).

The L Word *lesbian: Contemporary figurations*

Of Moira's butch identification, Bette reflects: 'She comes from a place where you know you have to define yourself as either/or; it's probably just the only language that she has to describe herself'. Indeed, butch-femme identifications are repeatedly rejected within the drama – mobilized as old-fashioned 'role playing'. Shane states: 'What difference does it make whether someone's butch or femme? We should just leave the labels alone and let people be who they are' ('Lobsters' 2006). This statement seems to exclude butch-femme from a notion of authentic subjectivity, which is conceptualized through a contemporary post-labels discourse.

These conversations articulate something of *The L Word*'s visual and narrative figuration of a contemporary lesbian subject. Whilst, as these discussions have explored, this is not entirely homogenous, the dominant lesbian subject is constituted in particular ways. *The L Word* mediates a contemporary, cosmopolitan figure navigating a social context in transition. This figuration is influenced by the various legacies of 1980s and 1990s: queer politics run through the drama in complex ways, whilst the turn towards lesbian chic of the 1990s is clearly visible in these glamorous LA lesbians. At the same time, whilst the 1990s saw a revival of butch-femme culture, *The L Word*'s framing evokes the tensions of the 1970s, when, as Munt describes 'a new generation of young lesbians, influenced by the women's movement, rejected butch-femme as a heterosexist imitation of the oppressive gender roles of patriarchy' (Munt 2009: 27). This reiteration of this critique, however, both recalls lesbian histories and situates itself firmly in the present: a (post)modern era in which old-fashioned labels are no longer necessary. Furthermore, this rejection of, in particular, the butch lesbian, simultaneously mobilizes a postfeminist distancing: Reed argues that 'as a mainstream show about lesbians, *The L Word* has a lot invested in distancing itself from the image of the lesbian feminist of the 1970s' (Reed 2009: 173). Indeed, the postfeminist sensibility that emerged in the popular culture of the 1990s is one of the sociocultural strands through which the drama is constituted. *The L Word*'s mobilization of sexualized femme/ininity, for example, evokes what Gill describes as 'the pervasive sexualisation of contemporary culture' (Gill 2007b: 150), which she and others situate as a key tenet of postfeminist media. A promotional image for the final season of the drama, for example, played on the show's sex appeal with the tagline: 'going down in history'. The image showed the heads and bare shoulders of the central cast: Bette and Jenny's heads are thrown back, Shane is licking Jenny's neck, and Alice and Tasha are almost kissing. This image evokes Gill's reading of the 'hot lesbian', a postfeminist iteration of 'the relatively stable representational practice for the "sexualized" depiction of woman–woman relations' (Gill 2009: 151). This figure seemingly mobilizes the postfeminist embrace of the visual codings of the male gaze, in which earlier critiques of such codes are made redundant in a new era of sexual liberation (McRobbie 2004). Critically, this figuration is exclusionary, as it can only function through particular bodies. In this self-proclaimed history-making marker of queer women's representation, desires and bodies that exceed the male gaze seem resigned to history in a new era of femme/inine inclusion.

Emerging in the context of the 2000s, *The L Word*'s lesbian figures are also constituted through the building momentum of the gay rights agenda. Thus, whilst the ways in which the lesbian subject 'lives and loves' are multiple, we begin to see the centralizing of marriage and motherhood as central markers of the new gay good

life. Thus, the ideal lesbian subject of *The L Word*'s glamorous imaginary, and access to these markers, is mobilized through the convergence of an essentialized version of 'woman-hood', embodied femininity, whiteness and class capital. *The L Word*'s lesbian subject is thus simultaneously complexly old-fashioned and distinctly contemporary, emerging as a site of struggle over queer/lesbian/feminist politics past, present and future.

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Loving and loathing Jenny Schechter: Or,
The L Word's *queer feminist gaze?*

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The convergence of *The L Word*'s influences means the drama is multiple in its positionality, in ways that can be complex and contradictory. This complexity is evident in *The L Word*'s most controversial character, Jenny Schechter, described in a 2019 *Guardian* article as 'a character so annoying she eventually […] became the undoing of the whole show' (Hanra 2019: n.pag.) (a response echoed in multiple reviews, recaps and fan commentaries). Yet, Jenny might also work as the show's 'undoing' in more productive ways: mobilizing the show's queerest, most feminist potential.

Jenny: The queer voyeur

The pilot episode of *The L Word* sees Jenny Schechter arrive in West Hollywood, collected by her boyfriend, Tim (following his earlier house preparations). Positioned within the narrative as a newcomer, Jenny embodies a naive fragility suggested by her lip-biting, wide-eyed looks and hesitant dialogue. Commenting on the 'traditional' character of the neighbourhood, Jenny is further positioned as an outsider. The earlier opening scenes, in which Bette and Tina appear in bed together and discuss the latter's ovulation cycle, tells the spectator that 'traditional' is an inaccurate reading of the setting. A later scene sees Jenny alone in the garden of the home she now shares with Tim. A moving medium shot follows Jenny as her attention is caught by unidentified voices in the garden next door. Staying close to Jenny the camera cuts to a close-up as she moves behind the fence separating the garden with that of the neighbours. Cutting to an identificatory point of view shot, two women beginning to remove their clothes are framed by the wooden slats of the fence. A previous introductory scene in the local coffee shop and social hub of the drama mean the audience will recognize one of these women as Shane. As Shane, now naked, dives into the pool the camera cuts to an overhead shot of her entering the water. The following sequence, in which the two women begin to have sex as Jenny watches cuts between three positions: Jenny's point of view,

a close-up of Jenny's face and an overhead shot of the pool. As the sex gets more heated, Jenny finally turns away and the spectatorial boundary of the fence is resumed. As a viewer, we take on a moving position in this scene. Positioned with Jenny behind the fence, our vision is at first obscured by the wooden posts. Our gaze, like hers, is a voyeuristic one. Our prior knowledge and overhead position, however, afford us an insider gaze that Jenny does not, at this point, have.

The history of the secretive lesbian gaze is evoked in this sequence. The physical boundary of the fence marks a divide between Jenny's supposedly heterosexual world and the lesbianism of the poolside scene. What is observed here – notably the first lesbian sex scene of the series – is observed illicitly. Critically, however, whilst the gaze is a secret one, the lesbian figures are not. In a rejection of the coded subtext, queer sexuality becomes unequivocally visible. The ambivalence of lesbian representation is transported onto the bearer of the gaze; it is her desire that evokes the ambiguity of the subtext. When a subsequent scene sees Jenny recount the experience to her boyfriend Tim, the conventions of lesbian representation are once more made present. As the pair begin to undress Jenny tells Tim that she saw two women, who she presumes to be Bette and Tina, 'getting way down' in their pool ('Pilot' 2004). Recounting the scene, Jenny and Tim go on to have sex in a 'slow, shared, relishing narrative and re-enactment of the lesbian scene she has just viewed' (Kosofsky Sedgwick 2006: xix). In this follow-up scene, the history of the gaze is foregrounded. For Sedgwick, this evocation of a pornographic male gaze mobilizes lesbian desire as erotic material for heterosexual sex (Kosofsky Sedgwick 2006: xix). For Samuel Chambers: 'by including lesbians in that circuit of desire as objects of fantasy to supplement straight desire, this first sex scene fully supports the heterosexual norm – not merely by ignoring lesbianism but by giving lesbians a specific, secondary place within the heterosexual norm' (Chambers 2009: 90). On the other hand, the replacement of the male voyeur with a female one might work to both make this legacy visible and re-write it on different terms. It might, as Candace Moore argues, be 'consciously transforming the conventions of heteronormative visual pleasure' (Moore 2007: 8). In evoking an objectifying gaze and complicating it, these early scenes might also work to 'dislodge the centrality of a heterosexualising gaze' (Jonet and Williams 2008: 155).

What emerges here is unstable in its signification. Jenny as outsider might initially function 'as part of the show's tutor text for straight viewers' (Moore 2007: 7–8). She is, however, an unreliable guide. Her perspective on the pool scene is an obstructed one; she glimpses the scene through the slats of the fence whilst the spectator's viewpoint goes beyond the boundary of the fence. Jenny and Tim's erotic recalling of the scene is similarly compromised. Jenny's mistaken assumption that the two women are their neighbours, Bette and Tina, means the fantasy image evoked for Tim is a false one. The lesbian figures that would become their 'objects

of fantasy' (Chambers 2009: 90) are different ones. As the series progresses, the instability of this scene is furthered by Jenny's own queer desire. Lesbian desire as temporary titillation, thus, cannot be contained within its heterosexual trajectory. Furthermore, whilst Tim can happily appropriate lesbian desire in this early context, the reality of Jenny's first affair with a woman is less palatable (a series of scenes portray Tim as angry and hurt).

In these scenes, *The L Word* mobilizes the male gaze, the lesbian spectator, the subtext, the pornographic and an unstable insider/outsider. In doing so, *The L Word* begins to make visible the tensions of public visibility. As the mechanics of voyeurism are evoked, an uncertain meta-narrative emerges. As the viewer we are, as Wolfe and Roripaugh argue, 'reminded that what we are witnessing on the small screen is also a representation, or form of fantasy' (Wolfe and Roripaugh 2006: 47). The viewer is implicated in this moment of lesbian visibility. Lesbian desire is not simply appropriated, or appropriatable, within the heteronormative, but might in fact have the power to queer it. Jenny might offer a site of heterosexual identification as a point of entry, but this identification is an unstable one, and leads to other, queerer, paths.

Mark and the male gaze

In Season 2 of *The L Word*, a new character is introduced in the form of filmmaker and amateur pornographer Mark Wayland (Eric Lively). Moving into the house shared by Jenny and Shane, Mark places hidden cameras at various locations around the house in the voyeuristic hope of capturing sellable footage of lesbian sex and 'lifestyle'. As the narrative progresses, he begins to conceptualize this as art, eschewing the pornographic intent with which it began. He is shown telling his friends that he is creating a documentation of lesbian life; his intentions no longer voyeuristic, but artistic. In the tenth episode of the series this narrative comes to a climax when Jenny discovers the cameras ('Land Ahoy' 2005). Cutting between Mark and Jenny's respective bedrooms, Jenny responds by undressing for the no longer secret cameras. Performing exaggerated pornographic clichés to the camera she is heard calling to Mark to 'fuck' her with his 'big cock'. Realizing he has been discovered, Mark is shown rushing to Jenny's room. In a medium shot Jenny is framed naked with the words, 'is this what you want?', written in dark pen across her front. In the following dialogue, Mark's apparent regret and attempts to explain himself are rejected in Jenny's response. Asking if he has sisters, she tells Mark: 'I want you to ask them a question, and the most important thing is that you really listen to their answer, I want you to ask your sisters about the very first time that they were intruded upon by some man or a boy'. To his response – 'What makes you think that my sisters have been intruded upon?' – she

states: 'there isn't a single girl or woman in this world that hasn't been intruded upon, and sometimes its relatively benign and sometimes it's so fucking painful. But you have no idea what this feels like' ('Land Ahoy' 2005). When he moves to remove the cameras, Jenny refuses, telling him: 'I'm gonna decide when you can take those rapey cameras down' ('Land Ahoy' 2005). A later scene sees Mark repeating Jenny's gesture. Appearing naked before her, he asks her in return, 'is this what you want?':

> No, what I want is for you to write fuck me on your chest. Write it. Do it. And then I want you to walk out that door and I want you to walk down the street. And anybody that wants to fuck you say 'sure, sure no problem'. And when they do you have to say 'thank you very very much', and make sure that you have a smile on your face. And then you stupid, fucking coward you are going to know what it feels like to be a woman.
>
> ('Loud & Proud' 2005)

This fictional encounter is, on the one hand, a brief narrative in *The L Word*'s broader trajectory. On the other hand, however, encoded within it are broader debates surrounding male violence, the gaze, the politics of representation and *The L Word* itself. In Jenny's response, an individualized narrative is to some extent refused in favour of a broader commentary on heterosexist violence. As McFadden argues, it 'situates the real harm his voyeurism has done to her in a larger cultural context of male dominance'; it produces 'a representation of a ubiquitous, prurient, objectifying male gaze and connects it to the violent, real world patriarchal oppression of women' (McFadden 2010: 421–22). At the same time, however, Mark's position is not a simple one. For Moore, this narrative 'interpolates and critiques the straight male viewer watching for voyeuristic pleasure, even as it provides them with the bedroom footage they are tuning in to see' (Moore 2007: 15). Voyeurism is thus a possibility, but one that 'comes at the cost of a critique' (Moore 2007: 15). Nonetheless, Mark is positioned sympathetically by the end of the series, and asked to film feminist activist Gloria Steinem's speech at Bette's father's memorial service. In his engagement with, and service to, feminism, an alternative path is, perhaps, played out.

The Mark narrative evokes a history of representation of both lesbian women and women's bodies more broadly. As it does so, it foregrounds the symbolic power of the gaze. Furthermore, it makes visible the complexity of representation in a heterosexist media context. Prior to the development of this narrative, *The L Word* had been criticized for pandering to the 'male gaze' (Wolfe and Roripaugh 2006: 47) in its representation of glamorous lesbianism, as previously discussed. At the same time, network executives were pushing the production team to introduce

a straight male character in order to broaden the show's appeal (Moore 2007). In this context, the appearance of Mark takes on further significance. This narrative allowed the writers to satisfy the network's demands whilst simultaneously critiquing the demand itself *and* acknowledging the audiences' concerns. Thus, as Wolfe and Roripaugh argue, the character himself acts as a metaphor for his own emergence. The character, 'a creative intrusion' inspired by commercial pressures, embodies intrusion itself within the narrative; in turn becoming 'a vehicle by which to examine and critique the theme of male intrusion' (Wolfe and Roripaugh 2006: 47). At the same time, the Mark narrative raises wider questions of *The L Word* itself and, as Beirne argues, 'of the relationship of television to voyeurism' (Beirne 2007a: 95). Whilst *The L Word* might position itself against a Mark-esque form of objectification, the possibility that the lesbian figures of *The L Word* are similarly exploited is always present. In working through this narrative the complex relationship between women, lesbianism and the screen is once more made visible. In this way, *The L Word* positions itself as oppositional to dominant frames of representation, mobilizing long-standing feminist concerns with hetero-patriarchal imagery and its social implications.

Lez Girls and *The L Word*'s meta-commentary

As the series progresses, Jenny shifts from newcomer to central figure. Exploring her desire for women with an affair that ends her relationship with Tim, she goes on to identify as first bisexual and later a lesbian. A writer, Jenny publishes a semi-autobiographical account of her experiences in West Hollywood. In one of the central narratives of the fourth and fifth seasons of the drama, the book is developed into a film, *Lez Girls*. In this long-running meta-narrative, the complexities of bringing lesbian representation to the screen are reproduced in a literal sense. A series of often-comedic scenes showing Jenny and Tina (working as a producer on the film) appointing a director, for example, mobilize tropes of lesbian representation as problematic. When a lesbian woman is employed for the role, her presumed suitability recalls the lesbian women of *The L Word* production team. As the producers are shown negotiating the images, reputations and audience-appeal of their predominantly heterosexual cast ('playing gay for pay'), the questions of authenticity previously raised are evoked. When the production company insists that the film have a heterosexual ending (for the Jenny character to return to Tim/'Jim'), the familiar heterosexual resolve of temporary lesbianism is articulated. Thus, the *Lez Girls'* narrative evokes both a broader context of representation and *The L Word*'s own production. Tina convinces Jenny of the film's importance by telling her: 'it could make a difference. A teenage girl in the Midwest who's afraid to come out of the closet, she could see your movie and it could change her life. It

could really affect people' ('Legend in the Making' 2007). As she does so, the social impact of representation, for all its complexity, is asserted. In this narrative *The L Word* makes public its own compromises with commercial pressures. It positions itself within the media context in which it emerges, and lays out the tensions of its own production. It foregrounds, as Wolfe and Roripaugh argue, 'the inherent difficulty of representing lesbians (or any woman) on the screen' in a context in which 'female characters are always open to exploitative readings' (Wolfe and Roripaugh 2006: 47). At the same time, however, it positions visibility as politically and personally important and argues for 'female and queer self-representation' (McFadden 2010: 422). In its insistence on reproducing the mechanics of representation and spectatorship, *The L Word* works to make visible the processes of mediation. In this sense, it reveals its own position within and outside of mainstream media. It voices the struggle for recognition within the norms of intelligibility that structure popular culture, speaking to a feminist project of interrogating and intervening in the power of mediation in hetero-patriarchal social worlds.

Jenny's queer femme disruptions

Jenny begins the drama characterized as a fragile young writer and heterosexual fiancée. At first shy, confused and conflicted, her character and narrative change significantly throughout the drama: indeed, much of the critique arose from what was seen as inconsistency of character and outlandish storylines. Later seasons see a much more confident Jenny. A published author with her book adapted for the screen, Jenny – with her agents, assistants, dark sunglasses and small fluffy dog – is characterized as a demanding media diva. As the series goes on, Jenny becomes dramatic, narcissistic and, at times, ruthless. She is both deeply duplicitous – she steals, lies and cheats throughout the series – and boldly truthful. Her sexual experiences and identifications encompass bisexuality, lesbianism, affairs, monogamy, non-monogamy, BDSM and stripping. Her narrative arc involves the revelation of her childhood sexual abuse (shown in a series of flashbacks) and her attempts to deal with her history in a variety of ways, including writing, drawing, self-harming, confronting her family and performing in a strip club: 'because when I'm in there, it's my fucking choice to take my top off and show off my breasts. And it's my fucking choice when I take off my pants and I show off my pussy. And I stop when I want to stop because I'm in charge' ('Lacuna' 2005). As this statement suggests, it is through Jenny that the drama voices its most unusual, controversial and often political dialogue. With her various incarnations throughout *The L Word*'s six-season run, she is a character that is hard to categorize in any coherent way. In the complex messiness of this often-unlikeable character, however, there is an appeal that recalls the new queer cinema aesthetic. New queer

cinema's reclamation of 'negative' coding, in which 'the villainess could become a new heroine', complicated the inclusion politics of 'positive' representations (Rich 2013: 105). Thus, Jenny as villainess – the Jenny that adopts a sick dog and has it put down in order to bond with a vet, the girlfriend of a journalist who gave her book a bad review, in order to seduce her. Taking her revenge on the journalist by sleeping with her girlfriend, for example, might offer a more disruptive pleasure. Jenny remains, to a certain degree, an outsider. Despite her relationships with the other central characters, the narrative always places her at a distance: never quite fitting in, refusing to follow social conventions, inconsistent in her loyalties and affections. Jenny's character/identity is flexible throughout the drama: both shaped by her experiences and open to unexpected change, echoing the unfixed identities of postmodern discourse. Certainly, Jenny is far from the good gay subject of homonormative inclusion. Rather, she evokes the queer codes of camp excess. As *The L Word* lesbians move towards marriage and motherhood, Jenny might constitute queer femme disruption, if femme is read as 'femininity gone wrong', the 'bitch, slut, nag, whore, cougar, dyke, or brazen hussy' (Brushwood Rose and Camilleri 2002: 13): the 'bad girl' (Harris and Crocker 1997) of gendered and sexual norms. In the final season, as we move towards the resolve and Bette and Tina's departure, Jenny is at her most disruptive.

At the same time, this character also evokes the pathologization trope. Whilst her experiences of depression and self-harm could offer meaningful visibility, she is often described as 'crazy' or 'insane' and is increasingly demonized within the drama. Indeed, the entire final season centres on her alienation of the other characters. Ultimately, she is killed, evoking the familiar expulsion of the transgressive woman. The possibility of disruption is arguably foreclosed in favour of Bette and Tina's marital futurity. Her death is left unresolved, however, denying narrative closure in favour of ambiguity. The series ends with the remaining central characters being investigated by the police (led, in a nod to queer women's representations past, by Sergeant Marybeth Duffy, played by *Zena the Warrior Princess*' Lucy Lawless), with *The Interrogation Tapes* released on Showtime's website following the series finale. Thus, we are also left with the possibility that Bette and Tina and *The L Word*'s ensemble of queer characters might be murderers. Not, perhaps, the aspirational happy ever after of homonormative inclusion after all. Jenny is a complex character, mobilizing familiar tropes of destruction, pathology and death, but in doing so destabilizing reductive trajectories of glamorous good gays. Through Jenny, *The L Word* articulates queer feminist speech, refusing the depoliticization of postfeminism and complicating the drama's navigation of mainstream visibility. In the multiplicities of this character, the struggles of *The L Word*'s mediation of queer lives and futures in the United States in the mid- to late-2000s are played out, and left, critically, unresolved.

The L Word online

For all that it reveals, this account does, however, risk ignoring a key feature of queer visibility. It does not account for the fact that what becomes of these figures as they circulate through media is not limited to that which they are within the programme itself. Thus, whilst the representational struggles of these figures are critical, they might nonetheless fail to fully account for the meanings and possibilities that emerge. In its contemporary context, in particular, spectatorship exists both within and outside of this representative space. Or rather, this representative space extends far further than the TV screen itself. In particular, it extends online.

The L Word is an interesting early example of transmedia television as its online space is extended both through the work of fans and the production company. From the production side, the Internet allowed for a *The L Word* section of the Showtime site; a site that mirrored fan sites in its inclusion of discussion boards and blogs, as well as selling products 'such as *The L-word* board game, CDs, DVD boxes, different types of clothes, mugs, a candle, and lipsticks in four different shades, the latter named after the most popular characters' (Ladendorf 2010: 273). The glamour of *The L Word*, or what Ladendorf terms the 'discursive re-positioning of lesbian identities', was further capitalized on in the clothing range, named 'L'Ements of Style' (Ladendorf 2010: 274). The site also featured script-writing competitions; in particular, 'The Fanisode', in which viewers competed to have their script incorporated into the drama itself. After the series finished, a 'real-life' version of Alice's 'Chart' was co-founded by Chaiken, financially backed by CBS and sponsored by stars such as Kate Moennig, Leisha Hailey and Jennifer Beals; OurChart, a (albeit short lived) social networking and popular culture site for lesbian and gay women, reworked Alice's on-screen chart website into an actual one. At the same time, unofficial fan sites quickly sprung up, some even appearing prior to the pilot being aired (Pratt 2008: 138). Sites such as *www.l-word.com* and *www.thelwordonline.com* allowed viewers to discuss the show and find information on cast, crew, characters, episodes and so on. Interestingly, AfterEllen and Autostraddle, popular culture and lifestyle websites for lesbian, bisexual and queer women, owe their establishment to *The L Word* fandom. As AfterEllen founder, Sarah Warn, reflects, 'it is a business that has literally been built on the lesbian community's interest in *The L Word*' (Warn 2006a: 2). Autostraddle founder Reise notes, the timing of *The L Word*'s broadcast was critical here:

> *The L Word* premiered at a very specific time with respect to the internet's evolution – right when blogging and online community-building was becoming increasingly accessible, wireless internet enabled uber-private browsing,

podcasts were popping up on iTunes and TV recapping was becoming a relatively respected vocation.

(Riese 2014)

In conversations that have continued long after *The L Word* itself ended, the kind of debates outlined in this chapter are taking place in these spaces, as the following chapters will attest.

Conclusion

The L Word remains a central example of lesbian visibility on television, emerging after the 1990s first constituted lesbianism as sellable television trope and before the contemporary emergence of new queer visibility. As the first television programme to make a predominantly lesbian ensemble its focus, the scope of the narratives of gender and sexuality it brought into being remains unparalleled. For all that its critiques matched its popularity, *The L Word*'s unique position mobilized lesbian visibility in a distinctly complex way. Its representation of race and class is problematically limited, as are the forms of visibility offered. Its equal rights agenda and celebration of the happily married lesbian couple invests in a politics of assimilation, but this exists at a site of struggle with its moments of queer feminism. *The L Word*, thus, emerges as a site of tension. It evokes the homonormative, but simultaneously retains a commitment to a broader politics of queer lives and a feminist critique. In doing so it simultaneously *resists* the 'privatizing' and 'demobilizing' of the homonormative, mobilizing the lesbian through a collective environment and community, and insisting on a gendered critique of inequality and violence. Furthermore, in *The L Word*'s multiple representations, alternative possibilities of intimacy and desire are brought into being. Duggan describes the 'new neoliberal sexual politics' of homonormativity as working through a 'rhetorical remapping of public/private boundaries designed to shrink gay public spheres and redefine gay equality against the "civil rights agenda" and "liberationism", as access to the institutions of domestic privacy, the "free" market, and patriotism' (Duggan 2002: 179). What emerges in *The L Word* exceeds this account. The struggles over intimacy, politics, desire, community, gender, bodies and families it mobilizes mediate a broader, less coherent rhetoric. As the lesbian family emerges alongside moments of feminist critique, political art, lesbian communities, sexual practices and cultural references, the privatized re-imaging of queer lives is complicated.

As a television drama, *The L Word* undeniably broke the boundaries of what was possible for the lesbian figure in popular culture. The struggle over queer futures and the ways that we want to and might live and love is opened up in *The*

L Word. Whilst it might have centralized a limited possibility of what that might look like, its contradictions and multiplicities also left that future unresolved, open to queerer, more feminist possibilities. Notably, in 2017 Chaiken confirmed *The L Word* would be relaunched. According to Chaiken, the new *L Word* will, however, reflect the changes of the past decade:

> The writer who is writing the new L Word, she's also the show runner, is Marja-Lewis Ryan. She's incredibly gifted. And what I know she's doing and what I know is important to her, which is also obvious and important to me, is frankly more inclusivity, more inclusion, more diversity, more voices, better representations in all of the ways that we're discussing. She's going to talk about the world as it's changed in these 10 years, the world as it is. My nascent representation of trans experience, my flawed and not-quite-enough representation of different cultures, all of that I think will be more well realised and fully realised in the new *L Word*.
>
> (Chaiken in Bourdillon 2018)

Here, Chaiken acknowledges a number of the critiques explored here, and speaks to a new context for LGBTQ+ representation. Indeed, we have seen both striking change and setbacks since *The L Word* launched in January 2004. Times have changed, and new representations followed *The L Word* that shifted the representational context into an era of new queer visibility. It is notable though that *The L Word* remains unsurpassed in scale. For all its significant limitations, there are powerful moments of queer feminist imagining in *The L Word* that offer rare glimpses of (albeit aspects of and versions of) lesbian lives on screen.

NOTE
1. 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' refers to the policy in place between 1994 and 2011 which prohibited discrimination against closeted lesbian, gay and bisexual service members whilst barring openly LGB people from military service.

3

'Homophobia is so old fashioned':
Skins and the lesbian normal

The February 2010 cover of *Diva*, a UK-based monthly magazine aimed at lesbian and bisexual women, features two teenage actresses, Kathryn Prescott and Lily Loveless. Prescott and Loveless appear in *Diva* to publicize British teen drama *Skins*, in which they appear as lesbian couple Emily Fitch (Prescott) and Naomi Campbell (Loveless). The subheading of their cover story states: 'homophobia is so old fashioned'. The image of Prescott and Loveless is posed to suggest that the two are in bed. The pink backdrop, the femme-punk aesthetic and Loveless' cocktail dress suggest an edgy glamour and a girlish femininity. The racer back of Prescott's top seems to nod to the androgynous or butch lesbian, whilst the heavy make-up evokes a more conventional femininity. Loveless gazes intently at Prescott, their foreheads touching. Prescott, mouth slightly open, looks directly at the viewer. Their pose both invites and rejects the voyeuristic gaze. The connotations of the bed, their touching bodies and tousled hair evoke the desirability of the femme/inine lesbian. At the same time, Prescott's turned back and the challenge of her look form a boundary between our gaze and the desire that invites it. The sexual coding of the setting both seduces and challenges us to see. This knowing image is furthered by the connotations of a history of lesbian coding. With their back-combed hair, dark eyeliner and bleached white skin, Prescott and Loveless evoke the vamp(ire); or the subtextual threat of the vampiric lesbian. Positioned together, the high-contrast image washes out the distinctions between the two bodies. In the symmetry of their positioning and the colour inversion of their clothing and hair, the two figures become the other's mirror image. In the fusing of their bodies their sameness evokes lesbianism as narcissistic desire, in which the 'lesbian couple represents […] feminine narcissism and autoeroticism par excellence' (Creed 2013: 99). The repetition of 'teen' in the other featured headings reminds us of the conflations of the temporary adolescent lesbian. In this complex set of signifiers, that which constitutes the lesbian as threat is knowingly evoked. *Diva* is a mainstream publication, sold in newsagents, supermarkets and high

street shops. Whilst its target audience is lesbian and bisexual women, its cover is visible to a wider audience. Yet, if our gaze is a homophobic one, we are interpellated through the old-fashioned figure of the heading. The cover thus seems to explicitly recall a homophobic response in order to constitute a challenge to it. It evokes a history and constitutes it as over. As it does so, it proclaims a new context for the twenty-first century lesbian figure.

New queer markets and the lesbian normal

When *The L Word* began in 2004 it entered a televisual public in which the lesbian figure remained relatively scarce. The following decade, however, has seen the emergence of what we might recognize as a new televisual landscape. As Marwick et al. suggest, 'since the mid-2000s, the diversity and breadth of gay characters on television has increased' (Marwick et al. 2013: 4). Indeed, recent years have seen a marked increase in gay and lesbian characters, narratives and/or images in popular culture. With long-running dramas introducing lesbian characters and new dramas beginning with central lesbian and bisexual characters, a new wave of lesbian visibility seems to be emerging. F. Hollis Griffin notes the impact of the shift from analogue to digital media: 'this transition has resulted in a proliferation of consumer categories in the media marketplace, shifts that made gay and lesbian audiences eagerly courted demographics' (Griffin 2016: 5). In 2007, the fourth season of US commercial broadcast television network ABC's medical drama *Grey's Anatomy*, for example, showed central character Calliope Torres (Sara Ramirez) develop a relationship with fellow surgeon Erica Hahn (Brooke Smith). Following seasons saw her in a relationship with Arizona Robbins (Jessica Capshaw), whom she went on to marry and raise a daughter with. The couple broke up, but continued to be shown in relationships with women. 2009 saw the first broadcast of Fox show *Glee* with gay, lesbian and bisexual teenagers in its central cast. 2009 also saw British school drama *Waterloo Road* (BBC) introduce lesbian teacher Jo Lipsett (Sarah Jane Potts) and the start of CBS' *The Good Wife*, introducing bisexual private investigator Kalinda Sharma (Archie Panjabi). 2010 saw the first broadcast of *Coronation Street*'s lesbian storyline and ABC's *Pretty Little Liars*. *Pretty Little Liars* is a teen mystery drama based around the lives of four teenage girls following the supposed murder of one of their friends, Alison. With a central theme of secrets and lies, the drama initially portrays central character Emily Fields (Shay Mitchell) as a closeted lesbian, hiding her love for Alison. As the series progresses Emily is shown 'coming out' and having relationships, and a number of supporting characters also emerge as lesbian and bisexual. At the show's resolve, Emily and Alison are a couple, raising twin daughters. Unlike

in previous examples, these lesbian figures emerge neither as marginal nor the premise of the drama. Rather, lesbianism becomes incidental; these characters are normalized into the conventions of the programme. In this sense, this new queer visibility signals a mainstreaming of lesbian representation, and the mobilization of the lesbian normal. *Skins'* Naomi and Emily mark a central early example of the opening up of this new lesbian market; as one fan describes:

> I think the Naomily relationship is and always will be an exceptionally important one. *Skins* brought Naomily about at a time when there was even less lesbian couples on television, especially young lesbian couples. It was before Glee and before Coronation Street and it was almost groundbreaking.
>
> (*Skins* fan, 2011)

This chapter examines *Skins'* groundbreaking lesbian teens, drawing out the ways in which they mobilize a new era of the lesbian normal.

Skins *and the (queer) teen gaze*

Channel Four Television's youth-targeted digital channel E4 first aired *Skins* on 25 January 2007. Produced by Company Pictures, the series was created by Bryan Elsley and his son Jamie Brittain. Elsley and the then teenage Brittain were joined by a team of young writers and teenage consultants. The drama aired until August 2012; running over six series of between eight and ten weekly 44- to 48-minute episodes. The narrative premise was the lives of a changing group of core teenage characters during their two years at the fictional Roundview Sixth Form College in Bristol, a city in the South West of England. This changing cast constituted three 'generations' of *Skins* characters. Following the sixth series and third generation, the drama was initially cancelled in 2012. Rumours of a film followed but were subsequently dropped and a seventh series of three two-part special episodes was announced, airing in summer 2013. These episodes – 'Fire', 'Pure' and 'Rise' – returned to the narratives of a selection of central characters from generations one and two. Original cast members reprised their roles and the drama relocated to London and Manchester. A US adaption of *Skins* aired in 2011 on MTV, but was cancelled after only one season following low ratings and concern over its content.

Such concern was, albeit to a lesser extent, similarly mobilized around the British production. Deborah F. Hunn describes *Skins* as 'a hybrid mix of high school romance, anarchic, ribald satirical comedy and sex, booze and drug fused dirty realism, spliced with occasional genre bending forays into noir or rom-com' (Hunn 2012: 90). Indeed, the programme's depictions of drug taking, drinking

and sex, described by right-wing tabloid *The Daily Mail* as 'a grotesque parody of modern British youth' (*The Daily Mail* 2007), evoked a predictable moral panic from some sections of the press. The programme's advertising campaign, in particular, was met with complaints: Forty-two complaints against a promotional poster featuring first-generation cast members April Pearson (Michelle) and Mike Bailey (Sid) in an 'orgy'-like scene were upheld by the Advertising Standards Agency and the advert was removed. Similarly, a series of news reports described a supposed trend of *Skins*-inspired parties, 'named after the Channel Four drama about appallingly behaved teenagers' (Ballinger 2008: n.pag.). These often-reactionary narratives of *Skins'* teenage figures reflect the drama's stylistic and generic coding. The oppositional relationship between teenager and adult is central to the drama's internal narrative. The spectatorial positioning of the programme is a teenage one, and 'adult' and authority figures are repeatedly characterized by failure, foolishness and ineffectuality. The carnivalesque freedoms of 'the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions' (Bakhtin 1984: 10) evoked in *Skins* are entwined with a narrative of disappointment. The adult characters do not have all the answers and their behaviour is often depicted as the more flawed. This disconnect between adults and teenagers, spectatorially pleasurable in its reversal of social convention, is to a certain extent a staple of teen drama. *Skins'* teen-centred production, its 'unique story telling of young people' (*Skins* fan, 2011), does, however, seem particularly effective.

Alongside these much-hyped themes, the drama also portrays various complex and often controversial 'issues': including eating disorders, religion, family, teenage pregnancy, death, mental health, bullying, work, friendship and, centrally to this account, sexuality.[1] Series 1 and 2 featured a central gay character in Maxxie Oliver (Mitch Hewer). The relationship between Maxxie and central character Tony Stonem (Nicholas Hoult) was both flirtatious and, on one occasion, sexual. In Series 3, a lesbian narrative is first introduced in the characters of Naomi and Emily. Series 5 and 6 evoke further ambiguity in the relationship between Mini McGuinness (Freya Mavor) and Franky Fitzgerald (Dakota Blue Richards), a character who also made visible questions of gender identity. In this sense *Skins* might be read as coded through what one interviewee describes as 'shades of queer' (*Skins* fan, 2011) and another as 'fluid' (*Skins* fan, 2011): 'Everyone in this generation is in love with more than one person … I think everyone in *Skins* is fluid (and has the capability of being with the same sex) and half in love with other characters' (*Skins* fan, 2011). These accounts echo Erin Tatum's exploration of *Skins'* 'queer friendships', what Tatum describes as 'emotional and erotic experimentations that distort and expose the possible artificiality of the ways that society classifies relationships' (Tatum 2013a).

Skins as transmedia TV

Skins' distinctiveness resided not only in its content, but also in its production and circulation. *Skins* aired as television was increasingly capitalizing on the potential of transmedia production. The use of new technologies of spectatorship and the development of new media platforms was effectively captured by the *Skins* production team. As with all of the channel's main programmes, *Skins* is available to watch again through Channel Four Television Corporation's 'video on demand' service, All 4 (previously 4oD). The series had official pages on the E4 website; the content of which changed according to the particular series/generation. Generally, these pages hosted various 'behind the scenes' interviews, images, videos and so on. They have also included episode playlists, style guides, character profiles, trailers, quizzes and news. They have featured interactive competitions and invited viewers to engage with *Skins* through attending parties, open auditions and opportunities to work with the production team. One winner of a short film competition, Daniel Lovett, went on to join the *Skins* writing team. *Skins* characterized the increasing central use of social media in 'transmedia storytelling' (Jenkins 2006: 93). As del Mar Grandío and Bonaut note, 'Myspace, Twitter or Facebook are among the social networks most used by TV networks to link specific content to their official sites and to generate an interaction between viewers and the fictional characters' (del Mar Grandío and Bonaut 2012: 558–59). *Skins* used these spaces to extend beyond the traditional boundaries of the television screen. Content design and creation company, 'Somethin' Else', worked with Company Pictures to produce this content for the fifth and sixth series. They describe their intention 'to bring the characters to life online':

> The core success of *Skins* is simple: authentic storytelling. We had to make that true on all platforms. We started with the characters and their online lives – Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr and YouTube. But how do we use these spaces to tell stories? Well, if we're going to undertake 'authentic storytelling' in these places, obviously in this case it means the characters must have lives between the broadcast of the episodes […] stories emerge in real time, at the right time of day, and of course, audiences can interact with the world of *Skins* in new ways.
>
> (Feuerlicht 2012: n.pag.)

This account highlights the ways in which transmedia storytelling is built into contemporary television production, with *Skins* a forerunner in this now established practice.

Skins' use of these different platforms is in part effective because of the ways in which it mirrors and facilitates fan media use. Fans are, after all, already making

use of multiple platforms: 'fan authors use a range of technologies, interfaces and forms in their creative authorship, from the word-processing programme Microsoft Word to write fanfiction, to Photoshop to create icons and manipulated figures, to pen, paper, and a digital camera to capture hand drawn illustrations' (Stein 2006). The opening up of online media has seen fandoms increasingly take up microblogging, social networking and media sharing sites such as YouTube, Facebook, Live Journal, Twitter and Tumblr, as well as fansites and forums (such as fanpop.com and fanfiction.net). Fans often have multiple cross platform accounts, and fan media (images, GIFs, blogs, videos, commentary, fanfictions) are easily produced and circulated (retweeted, reblogged, shared). As one interviewee described:

> On Tumblr they have made many blogs about Naomily. Personally I love them so much that I started my own Naomily blog too. It's something we all discuss, and fangirl over.
>
> (*Skins* fan, 2013)

Skins both engaged with and facilitated fan media platforms, releasing extra material, opening up opportunities for participation and directly engaging with fans through social media. *Skins* thus engages in a particularly successful version of the 'flow of content across multiple media platforms' (Jenkins 2006: 2) that Jenkins posits as central to convergence culture. As Jenkins suggests then, we might see the complex interplay between fans, producers and media as no longer 'occupying separate roles', but 'as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules' (Jenkins 2006: 3). A tension is inherent to these spaces however, as these changes might both 'open new opportunities for expression' and 'expand the power of big media' (Jenkins 2006: 11). As Hunn argues, whilst *Skins'* production team developed a relatively positive relationship with the *Skins* fandom, a 'hierarchical binary structure persists beneath the surface of team *Skins*' sympathetically conceived and critically well regarded participatory agenda' (Hunn 2012: 90). Nonetheless, *Skins* emerged as a successful example of teen-centred transmedia television; a programme already dispersed through multiple media platforms and extending a participatory relationship to the active viewer. It is into this context that *Skins'* first lesbian couple emerge.

Lesbian romance: Naomi and Emily

The third series of *Skins* introduces a new generation of characters. Mirroring the first two series, second-generation *Skins* features an ensemble cast around

a central character: Effy Stonem (Kaya Scodelario), the younger sister of first-generation character, Tony. We are first introduced to Emily Fitch (and her twin sister Katie, played by Meg Prescott), in the first episode of Series 3 ('Everyone' 2009). An early segment foregrounds the centrality of this character. In a series of shots, we watch Emily prepare for the first day of term at Roundview College. We are quickly located in an intimate proximity with this character. As she carefully prepares an outfit, laying out each piece on a bed in a messy teenage bedroom, a series of point-of-view and close-up shots keeps the viewer in close proximity to this figure. Minimal dialogue positions us alone with her, providing a spectatorial insight into the 'private' setting of her house and bedroom. Her frustrated inter-actions with family members (her sister has used all of the hot water, her brother is spying on her, her mother ignores her complaints and asks her to make her brother lunch) further the sympathetic framing of this subjective camera. As she dresses, her literal nudity signifies a vulnerability that increases our connection to her. Furthermore, the narrative coding of newcomer at school is a familiar one as the premise of numerous teen dramas. Emily's nervous optimism further evokes our sympathies as we recognize the conventions of a narrative guide. Thus, this brief early narrative constructs our identificatory gaze with this sympathetic and accessible figure.

A subsequent scene uses the school assembly to bring the majority of the second-generation characters together for the first time. As it does so, it intro-duces the character of Naomi Campbell. In the first shared screen space of these characters, a look is exchanged that signposts the narrative to follow. The tension of this look evokes a history of lesbian looks: the legacy of 'hints and subtexts' (Whatling 1997: 2). The possibility of emerging from the subtext is posited when we are told that the two characters once shared a kiss. Although the framing of the kiss – a drug-fuelled party transgression – might evoke the temporary, the sugges-tion of narrative development is implicit. In a series of shots, Naomi is constituted as the object of Emily's gaze. As the assembly continues we see from Emily's per-spective, an out-of-focus Naomi positioned at the edge of the frame. That she is slightly out of our vision seems to mirror her seeming unattainability. The clarity of Emily's look and our identification with her make us witness to this hidden desire. In these early scenes, lesbian desire remains a secret, but it is one that we are both narratively and spectatorially positioned alongside.

Over the series, the subsequent narrative sees this potentiality unfold. A second kiss at another party provides the first assurance that lesbian desire will emerge from the subtext. Naomi's similarly closeted desire becomes reluctantly apparent at the same time as Emily's feelings are more explicitly framed. A series of flirta-tions and retreats culminate in an episode focused on Naomi's character ('Naomi' 2009). In a romantically coded series of scenes, the two characters cycle to a

picturesque lakeside location in the woods. Arriving at the lake, Emily once more removes her clothes and stands dressed only in her underwear at the edge of the lake. As Naomi hesitates, they connote the tensions of the coming out narrative they inhabit. Emily, open in her desire for Naomi and ready to face its implications, is first to both reveal her body and enter the water.

A bridging shot of water falling on a rock and a soundtrack of the two characters laughing in the water marks the shift to evening. We cut to a close-up of Naomi drinking from a vodka bottle; this time it is Emily's head that is just out of focus at the edge of the shot. The camera cuts to a medium shot that frames the two characters, mirroring each other in matching outfits of oversized jumpers, bare legs and damp hair. Lit with a warm glowing light with a soundtrack of nighttime woodland, the quietness of this scene draws us more intimately into these characters. A series of reverse-angle shots of their conversation cuts to a close-up of their joined hands on the blanket. The leap into the water and emergence from it seems to signify a rebirth or change. Stripped of their usual attire, the characters are reduced to their mutual desire and this pivotal moment. When Emily suggests they do 'blowbacks',[2] they turn to face one another and in a series of close-up shots we see Naomi kiss Emily and the pair begin to remove each other's clothes and have sex for the first time. In these intimate, romantically coded scenes, lesbian sexuality emerges as unambiguously visible.

The narrative tension is, however, continued with further complications to their relationship. Naomi is shown to leave Emily the morning after the lake scene, and, although they continue to share romantic moments, it is not until the penultimate episode of the series that the relationship is confirmed by both characters. At the end of term 'Love Ball' that marks the approaching end of this series, Emily 'comes out' to the assembled students when she tells her sister: 'I can't fix this. I like girls. No, I like a girl. No, I love her. Ok? I love… her' ('Katie and Emily' 2009). When Naomi too makes her position public they leave the ball hand in hand. The generic setting of the school dance foregrounds the significance of this moment. Emily and Naomi finally emerge as intelligible figures of teen romance, their narrative an 'epic lesbian love story' (Sharkey 2013).

In her analysis of 'postfeminist romance' Gill describes romance as 'one of the key narratives by which we are interpellated or inscribed as subjects' (Gill 2007a: 218). The romance narrative remains a key site of heterosexism. Yet, it is reworked here with Naomi and Emily as central romantic protagonists. *Skins* writer, Ed Hime, evokes this romantic discourse when he reflects on these characters:

> They were so pure and so innocent compared to the Effy, Freddy and Cook storyline, which I do love but it was so nihilist and grinding. The motivations

of those characters were a little obscure, but with Emily and Naomi, you knew that they were supposed to be together and Emily really recognized something in Naomi that no one else did.

<div align="right">(in Sarah and Lee 2010)</div>

This romantic coding is repeatedly evoked in 'Naomily' fandom, as one interviewee describes: 'it really is crystal clear just how much they love each other, even at the start if you look hard enough' (*Skins* fan, 2011). Similarly, another interviewee described their relationship as 'one of a kind, special. I believe that they would last forever' (*Skins* fan, 2013). The romance narrative thus emerges as central to these lesbian figures. It is both what marks them as familiar – it mobilizes recognizable codes of intimacy and storytelling – and what makes them so distinctive. In emerging through these codes Naomi and Emily occupy the narrative position usually reserved for the heterosexual couple; they usurp the symbolic figures Berlant and Warner describe as the 'referent or privileged example of sexual culture' (Berlant and Warner 1998: 548). Yet, as Gill argues, to queer romance would require:

> not simply replacing heterosexual protagonists with homosexual ones, but, more fundamentally, questioning the very binaries on which conventional romance depends (male/female, gay/straight, virgin/whore, etc.) as well as the premise of fixed identity and the idea that the declaration of monogamy represents narrative closure.

<div align="right">(Gill 2007a: 225)</div>

In this sense, Naomi and Emily might both reshape and leave intact the normative conventions of romance. Nonetheless, a lesbian romance taking up this position of narrative centrality is significant in a heteronormative media culture.

New lesbian figures

In her consideration of 'breaking silence', Wendy Brown suggests that 'it is possible […] that this ostensible tool of emancipation carries its own techniques of subjugation' (Brown 2005: 84). Brown suggests that, for all the limits of silence, speech 'converges with unemancipatory tendencies in contemporary culture, establishes regulatory norms, coincides with the disciplinary power of ubiquitous confessional practices; in short, it may feed the powers it meant to starve' (Brown 2005: 84). For Brown, 'speech, because it is always particular speech, vanquishes other possible speech' (Brown 2005: 83). In the same way, visibility is always *particular* visibility;

as the new lesbian figure comes into being, she becomes normative in the repetition of a *particular* lesbian figure; a figure that both opens up and forecloses possibilities of queer belonging.

As in the *Diva* cover image, the Naomily narrative evokes conventional tropes of lesbian representation. *Skins*' teenage figures speak to, and reject, the silencing of lesbian desire – 'I want to have sex with girls […] I like girls. I like their rosy lips, their hard nipples, bums, soft eyes… I like tits and fanny, you know?' (Emily, 'JJ' 2009) – and narratives of inauthenticity. The adolescent framing of what appears at first as secret desire and drug-fuelled transgression is challenged by their narrative trajectory. As Emily's rebuke to Naomi makes clear, 'I'm not your fucking experiment' ('Katie and Emily' 2009). Naomi's hesitancy to 'come out' is in part contextualized by the representation of homophobia. Both Emily's sister, Katie, and mother, Jenna, mobilize a homophobic discourse. Katie's response is largely explained through the drama's account of the tensions of the sibling relationship, adolescence and identity. Jenna, on the other hand, evokes a more classic homophobic response: the drama sees her excluding Naomi from a 'family dinner', and telling Emily she is 'too young' to know she is a lesbian. The drama takes a critical position in its framing of homophobia, positioning Naomi and Emily as the sympathetic characters. Critically, the legitimacy of Jenna's position is undermined by her characterization and the broader framing of the drama. As previously argued, *Skins* positions the older generation on the margins of its gaze. Furthermore, Jenna is a fairly unsympathetic character, often mobilized for comic effect. The secondary narrative portrays a strained marriage, with Jenna the culturally familiar trope of overbearing wife and mother. Furthermore, she is coded as superficial; the ideal family an illusion she actively performs. Through Jenna, homophobia emerges – and emerges through the already oppositional older generation – in order to be rejected. Other characters, in particular the core teenage group, are portrayed as accepting the couple with little note. The school setting and broader social environments are, for Naomi and Emily, largely homophobia-free spaces. They are also, notably, isolated, spaces, where these queer individuals emerge with no connection to broader queer contexts (there are no lesbian bars frequented, no queer friends, no sense of history, politics or community). In these ways *Skins* 'normalizes' these characters into its conventions and storylines. The normalizing of Naomi and Emily marks a contemporary mode of lesbian representation. Homophobia and limited representational tropes are mobilized in order to be surpassed, and the new lesbian figure emerges as an integrated one – indistinguishable in all other ways from her heterosexual peers.

Central to this process of normalization is the lack of lesbian coding. In promotional images Naomi and Emily are coded as feminine, with styled hair and make-up, but not overly glamorous. Their outfits position them towards a

fashion-conscious, teenage audience; their poses often casual and not overly sexualized. Similarly, within the drama, Emily and Naomi are narratively and visually coded through a normalized teen femininity, as one interviewee describes: 'neither actress looks like your typical lesbian stereotype' (*Skins* fan, 2011). Indeed, they are not coded as femme, butch, in-betweener or any other queer subjectivity, rather, connoting young, white, middle-class femininity. Whilst this might evoke the passing of the lesbian femme, femme arguably 'goes far beyond the standards of whitemiddleclass feminine propriety' (Albrecht-Samarasinha 1997: 142). Lisa Walker describes femme as 'an identity, not just an adjective, which is decidedly queer, encompassing gender, style, sexual practice, and alliance with other queers' (Walker 2012: 795). It is hard to read these in these figures, who seem to slip unobtrusively into otherwise largely heteronormative social worlds, with few possibilities for 'alliance with other queers'.

This visual coding is central to the lesbian figures of new queer visibility. *Coronation Street*'s Sophie and Sian are coded through the less stylized, more working-class femininity of the soap opera, but similarly unmarked as lesbian figures. *Glee*'s lesbian and bisexual cheerleaders, Brittany (Heather Morris) and Santana (Naya Rivera) appear for the majority of the early seasons in cheerleading costumes, coded through the familiar symbol of the American high school girl. In the multiple publicity images of the four central characters of *Pretty Little Liars* and in the drama itself – Spencer (Troian Bellisario), Aria (Lucy Hale), Emily (Shay Mitchell) and Hannah (Ashley Benson) – lesbian character, Emily, is visually indistinguishable from the other characters. The visual codes of new queer visibility vary by genre, production context, audience and so on – the glossy figures of the all-American high school of *Pretty Little Liars*, for example, contrast with *Coronation Street*'s realist aesthetic – but are similar in the way in which they all work to normalize the lesbian figure into the conventions of the respective programmes. Warner argues that 'to have dignity gay people must be seen as normal' (Warner 2000: 52). These figures mobilize 'the lesbian normal', decoding the lesbian figure and integrating her into the popular imaginary.

'The lesbian normal' is multiple in its effects. On the one hand, it rejects a history of othering and marginalization. As the lesbian figure is 'normalized', she is made imaginable on a broader scale. Furthermore, lesbian and queer desire emerges as something that cannot be contained to the recognizable. If the all-American girl, a member of a soap opera family and the trendy teenager can all be lesbians, so might anyone. The lesbian normal might thus evoke Duggan and Kathleen McHugh's account of the postmodern femme as 'signifier of another kind of gender trouble': 'not a performer of legible gender transgression' like the butch lesbian or the drag queen 'but a betrayer of legibility itself'. Her seeming normality itself a site of rupture as 'she occupies normality abnormally' (Duggan

and McHugh 2002: 167). At the same time, it is her similarity to conventional femininity and heterosexuality that grants her access to the normal. As previously argued, this opens up critical slippages.

Intrusion

Episode 1 of the fourth series (the second for this generation of characters) opens to a dark screen, the sound of sniffing and distant music just audible ('Thomas' 2010). As the image fades in, the figure of a girl becomes visible. Her dark curled hair, the glitter on her cheeks and the white dress she is wearing evoke an innocence belied by the MDMA[3] she is rubbing into her gums. As she turns away, a tracking shot follows her as she opens a door and enters a stairway. As she climbs the stairs the music rises, and the nightclub setting becomes clear to the viewer. She passes central character Cook and an unfamiliar figure having sex in a corner and a drunk boy lying on the floor. She pushes open a door, the music gets louder and the camera pans the club scene before her. She walks through the busy crowd, none of whom seem to recognize her, passing other core characters Katie, Freddie, Panda and JJ. Reaching the other side of the room, she begins to climb another staircase, this time to a platform above the dance floor. On her way we see her glance at Naomi and Emily, who appear kissing against a railing, before slowly continuing upwards. Positioned alongside her, the spectator is unusually removed from the central *Skins* characters and placed within an unpredictable internal narrative. Reaching the platform, the scene below is shot from her point of view. Cutting to a medium shot from behind the girl, this narrative arc is revealed as we see her begin to climb the railing. An unsettling low-angled shot frames the unknown girl for a brief pause before her inevitable fall is shown in a series of frames. Her white dress billowing behind her, she hits the floor and we are released from our identificatory position.

This hard-hitting opening scene begins a less popular narrative for Naomi and Emily. In Episode 2 – a film-noir-inspired mystery narrative with Emily as detective – it is revealed that Naomi sold MDMA to the girl, Sophia, on the night of her suicide ('Emily' 2010). This revelation motivates Emily to visit Sophia's home. In a tense scene with Sophia's mother, it is revealed that Sophia spoke about Naomi and Emily as if they were friends. Entering her bedroom, Emily finds the walls filled with drawings, art work and repeated images of hearts and female nudes. Opening a university prospectus, she finds an image of Sophia and Naomi. When Sophia's brother enters and asks if Emily was his sister's girlfriend, he voices what is suggested in the images. As he does so, Sophia too emerges as a visible lesbian figure.

The image of Naomi and Sophia is initially explained by the pair having met at a university open day. Reconciled, Naomi and Emily investigate Sophia's army

cadet locker, revealing a hidden shrine to Naomi. A battery-operated candle lights a framed drawing of Naomi's face, in front lie her old toothbrush, an empty biscuit packet and lost bracelet. In the midst of this narrative Emily is seen arguing with her mother, Jenna, who rejects her relationship with Naomi. Refusing her mother's homophobic response Emily leaves the family home and moves in with Naomi. The Sophia narrative re-emerges, however, when Emily arranges to meet Sophia's brother later that night. Naomi follows her and in an emotive scene the final reveal takes place. Opening a wooden box found in the locker, Sophia's brother finds a notebook. He passes it to Emily, who begins to read the story it contains: 'Love on a Train'. A voice-over tells the story from Sophia's perspective as images are animated to illustrate her words. It is through these images that we learn that Naomi and Sophia slept together.

In the disruptive figure of Sophia, the legacy of the deviant lesbian is recalled. Emerging through a narrative of tragedy and suicide, her obsessive desire poses a threat to the central couple. The possibility of lesbianism as pathological (Sophia), tragic (Sophia), dead (Sophia), duplicitous (Naomi) and destructive (Naomi) intrudes into this narrative of contemporary romance. However, although it is revealed that Naomi betrayed Emily with Sophia, the portrayal of Sophia's excessive and imaginary relationship with the couple posits her as the truly deviant figure. Ultimately, she is expunged, secured as an interruption in a narrative in which she did not belong. Significantly, her death does not signify a return to a heterosexual trajectory, but a reunion of a lesbian couple. In the Sophia narrative, a history of pathology is evoked, resolved and expelled. Her expulsion is a necessary condition for the survival of the viable lesbian figures. In this figure, homophobic codes are once more made present and marked as the past.

Resolution

Naomi and Emily are ultimately reunited in the final episode of the fourth series; the final appearance of the second-generation cast. Mirroring Emily in series three, Naomi draws the narrative to a resolve with a public declaration of love. Familiarly positioned in a series of intimate close-ups, we see the pair unite in an emotive declaration of romantic love. In the only happy romantic resolution of the series, Naomi and Emily are secured as the central love story of second-generation *Skins*. Evoking Gill's description of 'the declaration of monogamy' as 'narrative closure' (Gill 2007a: 225), Naomi tells Emily:

> I've loved you since the first time I saw you. I think I was twelve. It took me three years to pluck up the courage to speak to you. And I was so scared about

the way I felt, you know, loving a girl, so I learned how to become a sarcastic bitch to kind-of feel normal. I screwed guys to make it go away, but it didn't work. When we got together it scared the shit out of me, because you were the one person who could ruin my life. I pushed you away. I made you think things were your fault. But really I was just terrified of pain. I screwed that girl, Sophia, to kind-of spite you for having that hold on me, and I'm a total fucking coward because I got these tickets to Goa for us three months ago, But I, I couldn't stand… I didn't want to be a slave to the way I feel about you, can you understand? You were trying to punish me back and it's horrible. It's so horrible, because really… I'd die for you. I love you. I love you so much it's killing me.

('Everyone' 2010)

From the unrequited love of early Emily, to love triumphing over adversity, to the betrayal and eventual reunion, Naomily is fundamentally mobilized through this narrative convention. Yet, what marks the entry of these lesbian figures into public visibility is their normalized account. As these 'everyday' figures rework the conventions of the classic love story, they emerge, as these interviewees describe, as 'two characters who are in love rather than two girls who like each other' (*Skins* fan, 2013). This is echoed by scriptwriter Ed Hime: 'I didn't really think of them as lesbians for quite a while' (in Sarah and Lee 2010). Rather, Hime conceptualized Naomi and Emily 'as people' of whom he wanted to 'tell an emotionally honest story' (in Sarah and Lee 2010). These accounts mobilize a complex set of shifting discourses of identity, gender and sexuality. In this sense, it is their mobilization through the ordinary that constitutes these figures as so powerful. Lesbian intimacies become indistinguishable from the conventions of romance. A slippage emerges between Naomi and Emily as *lesbian* figures and Naomi and Emily as individuals who transcend such labels. For April Sharkey, this sense of fluidity is central to their success as contemporary figures:

> The success of *Skins* in a queer context lies in the inclusion of content that consists of sexual and gender exploration and highlights the fluidity of the subjectivities of gender, sexuality, and teen-hood, along with other identities, such as race and class. By mirroring what adolescence sometimes looks like, along with the instability of being a gendered and sexual individual, with hormones firing on all cylinders, *Skins* represents many of the realities of growing up queer in the 21st century.
>
> (Sharkey 2013: n. pag.)

Responding to an interview question about Naomi's sexuality in the *Diva* magazine article, *Skins* actress Lily Loveless replies:

I think she's probably bi […] but I also don't think it's that important. Now that she's come to terms with the fact that likes girls, it's more about the fact that she likes who she likes, whether a boy or a girl. So maybe she's bi or maybe you can't put a title on her. I don't think she'd want the title, she's more like, 'if I like someone, I like someone'.

<div align="right">(2010)</div>

Similarly, the article reports that, 'when pressed to define their sexuality, both women explain that they prefer not to label themselves' (2010). These accounts echo sexualities' research such as Driver's work on 'queer girls', in which participants 'refused familiar and straightforward categorizations'. Driver describes the ways in which queer youth 'position and name their sexualities' as working to 'avert regimentation' (Driver 2007: 42). Similarly, Liz McDermott's work on LGBT youth and self-harm notes 'the fluidity and contingency of sexual and gender identities' (McDermott et al. 2013: 130). As in other examples (including *Glee*'s Naya Rivera and Heather Morris and *Coronation Street*'s Brooke Vincent and Sacha Parkinson), the possibility of a relationship between Prescott and Loveless also circulated through fan spaces – often tagged as 'LilyKat' in online posts. Again, the emphasis here was less on the actresses' sexual identification, and more about the possibility of queer romance.

What emerges in these accounts disrupts the fixity of both the heteronormative and the homonormative; lesbian desires emerge as multiple and uncontainable possibilities. In the suggestion of flexibility evoked in the Naomily/LilyKat figures' sexuality is untethered from a heteronormative imperative, and the young person struggling against regulatory categories of sexuality might be offered a frame of recognition. At the same time, however, as these figures destabilize sexual categorization, they might engage in what Lisa Blackman describes as 'a re-making of sexual kinds' in which they emerge as 'post-gay' (Blackman 2009: 124). As such, they might simultaneously evoke the 'heteroflexible': 'an invitation to straight men and women to open themselves to the possibility of emotional and sexual same-sex relationships' (Blackman 2009: 124). Flexibility in this sense, however, emerges through a 'logic of movement and expansion' that 'enacts or performs cultural norms that present the normative subject as one exercising choice, freedom, and autonomy' (Blackman 2009: 124). As 'across advertising and entertainment industries, girls are being universally celebrated and marketed as ideally adaptable, preeminently desirable, fiercely independent and indefinitely open to change' (Driver 2007: 7), this mobilization of sexual fluidity might take on multiple meanings. As Driver argues, popular representations of sexual fluidity might function in a way that 'both constructs and forecloses queer girl desires' (Driver 2007: 7). *Skins*' representation of 'the fluidity of the subjectivities of gender, sexuality, and teen-hood'

(Sharkey 2013: n.pag.) is normalized into the every-day of teen drama; unlike *The L Word*, *Skins* makes little reference to a broader lesbian/gay culture or politics. Thus, as isolated figures Naomi and Emily might function to mediate queer identifications in ways that simultaneously obscure and depoliticize.

Death and futurity

Central to the move towards the homonormative is a desire for entry into future imaginaries. This desire emerges in the context of normative social imaginaries in which, as Dustin Bradley Goltz describes, 'LGBTQ+ people are people without futures – doomed peoples' (Goltz 2013: 136). In the history of queer representation, narratives of punishment, death and recuperation repeatedly disavow possibilities of sustainable queer futures: 'discourses of future punish queerness' (Goltz 2013: 136). As Berlant describes, the dominant 'logic of the national future' relies on the generational form of the family, mobilizing inclusion as 'straight, white, reproductively inclined heterosexual' (Berlant 1997: 18). Excluded from this trajectory, what Halberstam describes as 'queer time' – 'the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing' (Halberstam 2005: 2) – might be opened up. At the same time, to be excluded from the dominant markers of social belonging is often to experience various symbolic and material forms of suffering. In this context, access to futurity, even on homonormative terms, is often both desirable and, indeed, necessary.

Skins has a complex relationship to narratives of futurity. On the one hand, it mobilizes a break from the past. Its lesbian figures constitute the new. At the same time, in the world of *Skins* the future is not uncomplicatedly an optimistic one. The narrative of progression demanded by normative accounts of futurity is denied in *Skins*. As Halberstam argues, 'in western cultures, we chart the emergence of the adult from the dangerous and unruly period of adolescence as a desired process of maturation' (Halberstam 2005: 152). Yet, whilst adolescence may evoke the unruly within *Skins*, maturity does not offer order. The troubled adults of *Skins'* teen gaze disrupt the ideal figures of the future. Family, marriage and authority are repeatedly complicated in *Skins* in ways that do trouble the centrality of 'the institutions of family, heterosexuality and reproduction' (Halberstam 2005: 1).

This is further complicated by the ultimate resolve to this narrative. Three years after Naomily's romantic reunion, Channel Four aired three two-part *Skins* episodes. One of these episodes, *Skins Fire*, brought Naomi and Emily back to the screen. Interviewing fans prior to the airing of this episode, many expressed an anxiety as to the direction their narrative would take. Fans expressed concern that they would survive at all, suggesting familiarity with the conventions of lesbian representation. Sadly, fan concern was to prove justified as the narrative

saw Naomi diagnosed with an unspecified case of terminal cancer. Keeping the cancer a secret from Emily, who is absent for much of the two-part episode, the viewer sees little of the couple together. Emily is eventually informed and the pair once more reunite, but are ultimately and irrevocably separated by Naomi's death ('Fire: Part One' 2013; 'Fire: Part Two' 2013). In this narrative, this contemporary representation is resolved with another dead lesbian. Naomily's final framing is one of tragedy and heartbreak. Furthermore, with the certainty of her death, these teen figures are fixed in their liminality. In this move, these new images and narratives of lesbian visibility end with two of their three lesbian figures dead and one left heartbroken. A happy ending is denied and with it a future; there is no normative recuperation, but neither is there a 'life unscripted by […] conventions' (Halberstam 2005: 2). These figures might thus propose a radical refusal of the future: perhaps there can be no happy ending on these terms. We might recall here Lee Edelman's call to 'withdraw our allegiance […] from a reality based on the Ponzi scheme of reproductive futurism' (Edelman 2004: 4). At the same time, the absence of a future is also the absence of intelligibility: an impossible, if disruptive, trajectory. Furthermore, this narrative ultimately remobilizes the lesbian as 'doomed peoples' (Goltz 2013: 136). In this sense, *Skins'* teen lesbian figures evoke an unsustainability and a liminality that is, paradoxically, 'old fashioned'.

Notably, Naomi is not alone in continuing the dead lesbian trope. Whilst *Pretty Little Liars'* Emily and Alison are awarded a happy ever after, the show killed off a number of other lesbian and bisexual characters in its seven-year run. As Heather Hogan wrote in an article on Autostraddle in 2016: '*Pretty Little Liars* has now killed more queer and trans women than any other TV show' (Hogan 2016: n. pag.). Popular British BBC drama *Last Tango in Halifax* brought a lesbian couple into the centre of its narrative, only for one of the couple to be killed in a car accident the day after their wedding. As Kaite Welsh wrote in *The Guardian*: 'Killing off half of a middle-aged lesbian couple – and a woman who also happens to be the show's only character of colour – is a retrogressive move' (Welsh 2015: n.pag.). They are joined in the persistent dead lesbian trope by lesbian, bisexual and queer characters in a number of shows of varying genres, including: *Defiance*, *House of Cards*, *Supernatural*, *True Blood*, *Jessica Jones*, *Empire*, *Emmerdale* and *The 100*. In 2016, Netflix's *Orange Is the New Black*, which as Debra Ferreday observed in 2015, initially 'attracted critical acclaim and a huge feminist following for the challenge it mounts to dominant media representations of women' (Ferreday 2015: n. pag.), shocked fans with the murder of Black lesbian character Poussey Washington (Samira Wiley). Thus, even as the lesbian normal opens up new spaces for queer women's representation, visibility remains unstable, as what has come to be known as the 'bury your gays' trope continues to curtail possibilities of queer futurity.

Conclusion

Skins can indeed be read as a 'groundbreaking' television. It evokes a new struggle over the lesbian figure and the terms on which she can enter public discourse. In part, this is an entry defined by the rejection of the regulatory tropes of the past. It opens up new possibilities for representations of intimacy and desire. It blurs the conventional narratives of romance. It suggests an integration into the 'normal' that fundamentally disturbs the presumed predictability of sexuality. These normalized characters mobilize an 'unmarked' lesbian figure which refuses to conform to conventional narratives of gender and sexuality. In a potentially radical move, the lesbian figure becomes the everyday; it is no longer certain what constitutes this figure, and thus she cannot be contained. Naomi and Emily mobilize a hopeful narrative of viable lesbian desire, even if it is ultimately closed down in Naomi's death. At the same time, as they open up new possibilities they might also close down others. As homophobia becomes old fashioned so too do the LGBTQ+ and feminist politics struggled over in *The L Word*. In this sense, struggle might be relegated to both the personal and the past. Love both secures and displaces the lesbian, even as it makes this figure unapologetically visible. An individual narrative of neo-liberal 'sameness' is evoked here in ways that secure, to some extent, the homonormative. An unfixed fluidity mobilizes the lesbian figure through flexible terms. At the same time, the future emerges as both troubled and troubling. These figures refuse or are refused a normative narrative of futurity. The version of intimacy they evoke remains complex and unresolved. It is perhaps radically transformed and newly 'rendered governable' (Richardson 2005: 522) in these new lesbian figures. At the same time, as interviews with fans attest, the new visibility of the lesbian figure offers a scene of recognition; recognition that has undeniable significance in the social world through which it moves, in which LGBTQ+ youth remain vulnerable to various forms of violence and exclusion.

NOTES

1. This locates *Skins* in a distinct genre of teen drama (such as *Grange Hill*, *Waterloo Road*, *Dawson's Creek*, *Gossip Girl*, *The O.C*, *As If*, *One Tree Hill*, *My So Called Life*). The genre largely emerged in the 1990s with the US television series *Beverly Hills, 90210*.
2. When a joint is blown backwards into another person's mouth.
3. MDMA refers to the purer, powder form of ecstasy.

4

'*Skins*' truest legacy':
The counterpublics of Naomily fandom

The new visibility signalled by figures such as *Skins'* Naomi and Emily marks a shift in the terms of public culture, a new era in LGBTQ+ visibility and the mediation of new forms of queer belonging. Critically, however, these representations extend far beyond the original televisual platform. In the production and circulation of fan media, TV's lesbian figures are opened up in ways that extend their possibilities as they are made open to appropriative readings. If Naomi and Emily's relationship came to a tragic end on television, in fandom, their narrative continues in multiple coexisting ways. Furthermore, as fans engage with these characters online, what might be described as counterpublic sites of recognition and sociability are brought into being. Drawing on fan media and interviews with fanfiction writers, this and the following chapters offer an insight into 'the social life' (Tyler 2011: 212) of television's new queer visibility as it emerges in online fandom. Fandom has long had a central role in facilitating queer pleasures in popular culture, and a particular concern with issues of gender and sexuality. New media platforms, and the changing relationships between producers and audiences, have, however, opened up new dynamics and possibilities for queer fans. As Jenkins argued in 2007: 'we should no longer be talking about fans as if they were somehow marginal to the ways the culture industries operate when these emerging forms of consumer power have been the number one topic of discussion at countless industry conferences over the past few years' (Jenkins 2007: 362). Critically, as one *Skins* fan and fanfiction writer reflected in 2018, fandom can open up powerful sites of belonging that exceed, and outlive, the media that inspired them:

> The *Skins* fandom has naturally drifted off in different directions, but I am thrilled that I am still in touch with people who I brought into contact with through *Skins*. We are all liking different shows, and fighting different lesbian and bi battles, but with some I still feel a certain kinship. We survived the *Skins* fandom together, and our lives are better because of it […] this is the long lasting impact

of representation, of finding people online through a shared experience of some-
thing as wonderful as two gay/bi characters […]. That is *Skins*' truest legacy.

(*Skins* fan, 2018)

Skins *fanfiction*

Fanfiction has been central to the development and study of fandom. Although
its roots can be traced back to the 1920s and 1930s, fanfiction largely emerged
in public culture in the 1960s (Coppa 2006). Fanfiction is most closely associ-
ated with early *Star Trek* fandom: 'A creative *Trek* culture rapidly developed
through the proliferation of fanzines like *Spockanalia*, *ST-Phile*, *T-Negative*, and
Warp Nine: A Star Trek Chronicle' (Coppa 2006: 45). The following decades saw
fanfiction become increasingly established, with technological advances in the
1990s seeing a move into online spaces. Using early digital technologies, fandoms
emerged through electronic correspondence (via GEnnie) and subscription-based
discussion boards (Usenet), technologies that were not widely accessible. Thus, as
Coppa argues, 'fans, as a group, were technologically ahead of the curve; many
worked from VT 100 terminals at university computer labs or were early adopters
of home computing equipment' (Coppa 2006: 53). With the increase in access to
such technologies, the early 2000s saw fanfiction move more publicly through the
blogosphere (Hellekson and Busse 2006).

Hellekson and Busse define the three main fanfiction genres as '*gen*, *het* and
slash' (Hellekson and Busse 2006: 10)[1]: gen, short for general and meaning a
(largely) non-romantically themed story; het, revolving around a heterosexual
relationship; and slash/femslash, which depict (predominantly) non-canon[2] gay
pairings. Slash fiction is historically rooted in the trend for pairing Spock and
Kirk (*Star Trek*) (Coppa 2006), but, according to Francesca Coppa, it was in
the early 1980s that lesbian slash, or femslash, became more visible as a popular
form of fan writing, largely instigated by fans of the American TV series *Cagney
and Lacey* (Coppa 2006). In relation to other genres, slash fiction has received
considerable academic attention: 'the history of fan fiction studies, for the most
part, is a history of attempting to understand the underlying motivations of why
(mostly) women write fan fiction and, in particular, slash' (Hellekson and Busse
2006: 17).[3] Fandom and fanfiction have always been engaged in the politics of
representation. As Amanda L. Hodges and Laurel P. Richmond argue, 'the por-
trayal of gender and sexuality takes a special precedence for fans… fans continue
to wrestle with hegemonic and resistant notions of femininity in complex, often
contradictory ways' (Hodges and Richmond 2011: 1.2). Considering *Buffy the
Vampire Slayer* fanfiction, they describe a varied set of narratives in which 'some

[…] writers alter the original story line in dramatic ways that challenge authorial intent while others write slash or femslash' (Hodges and Richmond 2011: 2.2). For Hodges and Richmond, 'such playful, varied interpretations speak to ways in which fans, especially fan fiction writers, resist and trouble conventional mores and discourses' (Hodges and Richmond 2011: 2.2).

The rise of new media technologies has had a significant impact on fan practices. In part, they have made fan practices newly visible: as Hellekson and Busse note, the Internet 'created a new culture of visibility' (Hellekson and Busse 2006: 14). It is increasingly easy to access and participate in fan communities. As well as engaging in social networking sites, fans use content hosting sites such as YouTube, Fanpop and DeviantArt, sharing images, videos, engaging in discussions and so on, whilst Fanfiction.net, LiveJournal and Tumblr, are used to publish and access fanfiction. Meanwhile, on Twitter and Facebook, fans and audiences offer real-time commentary and reflections on television. Furthermore, as Driver argues, the Internet more broadly has particular significance for queer youth: 'queer youth are actively creating and participating in a wide range of online communities […] there are dozens of lesbian, bisexual, gay and trans Internet sites and communities offering youth chances to produce self-expressions as mass media' (Driver 2007: 169). Critically, recent years have seen the mainstreaming of fan practices as media companies are increasingly engaging with the potential of the fan as ideal consumer: 'according to the logic of affective economics, the ideal consumer is active, emotionally engaged, and socially networked' (Jenkins 2006: 20). Thus, as Roberta Pearson argues:

> The digital revolution has had a profound impact upon fandom, empowering and disempowering, blurring the lines between producers and consumers, creating symbiotic relationships between powerful corporations and individual fans, and giving rise to new forms of cultural production.
>
> (Pearson 2010: 84)

Questions emerge, however, as to 'whether the changes brought about by convergence open new opportunities for expression or expand the power of big media' (Jenkins 2006: 2). As examples explored in this book attest, the television media of new queer visibility sees these tensions play out in multiple ways, as fans variously invest in, challenge and are sometimes disappointed by media representation.

Filling in the gaps

Naomi and Emily, or 'Naomily', fanfiction is diverse in form and content: from 'one shots' – one chapter stories – to multi-chaptered sagas, imagining Naomi

and Emily's stories both within and beyond the *Skins'* universe. One key strand of Naomily fiction works closely with the original text – or canon – but fills in the gaps before and after the TV story, and in between the televised scenes. As one interviewee reflects: 'I write fanfiction mostly as a celebration of the original canon, exploring moments between characters and relationships that don't get the attention they deserve' (*Skins* fan, 2011). This has particular significance for queer characters, typically marginalized within media stories. In fanfiction, Naomi and Emily, and other queer characters, can become the centre of the story. In the case of Naomi and Emily, fanfiction stories explore moments such as their first kiss – a critical moment that we are informed about in the TV series but never see, and the aftermath of pivotal scenes, such as after the couple sleep together in the woods and before Naomi leaves the next morning, and after the Love Ball where Emily publically declared her feelings for Naomi. The details of their romance are lovingly expanded upon, developing the Naomily narrative in multiple ways.

Fanfiction as queer sex education

LGBTQ+ inclusion politics have long relied on a discursive desexualization of the queer subject, and contemporary shifts are no different. As many have argued, 'desexualization is a prerequisite for transforming lesbians and gays into "normal citizens"' (Ludwig 2016: 422). In fandom, however, the images and texts of popular culture are re-made with queer eroticism written in. Whilst, to a certain extent, *Skins* makes the couple's desire visible, what is seen on screen is limited. Many fanfiction stories can be found, however, that delight in the erotic re-telling of media representations such as theirs. Fanfiction, thus, offers an accessible site of queer erotica. For young people in particular, this can open up critical sites of pleasure and pedagogy, mobilizing a form of sex education that exceeds the limited provision commonly offered in schools. As one interviewee reflected:

> My in-school sexual education was fairly basic – STDs, pregnancy, and barely, how to use a condom. There was no inclusion of sexuality spectrum, no attention to anything remotely practical in the life of a teenager who wasn't necessarily interested in abstinence […] I could read fanfiction about just about any kind of sex I wanted to learn about, and it was discrete. My mother watched what I checked out from the library and I didn't feel comfortable asking about things with my largely-religious group of friends, especially if those things might indicate that there was something wrong with me, that I was less than straight.
> (*Skins* fan, 2011)

Similarly, another interviewee recalls:

> I wasn't out to myself or to my friends, but online no one knew me and I could write what I wanted under a pseudonym. I read nc-17 fics about m/m couples and m/f couples. I learned things that my meagre sexual education and mother hadn't hardly broached [*sic*]. No one was going to tell me these things, I had to find them for myself.
>
> (*Skins* fan, 2011)

The Internet's ability to offer anonymity, to be 'discrete' and easily accessible, is of critical significance to queer youth for whom privacy can be a necessary form of safe-keeping. Whilst not untraceable, in comparison to accessing library books or more conventional forms of media, the Internet has much to offer. As these accounts suggest, with access to digital technologies the teenager with limited access to information can go online in the privacy of their bedroom and read, write and share fanfiction.

Writing on *Harry Potter* fanfiction, Catherine Tosenberger notes the significance of sexual content, particularly queer content, for adolescents, 'whose self-expressions are heavily monitored in institutional settings'. In fanfiction, however, Tosenberger argues, 'fans are able to tell narratives of sexuality in a space not directly controlled by adults, and do not have to shape their stories to adult sensibilities and comfort levels' (Tosenberger 2008: 202). The same can be argued for *Skins* fanfiction, where various versions of sexual desires and fantasies play out. As the above accounts suggest, this is of deep significance in the context of the silencing and pathologizing that continue to structure the knowability of queer sexualities. Notably, fandoms' insistence on the visibility of queer desire is not confined to fan media, but turned back on mainstream popular culture. In the form of blogs, articles, petitions and Facebook and Twitter campaigns, audiences are critiquing the desexualization of queer characters and demanding content creators make sex and sexuality more explicit in televisual representations of gay, lesbian and bisexual characters. A Facebook campaign, for example, challenged ABC drama *Modern Family* to let its gay couple kiss – 'Let Cam and Mitchell kiss on *Modern Family*' – and a Twitter hashtag circulated asking the same for *Glee*'s queer characters, Santana and Brittany: #LetBrittanaKiss. Thus, various counter-texts are mobilized that move within and against representations.

Re-writing Naomily's future

In the production of these fictional stories, fanfiction offers the spectator the ability to shape the narrative of the lesbian figure. As well as filling in the gaps between

scenes or narrative points, fanfiction allows stories to continue on far after their televisual closure. Fanfiction is, as Hellekson and Busse's describe, 'fragmented and fragmentary, just as it is self-perpetuating, itself a continual work in progress that cannot be shut down' (Hellekson and Busse 2006: 8). Again, for conventionally limited LGBTQ+ representations, this has particular significance. As one interviewee observed: 'Naomily didn't just stop when series 4 was over, it continued to stories and whole communities who praise them' (*Skins* fan, 2011). As April Sharkey suggests, whilst 'the writers will move on to the next project, as will the actors', Naomi and Emily and 'the "Naomily" storyline remains the property of young lesbians searching for any representation of how they feel' (Sharkey 2013: n. pag.). Indeed, *Skins* fanfiction continues to be written and published online, six years after the 2013 three-episode seventh series aired.

Multiple stories write future narratives for Naomi and Emily, imagining them and their romance with various trajectories. This is particularly significant, as the canonical couple's story was foreclosed in Naomi's tragic death. In a blog post for *BitchFlicks* responding to Naomi's death in *Skins Fire*, Erin Tatum evokes the significance of these identificatory figures:

> The queer community fell as deeply in love with Naomi and Emily as they did with each other and the couple was almost universally hailed as the most iconic queer coming-of-age story of our generation.
>
> We have precious few torchbearers of alternative identity. The capitalization on such fragile issues is sickening and myopically focused on garnering brownie points for the status quo […]. At the end of the day, in spite of the most idiotic departures you can think of, these characters symbolize an intense hope and tenacity for those who might not have any other allies in their corner.
>
> For all these reasons and more, I will not allow you to quietly bury your queers.
>
> <div align="right">(Tatum 2013c: n.pag.)</div>

The potential for loss remains tied up in queer stories, as viewers are familiar with the tropes that curtail fictional LGBTQ+ lives. In fandom, however, characters are re-imagined into the fictional futures they have been expunged from. Tatum's rejection of Skins' repetition of the dead lesbian trope is echoed in fandom, where Naomi's fate can be re-written; her narrative death becoming only one of many possible outcomes.

Various versions of Naomi and Emily's futures circulate in fandom, but one repeated set of narratives does emerge: proposals of marriage, weddings and motherhood. In these stories, the symbolic wedding and the subsequent children are mobilized as happily ever after. As a counter to the finality of *Skins Fire*, these

stories work to secure the lesbian figure in a future trajectory. The repetition of the 'happily ever after' trope writes hopeful possibility over the tragic suffering of Naomi's canonical death. This is multiple in its effects. Like Bette and Tina before them, Naomi and Emily as wives and mothers both redefine and are, ultimately, defined by the symbolic institutions of marriage and family. On the one hand, futurity is expanded beyond the heterosexual imperative. A queerer trajectory enters into future imaginaries and is constituted as a viable option. The repetition of these narratives mobilizes a collective hope for the possibility of a happier future. Fanfiction is published in order to be read, and sites such as fanfiction.net and Tumblr facilitate sharing, commenting and reviewing. The reception of these kinds of stories speaks to an attachment to or investment in the hope they mobilize. As Goltz argues, 'given the way discourses of future punish queerness, hope marks a site of political struggle and urgency' (Goltz 2013: 139). Occupying the 'happily ever after' might constitute a radical act in the context of queer marginalization. To imagine its possibility might offer a necessary lifeline, a framework through which to imagine a 'liveable life' (Butler 2004: 226). As Judith Butler argues, 'our very lives, and the persistence of our desire, depend on their being norms of recognition that produce and sustain our viability as humans' (Butler 2004: 33). Indeed, to live in ways for which there are no 'categories of recognition' is to live an unliveable life, whilst to live in ways 'for which those categories constitute unliveable constraint is not an acceptable option' (Butler 2004: 8). These texts are both constituted through and constitutive of the public re-imagining of the lesbian subject as fiancé, bride, wife and mother. This works to shift and expand categories of recognition in what will be, for some, meaningful ways. Yet, there are, of course, limits to what is made liveable on these terms. The repetition of marriage and motherhood as ideal resolve arguably '[imports] heteronormative structures into a queer text' (Hunting 2012: 16). As these narratives are repeated and constituted as fanfiction tropes, a new homonormative imperative emerges in which futurity is made intelligible only on these terms. Furthermore, for the lesbian figure, this resolve re-imagines the 'the postfeminist lifecycle' which, as Winch describes, is signified by 'marriage, motherhood, or both' (Winch 2012: 71). This is re-scripted here, transforming the heterosexual imperative. However, this also reiterates these roles as necessary for women to lead successful lives. Meanwhile, the increasing visibility of this re-imagined lifecycle also works to crowd out other possibilities of intimacy, desire and kinship.

Alternative universe Naomilys

Alongside the engagements and weddings, there are, however, always other possibilities being brought into being. As Camilla Emilie Brix Jensen writes: 'this

circulation of interdependent texts results in a never-ending tale of uncountable parallel universes in which the shared inspirational idea, embedded in the Naomily storyline, is constantly repeated in translation, developed and kept alive' (Jensen 2013). Indeed, fanfiction can extend far beyond the original text, taking this shared idea and re-imagining it in an unlimited fictional universe. Alternative universe, or AU, fanfiction can change key events within the narrative world, or take the characters and re-write them into new contexts entirely. There are no limits to this style of fanfiction: from the supernatural to time-travel to crossover fics that merge two unrelated fictional universes. In AU fanfiction, Naomi and Emily re-emerge in multiple contexts and moments in time: from vampire hunters to musicians, competitive tennis players, *Big Brother* contestants, celebrities and holiday romances. In one story they are transplanted to the Ottoman Empire in the sixteenth century, in another their romance is set to the story of *The Princess Bride* (a 1973 novel and 1983 fantasy adventure film). For historically side-lined queer characters, the significance of this potential is clear, as LGBTQ+ characters and romances can be re-imagined across space and time, as well as written into popular media universes. Thus, as 'one media text becomes several hundreds of new texts' (Jensen 2013: n.pag.), multiple versions of the lesbian figure are brought into being. The marriage and motherhood trope is by no means the only possibility.

Fantasizing Keffy

In *Skins* fanfiction it is not only Emily and Naomi who emerge as lesbian or bisexual figures, but also Emily's twin sister Katie, most commonly paired with central character Effy Stonem (a coupling known in the fandom as 'Keffy'). In slash fanfiction, this non-canonical pairing is re-written as queer. The long-standing practice of appropriative reading – the 'fantasy space between film text and interpretation' (Stacey 1994: 115–16) – is transformed through fan media into texts in their own right; in fanfiction (and images and videos) the fantasy space is realized. The repetition and shared imagining of this pairing comes to constitute them as recognizable queer figures within fan media. Thus, in *Skins* fandom, Naomi and Emily are no longer isolated, but exist in relation to other queer subjects. For Ika Willis writing queer fanfiction works to 'force the text to keep, rather than to disavow, the promise of queerness it makes insofar as it engages me as a reading/desiring subject' (Willis 2006: 160). Indeed, fans I interviewed spoke of reading the narrative codes of these characters and their interactions with one another, and developing an appropriative reading out of those codes that made sense within the conventions of the *Skins'* universe. In fandom then, Katie and Effy join Emily and Naomi as queer figures, themselves opening up further possibilities of imagining lesbian identities, lives and futures.

The queer world making of Skins fandom

In their analysis of queer youth and MySpace, Lori Macintosh and Mary Bryson argue that 'there are particular sets of cultural affordances to which many queer youth do not have easy access in an embodied world that they have the potential to locate and/or create in a virtual world' (Macintosh and Bryson 2008: 140). A decade later, and for all the shifts that period has seen, it remains the case that queer lives continue to be structured by various forms of marginalization. In this context, the 'virtual world' of fandom takes on further significance. As one interviewee recounted:

> I led a pretty closeted childhood […] It was years ago as well, so there was even less representation for LGBT culture than there is now, and since I was so young I was hardly exposed to any of it. The Internet was all I really had, especially since when I started getting into fanfiction I had just switched schools because my mum and I had to move and I spent the entire school year trying to find friends and then trying to keep and be accepted by those I HAD found. Fan fiction offered me a bit of an escape route. It gave me access to things I didn't really know about, which was a big helper when I started figuring out the whole 'Shit, I'm into girls' thing, especially since my father's never really made a secret of his dislike of homosexuals.
>
> (*Skins* fan, 2011)

This account speaks of the isolation of the 'closeted childhood': as Warner argues, 'almost all children grow up in families that think of themselves and all their members as heterosexual, and for some children this produces a profound and nameless estrangement, a sense of inner secrets and hidden shame' (Warner 2000: 8). Coupled with limited access to LGBTQ+ cultural references, sites of identification are limited. The Internet offers an 'escape route' from heteronormative exclusions, however, and the young person 'figuring out' being 'into girls' is offered a counter-narrative of queer possibility. Critically, not only do many families 'think of themselves and all their members as heterosexual', of course, many are also actively opposed to the alternative. Indeed, the father's 'dislike of homosexuals' speaks to the ways in which the family can be a site of both heteronormativity and active homophobia. As Walters writes, 'queers often experience their first taste of fear and loathing at the family hearth' (Walters 2014: 214). Notably, a 2015 report by The Albert Kennedy Trust found that 'young people who identify as LGBT are grossly over-represented within youth homeless populations', with family rejection on the grounds of sexuality playing a significant role (The

Albert Kennedy Trust 2015: 6). As sex education, religion and family emerge in these accounts as limited, and limiting, contexts for queer youth, fandom offers a meaningful alternative.

As Driver suggests, 'many queer kids grow up in contexts where their gender and sexual embodiments as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, queer, two spirited, and questioning are shunned, devalued, or ignored'. As such, they are forced to 'actively seek out alternative means of making connections, asking questions and seeking out advice from others sharing similar experiences' (Driver 2007: 169). Interviews with *Skins* fans suggest that fan practices such as fanfiction can function as one of these 'alternative means'. Opening up possibilities of subjectivity and connectivity, fandoms might engage in queer world making projects. As they 'elaborate new worlds of culture and social relations in which gender and sexuality can be lived' (Warner 2005: 57), they might bring into being counterpublics of gender and sexuality.

Sociability

Berlant argues that 'aloneness is one of the affective experiences of being collectively, structurally unprivileged' (Berlant 2008: viii). In the shared practices of fandom, however, participants are offered sites of connection and sociability. For queer youth, 'who are often geographically separated, culturally isolated, and socially threatened' (Driver 2007: 170), this has particular significance. As this interviewee describes:

> I think having this sense of community is important because being gay you're still part of a minority, which although is quite accepted, it still isnt fully so, therefore being able to feel a sense of belonging to a community gives you a sense of normalcy and somewhere you can feel comfortable to fully explore and express who you are. This was especially so for myself because at the time I came out I didn't have any gay friends, no one in my family is gay so I did feel quite isolated, therefore I turned to online communities to find a sense of belonging.
>
> (*Skins* fan, 2011)

In this extract, fandom is described as an inclusive community, offering 'a sense of belonging' that constitutes the queer subject as less alone. As Stanfill describes, 'the counterpublic of fandom […] is produced through an ongoing circulation of these texts binding people together' (Stanfill 2013: 5): in this binding, communities emerge that extend beyond the exchange of fictional stories. As they do so, they mobilize forms of stranger sociability. In the connections this forges we might read

'scenes of association and identity that transform the private lives they mediate' (Warner 2005: 57). As another interviewee describes:

> Fanfiction has been very important to me in terms of exploring my sexuality. It's so much easier to bare yourself online than in person so I was able to talk to one friend in particular who I met from fanfiction and her sending me a message about how much she enjoyed my story. We corresponded for a while and she ended up being the first person I admitted I thought I was gay to. So yeah big effect on my life.
>
> (*Skins* fan, 2011)

Forms of intimacy emerge here that evoke Berlant and Warner's account of queer world making, as they 'bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to prosperity, or the nation' (Berlant and Warner 1998: 558). In doing so, they open up frames of recognition that transform the possibilities of queer subjectivity. Furthermore, whilst there are, of course, various and significant limits to Internet access, individuals separated by boundaries of location are, to a certain extent, brought into these sites of sociability. As Fabienne Darling-Wolf suggests, 'because of the Internet's potential to eliminate the barriers of time and space, fans who are otherwise isolated from each other can engage in virtual communities' (Darling-Wolf 2004: 509). This is supported by the responses to my call for interview participants from *Skins* fans from the United Kingdom, United States, Brazil, Argentina, Canada, Australia, Finland and Serbia. The sociability mobilized here is thus not globally representative but is transnational, bound, despite various differences, by a shared sense of recognition of living queer lives in exclusionary social worlds.

Identification

As they re-circulate, secure and re-imagine LGBTQ+ characters and narratives, fan publics mobilize identificatory scenes of intelligible queer lives. The fans I interviewed spoke of the relatability of these characters, and their experiences of secret queer desires, coming out, family struggles and first relationships. As Jensen argues, 'the Naomily storyline has therefore created the foundation for a shared inspirational idea – a junction from which people with same-sex desires have developed a community of symbolic mirrors in which they can reflect themselves in the fictional characters and in each other' (Jensen 2013: n.pag.). As one interviewee described:

> We can relate to that because with Emily she sort of knew she was gay and then when she admitted it to herself she just had to come out to everyone. Her group accepted her, but her family didn't. If you're gay, lesbian, or bi we know that

we always have this fear of coming out to our family and wondering if they will accept it or not.

(*Skins* fan, 2013)

If these aspects of Emily's character and narrative produce identificatory attachments, fandom takes up this relation and further expands its significance. As these characters and their narratives are replayed and reworked in fanfiction, experiences of living 'gay, lesbian or bi' lives are repeatedly played out. Here, key aspects of these attachments are taken up and made use of. In these re-tellings, multiple possibilities are mobilized – families are accepting, or aren't – and various responses and emotions articulated. Future trajectories, from the hopeful to the tragic to the fantastical, are played out. In doing so, fans are able to imagine and try out multiple possibilities of living queer lives and negotiating heteronormative contexts.

Emily as identificatory figure is a position supported by the formal codes of the original text, as the previous chapter suggests. However, it is not only the canonical figures that mobilize this sense of recognition. In the queering of seemingly hetero-sexual characters seen in slash fiction, further sites of identification are created:

> Femslash allows readers to make-believe that characters they are invested in are like them even if it's not canon […]. You always want to see a bit of yourself in the characters and femslash allows for that. It makes lesbian sexuality normal.
>
> (*Skins* fan, 2011)

This recalls Alexander Doty's position on 'queer readings' of popular culture as no 'less there, or any less real, than straight readings' (Doty 2002: 2). Inserting queerness into cultural representations works to insist on identificatory sites as viable options in a culture that attempts to deny their possibility. Critically, the identificatory structures of fandom go beyond the representation and recognition of common experience, and to the very possibility of such recognition. As one interviewee reflected:

> [I] was first introduced to the idea that lesbian was more than a curse word through fanfiction. There was no way in my family (I grew up very religious) that I would receive any knowledge that something outside of m/f marital sex was acceptable. I had no idea that lesbians were people too.
>
> (*Skins* fan, 2011)

In this account, religion and the family converge to secure norms of intelligibility that exclude queer lives: 'I had no idea that lesbians were people too'. In fandom,

however, the norms of intelligibility are expanded, opening up to include lesbian as a viable subject position.

The limits of queer world-making

For all their significance, the counter-texts produced and circulated within fandom have their limits. As the previous chapter argued, the lesbian figures at the centre of these publics emerge through normative intersections of gender, race, age, appearance and class. Whilst, in fan media, representations such as Naomi and Emily can be re-made, their stories re-written, they remain limited to the white, middle-class, feminine figures of the TV programme. Thus, there remain limits to the identificatory positions they open up and the forms of recognition they offer. Indeed, the popularity of the media texts themselves, which dictates (to a certain extent) their reach and, critically, ability to stay on air, is itself structured by cultural norms and hierarchies. Furthermore, fandoms are not utopias; the exclusions of broader social contexts emerge here too. As Rukmini Pande and Swati Moitra argue, 'while these spaces definitely work to disrupt hegemonic constructions of what kinds of stories are allowable in fan communities, their recurrent biases and erasures are equally present' (Pande and Moitra 2017: 5.1). Indeed, as Rebecca Wanzo argues, 'sexism, racism, and xenophobia are routinely visible in fan communities' (Wanzo 2015: 1.4), meaning there are barriers to the forms of sociability opened up here.

In *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (2008), Berlant describes the 'mass-marketed intimate public' of 'women's culture' (Berlant 2008: 5). An intimate public, she explains, is that which 'operates when a market opens up to a bloc of consumers, claiming to circulate texts and things that express those people's particular core interests and desires' (Berlant 2008: 5). For marginalized subjects, intimate publics work, Berlant argues, 'to tell identifying consumers that "you are not alone (in your struggles, desires, pleasures)"' (Berlant 2008: viii). The texts of the intimate public both speak the life narrative of the marginalized subject and reproduce it in order to work through the problems of marginalization. Berlant argues, however, that even as they voice exclusionary norms, intimate publics might also work to sustain those excluded through sentimental accounts of belonging that function on normative terms. Rather than rejecting the terms on which exclusions are produced, the intimate public offers means of survival within them, offering solutions that speak to 'the desire to remain attached and proximate to normative subject positions which have proven disappointing' (Poletti 2011: 34). The conventions of the lesbian normal might function similarly to offer frames of recognition in *proximity* to normative structures of belonging. In the romantic narratives of *Skins* fandom,

hopeful investments in normative institutions are made and reiterated, but the terms of those exclusionary structures are left intact. Struggles of living queer lives within those institutions are mobilized and worked through, in ways that might resolve concerns that would be better left unresolved and turned, instead, against the structures through which they are produced.

Conclusion

Fan media must be seen as an extension of the television programme; representations are not limited to what is seen on television screens, but spread out into attachments and re-writings. Fanfiction produces complex, and contradictory, mediations of intimate lives, mobilizing counter-texts: emerging within and beyond the original narrative, fan media works to secure the visibility of the lesbian figure. Whilst the cultural visibility of the lesbian figure has made her open to complex appropriations, fandom offers the participant a space through which to define her terms. In such spaces, lesbian figures might be secured and conventional tropes (destruction, death, misery and so on) resisted. Furthermore, new queer figures are produced, as characters such as Effy and Katie are re-animated through queer narratives. Critically, in the circulation and recirculation of these representations, meaningful spaces of sociability are entered into. These spaces, and the media that produces them, offer a site of counterpublic belonging for the young queer subject. Mobilized in opposition to the dominant publics of school, media, families and religion, these spaces provide new sites of collectivity and intimacy. For some participants, these offer unique, and necessary, sites of recognition. These spaces offer frames for exploring queer desires and finding ways of living in often exclusionary social worlds. As they make and re-make lesbian visibility, they also make it possible: 'I also was first introduced to the idea that lesbian was more than a curse word through fanfiction […] I had no idea that lesbians were people too' (*Skins* fan, 2011).

Nonetheless, there are limits to what can emerge here. The narratives and objects that circulate are defined by the original television programme. Thus, the figures that emerge through these platforms are shaped by their conventions: thus, the repetition of the femme/inine lesbian and the absence of alternatives. Mobilizing around Naomi, Emily, Katie and Effy, the frames of reference that circulate here do not include, for example, butch lesbians, older lesbians, lesbian women of colour or disabled lesbians. Rather, for all their multiplicity, they begin to mobilize conventions of their own. The wedding/marriage/children narratives emerge repeatedly, and are posited as ideal resolves. Again, this works on a number of, contradictory levels. In part, this works to queer the domestic; to disrupt the

heteronormative imperative of the family. Furthermore, it secures a future for the lesbian figure. At the same time, as queer debates over futurity suggest, the future is limited to conventional terms of belonging. The fantasy of the good life is mobilized as attainable, but doing so must ignore its limits. Thus, an optimistic narrative of belonging emerges through the very terms on which queer subjects have been made marginal. And yet, it remains the case that, for all the dominance of Naomi and Emily as wives and mothers, Naomi and Emily as pirates and vampires coexist in ways that offer multiple possibilities.

NOTES

1. Fanfiction is commonly distinguished by further subgenres such as romance; action/ adventure; angst, indicating the story will involve some form of misery or suffering; fluff, indicating that it will avoid such themes, usually in favour of light-hearted romance; hurt/ comfort (H/C), in which one character will experience some form of suffering and another will comfort them; deathfic, which involve the death of a major character; crossover fics, which involve the combination of two different source texts; various sexually explicit fictions that feature kink or BDSM, and so on. Stories are also often rated according to content with a ratings system based on that of the Motion Picture Association of America: see http://www.fanfiction.net/guidelines/.
2. 'Canon' refers to the original source material and to facts and narrative that remain true to it. Or: 'the events presented in the media source that provide the universe, setting, and characters' (Hellekson and Busse 2006: 9).
3. See, for example, Russ (1985), Lamb and Veith (1986), Selley (1986), Penley (1992) and Bacon-Smith (1992).

5

'The nation's favourite lesbian': *Coronation Street* and the 'everyday' soap lesbian

It's September 2010 and on screen, a medium shot shows two women sitting at a counter in a café. The older of the two women is dressed in a red coat, accessorized with large pearl earrings and a pearl necklace. Her bouffant red hair is carefully styled and her eyes are rimmed with kohl. The other woman is blonde, and wears a simple red cardigan. On the walls of the café are tiles with brown floral prints, local advertisements, framed old postcards of British holiday destinations and various railwayana. A British television audience would recognize the setting as a traditional, working-class, café. Many would also recognize the café as 'Roy's Rolls', and the two women as familiar, long-running characters on the British soap opera *Coronation Street*: Sally Webster (Sally Dynevor) and Rita Tanner (Barbara Knox). As the scene begins, Rita says to Sally, 'you must be glad to have Sophie back'. Sally nods tearfully, and Rita places her hand over Sally's, asking, in a gentle voice, '*is* Sophie gay?'. Sophie, fans of the show will know, is Sally's (then) fifteen-year-old daughter. The camera moves in closer to the two women's faces and we watch in a shot-reverse shot sequence as Sally nods again and Rita hands her a tissue saying, cheerfully and deliberately: 'well, how wonderful'. Sally's face shows an expression of surprise but Rita continues: 'wonderful that you brought her up so well, she knows her own mind and what she wants from life, and bright enough to get her head round it'. After a brief pause she observes: 'not so easy for the likes of you and me though eh?'. Sally shakes her head, but Rita pushes on: 'and isn't it great that this is 2010, and she hasn't got to hide anything. Like she would have when I was younger and when you were younger' (Episode 7433 2010).

This conversation took place on British soap opera *Coronation Street*. Currently airing six times a week, the Northern soap opera is a popular staple of British television schedules. When the teenage Sophie Webster (Brooke Vincent)

came out as a lesbian in 2010 and began a relationship with Sian Powers (Sacha Parkinson), it marked the soap's first queer women characters, and the first time a lesbian romance was written into *Coronation Street*'s fictional world.[1] In the above scene, street matriarch Rita guides Sally and the drama into a new era of LGBTQ+ rights and representation: 'isn't it great that this is 2010'. The soap's venture into queer women's representation came at a significant period in LGBTQ+ rights in the United Kingdom, as the country moved towards the legalization of same-sex marriage under a conservative government. *Coronation Street*'s mediation of the lesbian figure contributes to the reorganization of lesbian and gay lives in public culture that this moment constitutes. At the same time, lesbian subjectivity remains precarious, as dead lesbians and broken hearts go on to populate the iconic street.

Coronation Street: *Sexuality, class and the soap opera*

Coronation Street is a continuous serial created by Tony Warren for Granada television in 1960. The soap opera is set in the fictional town of Weatherfield, based on the city of Salford, in the northwest of England. First broadcast on ITV on 9 December 1960, the drama holds the title of world's longest running soap opera. The soap opera combines conventions of light entertainment, melodrama and realism (Geraghty 1991: 31). Emerging in the 1960s, *Coronation Street* was particularly influenced by social realism, and the genres concern with 'authentic' representations of 'working-class' life. Such concerns constituted a mode of representation in film, literature and theatre of the period, as well as a form of sociological enquiry, such as in Richard Hoggart's 1957 book, *The Uses of Literacy*. As Dyer describes, these various forms were all 'concerned to "discover" and legitimate a tradition of culture that could authentically be termed "working-class"' (Dyer 1981b: 2). Emerging in the soap opera format, Marion Jordan describes the resulting genre as 'Soap-Opera realism' (Jordan 1981: 28). Articulating this variation of the genre, Warren described his intention to represent 'life in a working-class street in the north of England': 'The purpose […] is to examine a community of this nature, and in doing so entertain' (in Jordan 1981: 27). Emerging in this tradition, *Coronation Street* thus makes a claim to an authentic representation of Northern, working-class life. Whilst there are critical limits to such claims, *Coronation Street* nonetheless offered some new visibility in terms of class and region. Lez Cooke argues that, 'for working class audiences, especially in the Midlands and the North, who were watching television in huge numbers by the early 1960s, a programme like *Coronation Street* offered a shock of recognition' (Cooke 2015: 38).

As Dyer describes, *Coronation Street* 'takes as its mode the interactions of everyday life as realised in common-sense speech and philosophy' (Dyer 1981a: 2). The soap imagines 'ordinary' life, foregrounding the domestic sphere, the local community and the family. Its settings are largely confined to the street of terraced houses, the kitchens and living rooms of its residents, the local pub, small shops and local factory (owned and run by various Street characters). Intimate relationships are key, as Christine Geraghty states: 'the basis of soap operas is family life' (Geraghty 1991: 60). Whilst the soap's storylines are occupied with family drama, however, this is an expanded notion of family that encompasses the community of the Street; as Jordan argues, 'the family that the programme is essentially about is *Coronation Street*, not a nuclear family' (Jordan 1981: 35). Social issues are mediated through this intimate frame, explored through 'the drama of human relationships' (Geraghty 2002: 66). These representations do more than simply 'represent' the intimate everyday, however. Rather, as Charlotte Brunsdon writes, they are engaged in 'constructing moral consensus about the conduct of personal life': 'there is an endless unsettling, discussion and resettling of acceptable modes of behaviour within the sphere of personal relationships' (Brunsdon 1997: 16). As feminism has long argued, the personal is the political, and these negotiations are, of course, embedded within their sociopolitical contexts. These functions make *Coronation Street*'s introduction of lesbian characters particularly significant, as the lesbian figure is mobilized through its fantasy of 'everyday' Britain.

Whilst Sophie was to be the soap's first queer woman, *Coronation Street* introduced its first representation of a gay character in 2003, when Todd Grimshaw (Bruno Langley) kissed his girlfriend's brother, Nick Tilsley (then played by Adam Rickett). In the same year Antony Cotton (who played Alexander in the original UK version of *Queer as Folk*) appeared in the soap for the first time as the openly gay Sean Tully, before joining as a full-time cast member in 2004. *Coronation Street* broke ground with the first transgender character in a British soap opera, in long-running character Hayley Cropper (Julie Hesmondhalgh) (1998–2014). Whilst, despite these notable examples, the number of LGBTQ+ *Coronation Street* characters has been limited until recently, the soap is imbued with a broader queer sensibility. Creator Tony Warren was himself a gay man, out at a time when homosexuality was still illegal in the United Kingdom. Reflecting in 2007, Warren described drawing on the 'queens' of Manchester's gay village for inspiration for the strong women characters of the soap (Ewin 2007). Indeed, *Coronation Street* has a strong gay fandom, and the queerness of its working-class matriarchs is much celebrated. As Susan Irvine wrote in a 1995 profile of pub landlady Bet Lynch (Julie Goodyear), for example, 'Bet Lynch is a gay icon as much as a housewives' heroine' (Irvine 1995).

A new era on the Street: Sophie comes out

The character of Sophie Webster was born onto the Street, with her on screen 'birth' in 1994 to Sally (of the tearful café scene) and Kevin Webster (Michael Le Vell). The character of Kevin was introduced in 1983, and Sally in 1986, making this a familiar family to *Coronation Street* audiences. As writer and recapper Heather Hogan describes, 'that's the beauty of *Corrie* right? You don't just know about these characters; you *know* these characters, because week in week out for fifty years they're showing up in your living room and letting you into their lives' (Hogan 2011a). Indeed, Sophie is a character viewers have known for the duration of her fictional life. In 2009, Sophie was fifteen and characterized as an active Christian, when the soap introduced fellow teen Sian Powers (Sacha Parkinson). Initially best friends, in April 2010, Sophie and Sian were shown sharing their first kiss. At first characterized as confused and uncertain, the couple began an initially secret relationship. Following the inevitable dramatic reveal, *Coronation Street* portrayed various reactions through its ensemble cast. Whilst some characters were depicted as accepting and supportive of the couple, such as Sophie's sister Rosie (Helen Flanigan), *Coronation Street*'s first lesbian characters were also met with prejudice. From the homophobic anger of Sian's father – 'you grubby cows' (Episode 7432, 2010) – to Kevin's suggestion that it might be a phase – 'you're fifteen, you don't know what you are' (Episode 7416, 2010) – to rejection by their church Pastor.

Also depicted as struggling to accept the couple is Sally. Continuing her conversation with Rita following the reveal of Sophie and Sian's relationship, Sally cries: 'why can't she just be normal?' After all, she appeals to the older woman, Sophie she is 'a pretty girl', she has 'lovely hair, long hair' and 'wears make up'. Rita, exuding the wisdom of the soap opera matriarch, firmly states that, 'she is normal Sally', and dismisses her comments on her daughter's appearance, with a kindly, knowing: 'oh Sally' (Episode 7433 2010). In a later episode, Rita reassures Street stalwart Emily Bishop, as she struggles to reconcile Sophie and Sian's sexuality with her Christian faith. Emily too notes the changing times, positioning her response as old-fashioned and out-dated: 'the worlds moved on, yet I feel that I stopped somewhere around 1966'. She tells Rita, 'we're a dying breed […] the last of the dinosaurs'. Rita reassures her, kindly but firmly encouraging Emily that: 'once you get your head round all this, you'll be able to deal with Sophie and Sian with the utmost wisdom and compassion' (Episode 7465, 2010).

The soap matriarch as pedagogic guide

Barbara Knox first appeared on *Coronation Street* in 1964, before becoming a series regular in 1972. Knox is the third longest serving actor on *Coronation Street*

and indeed on any UK soap opera, making her a particularly familiar face to soap viewers. Rita evokes Christine Geraghty's description of the soap matriarch: 'the grandmother figure as the head of an extended family and as a guardian of the community's tradition' (Geraghty 1991: 82). As many British soap matriarchs are, Rita is a glamorous figure of working-class femininity, and coded as more 'worldly-wise' than characters such as Emily. In a 1981 study of the soap Marion Jordan described Rita as a 'mature, sexy woman' (Jordan 1981: 69), and noted her past as a dancer and nightclub singer and her various relationships. The scenes of her advising Sally and Emily are not uncommon, as Rita is characterized as wise and caring, if straight-talking, particularly to various younger women whom she has acted as friend and mentor to throughout the serial's run. Familiar, experienced Rita is thus an ideal figure to act as trusted guide to navigating the Street's first lesbian inhabitants. In doing so, the programme functions to offer a pedagogic guide to navigating new norms of LGBTQ+ inclusion. In the references to times gone by and the claims of a new era ('isn't it great that its 2010'), a celebratory progress narrative is mobilized. Through the struggles of characters like Sally and Emily, however, anxieties around these social changes are voiced and, as they are worked through within the narrative, resolved. A road map is offered to the heterosexual viewer in which concerns (no matter how prejudiced) are recognized and understood, but gently encouraged to be compassionately overcome. Heeding Rita's advice, Sally tells Sophie: 'If I could wave a magic wand right now and make you normal, I'm telling you I'd do it, but I can't, so I'm just going to have to wait for the shock to wear off, and in time I'll get used to a different sort of normal' (Episode 7435 2010). Over time, she, and Emily, do exactly that, and the Sophie and Sian narrative offers a pedagogic trajectory through a public sphere negotiating 'a different sort of normal'. Notably, this trajectory asks only for tolerance and compassion for social change, however undesirable that change may be.

The 'everyday' lesbian

The struggle for acceptance is a generational one in *Coronation Street*, as the older characters are represented as having to adjust to a tolerant, modern Britain. Sophie's sister, Rosie, is, however, quick to accept and support the couple. Indeed, she delights in having a lesbian sister: 'isn't it great […] the whole lesbo vibe, I love it!' (Episode 7434 2010), she casually proclaims to a still struggling Sally. As she informs Sian's mother, 'lesbians are well cool, especially the lipstick ones' (Episode 7434 2010). Rosie's mobilization of the 'cool lesbian' speaks to gay and lesbian inclusion as 'on trend': modern, desirable and marketable. Similarly, a source quoted in an article reporting the couple's first kiss declared: 'this kiss is an historic moment for *Corrie* and shows we are in touch with the times' (Daily Star Reporter

2010). Of course, 'the times' require history to be made on particular terms. Like Naomi and Emily, Sophie and Sian appear through a visual register of young, white, femininity. Mobilized through the conventions of the soap opera, this is a more working-class, 'everyday' femininity than the glamour of *The L Word* or the more edgy fashion of the teen drama. Whilst Rosie speaks of lipstick lesbians, Sophie and Sian are in fact usually styled with minimal make up, their hair in soft waves, messy buns and plaits, wearing t-shirts, hooded jumpers and jeans or simple floral dresses. The lipstick lesbian is thus re-animated on 'everyday' terms, as Sophie and Sian repeat the decoded 'lesbian normal' of new queer visibility. On the one hand, such representations challenge heteronormative expectations, as 'pretty girls' with long hair and make-up turn out to be lesbians. They evoke what Hannah McCann describes as 'the queer potential of all femininity', and 'the possibility of desire that cannot be communicated through simple signification' (McCann 2018: 20). Walker argues that 'the passer, as a figure of indeterminacy, destabilises identities predicated on the visible to reveal how they are constructed' (Walker 2001: 10). Indeed, Sally's struggle to comprehend that her pretty daughter with 'lovely hair, long hair' could be a lesbian reveals the uncertainty of such codes. What's more, the soap setting brings queerness into the imagined everyday and, in its class coding, opens up a certain degree of space for working-class LGBTQ+ visibility. At the same, of course, this representation reiterates the whiteness of the lesbian figure, and the 'pretty lesbian' begins to become a regulatory trope, repeatedly mobilized as the bearer of contemporary inclusion.

The nation's favourite lesbians

The press interest in *Coronation Street*'s first lesbian characters was substantial, with news of *Coronation Street*'s first lesbians and the broadcasting of their first kiss reported in multiple newspapers and magazines. At some point in their storyline, Sophie and Sian were hailed 'the nation's favourite lesbians', a title repeated in multiple publications. The soap opera is engaged in projects of gendered, classed and racialized nation building, mediating an imagined 'everyday' of British culture. That Sophie and Sian should be granted this title suggests the incorporation of gay and lesbian lives into this national project. That the nation might have 'favourite lesbians' at all speaks to a significant shift in public culture. This shift might work to make some lesbian and bisexual lives more liveable, as they are made intelligible within national imaginaries, opening up necessary sites of recognition. At the same time, this mobilization also functions as example of what Jasbir Puar has termed homonationalism. Puar described the ways in which 'aspects of "homosexuality" [came] within the purview of normative patriotism

after September 11', and the mobilization of 'progressive sexuality' as 'a hallmark of US modernity' (Puar 2006: 69–71). Transporting this to the UK context, we see a similar manoeuvre in the way in which *Coronation Street*'s inclusion of Sophie and Sian in the soap's iconic archive of characters and storylines was repeatedly mobilized as symbolic of contemporary Britain. Their national treasure status imagines a tolerant nation proud of its lesbian citizens. It should also be noted that the *Coronation Street* audience is not limited to the local, but broadcast and streamed in various countries around the world. Thus, the soap broadcasts a fantasy of contemporary Britain that is knowingly global in its reach. The fantasy of an inclusive, modern, democratic Britain can, and has, of course, long been strategically mobilized, tied up in political projects of imperialism, warfare, borders and global capitalism. This title, then, evokes a more sinister potentiality than its cosier connotations of celebratory inclusion might suggest.

Brooke Vincent wants people to know she's 'not gay', and so does the lesbian normal

Alongside celebrations of the nation's favourite lesbians and discussions of the significance of this representation for LGBTQ+ visibility, however, the dominant discourse of the press attention was the 'lesbian kiss as titillation' trope, with the 'historic moment' of this representation framed through a sexualized sensationalism. In April 2009 *The Telegraph* reported that *Coronation Street* was 'to get its first lesbian character', describing Sophie as 'poised to shatter her wholesome image by turning gay' (*The Telegraph* 2009). With gayness equated with a lack of wholesomeness, this framing evokes long-held associations of sexual deviancy. The description of Sophie as 'turning gay' evokes a lack of authenticity and the fear that others might be similarly 'turned'. *The Daily Star*, meanwhile, announced '*Corrie* first lez kiss' (*Daily Star* 2010). Shock was proclaimed all round as *We Love Telly* magazine's cover story 'Kiss and Tell' revealed 'Sophie shocks Sian with a kiss in *Corrie*' (Daily Mirror 2010), the *Daily Star* informed readers that '*Corrie* babes Sophie Webster and Sian Powers have a snog that will stun viewers' (Daily Star Reporter 2010) and *The Mirror* announced the 'lesbian snog that's going to shock the Street' (Mirror.co.uk 2010). The repeated use of the word snog speaks to the insistent sexualization of what was, in fact, a brief kiss on the lips.

The visual coding of the imagery accompanying the press response fit into two central categories: the 'everyday soap-opera lesbian' and the softcore 'sexy lesbian'. Indeed, the combination of the decoded lesbian and her availability to a heterosexual male gaze is central to the figuration of the lesbian normal. In an article for British gossip magazine *Heat*, for example, a photoshoot of Vincent

and Parkinson dressed in pink corsets and bunny ears is accompanied with the heading: '*Corrie*'s Sophie and Sian kissed a girl, but did they like it? Paul Flynn finds out' (Flynn 2011: 60). In one image, Vincent and Parkinson, wearing the same outfit, their hair identically styled and matching smiles fixed on their faces, stand at the bar, facing one another in identical mirrored poses. Their doubling is further doubled as the photo has been edited so as to look as though there is another Vincent and Parkinson (in different, but also identical poses) leaning on the same bar. The double doubling evokes lesbianism as narcissism. As Creed describes, 'images of the lesbian double are designed to appeal to the voyeuristic desires of the male spectator', even as he 'is shut out from her world' (Creed 2013: 100). Here, the investigative role of the male journalist embodies the voyeuristic gaze.

The text hints at a real-life relationship between the actors, and a subsequent article in the *Daily Mail* commenting on the *Heat* interview asked: 'Are the *Corrie* lesbians getting a little too close?' (Daily Mail Reporter 2011: n.pag.). In this and other examples, queer visibility is recuperated as object of the male gaze. This imagery also evokes, however, readings of postfeminist media culture in which, as Gill describes, 'women are not straightforwardly objectified but are portrayed as active, desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their liberated interests to do so' (Gill 2007b: 151). Here, liberation is also signified by the performance of lesbianism, as indicator of contemporary sexual freedom. Meanwhile, Vincent was quick to reassure viewers of her heterosexuality: as she assured gossip magazine *Reveal*, 'I want men to know I'm not gay'. In this familiar reiteration, heterosexuality is reinscribed into this media archive and the male spectator is welcomed in, no longer excluded by lesbian desire.

Coronation Street *and the lesbian wedding*

As their narrative developed on screen, however, the couple transcended the temporary trope of the sensationalized lesbian kiss. Indeed, over its run, the Sophie and Sian storyline brought to the screen the everyday imagery of a lesbian romance. Notably, the setting made for the representation of the 'ordinary' (and simultaneously not so ordinary) intimacies of a couple developing a relationship, sharing a home, participating in family life and in the broader community of The Street. The pair could regularly be seen in scenes cuddled up together drinking mugs of tea on the Webster's sofa, or chatting over the counter at the local corner-shop where Sophie worked. On 31 December, the New Year's Eve episode showed the pair sleeping together for the first time. A couple of nights later, they are walked in on in bed by Sally, who proceeds to temporarily kick the pair out of the house. They

soon return however, although this is not the last of their troubles. The following months see the couple go through various narrative hurdles, from arguments and jealousies to Sophie's struggles with her parents' divorce and her relationship with her faith – the latter culminating in her drunkenly falling from the roof of her old church, leaving the teenager briefly in intensive care. Sophie recovers, however, and the young couple continue their relationship. In September 2011 *What's on TV* magazine announced, '*Coronation Street*'s teen lesbian couple to marry' (McLennan 2011: n.pag.). Indeed, one month later, Monday 24 October's episode saw Sophie propose to girlfriend Sian, and *Coronation Street* begin the first same-sex wedding storyline on a British television soap opera. As they plan their future and talk of 'forever', the fan-imagined weddings of Naomi and Emily are written into Sophie and Sian's official narrative, and audiences are offered a popular and highly visible site for imagining a form of lesbian futurity (albeit a particular one).

Sophie and Sian's wedding scenes were broadcast over the Christmas and New Year period; always an important time in the British soap opera calendar. From births and weddings to tram crashes and the deaths and departures of beloved characters, major storylines, epic disasters and romantic climaxes are all conventions of soap Christmases. 2011 saw Sophie and Sian's wedding included in this archive of iconic episodes. The *Coronation Street* wedding was set in a church, decorated with white flowers and blue and silver bows. The familiar *Street* characters gather for the wedding, including of course Sally and Kevin, Rita, their early supporter, and Emily, now accepting of their relationship. The first glimpse of the brides entering the church is a close-up shot of a mass of white tulle. As they move down the aisle, we watch from behind as their matching white wedding dresses come into view. As the shot cuts to frame them from the front, we see the full dresses – white corsets and full skirts – their identical bouquets, their hair similarly styled in soft waves, each adorned with a sprig of baby's breath. The two figures evoke a conventional image of the symbolic bride. At first glimpse, there is nothing to differentiate this wedding from the countless others we have seen televised. This could be a joint wedding, the two brides could be friends or sisters. Of course, as they reach the end of the aisle and turn to one another, the difference is made clear: there is no groom in this otherwise deeply familiar wedding scene (Ep7768 2011). Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (previously Leah Lilith Albrecht-Samarasinha) argues that 'femme is queer', stating: 'drop a femme into a straight bridal shower and she'll stand out as much as a drag queen would' (Albrecht-Samarasinha 1997: 142). The feminine bride of the lesbian normal does not stand out, rather, she is incorporated into the conventions of the 'straight' wedding. It is this confluence of representational 'same-ness' – the decoded lack of standing out – and critical difference – the absence of husband and presence of two brides – that is central to the new queer visibility of the same-sex marriage era.

Nonetheless, this is a soap opera, and soap weddings rarely go to plan. Sophie is portrayed as doubting her decision to marriage in the lead up to the wedding, and as it comes to her turn to say her vows, she finds she cannot. The wedding ceremony ends with Sian fleeing the church. Parkinson left the soap soon after, and thus ended *Coronation Street*'s first lesbian romance. On the one hand, this narrative resolve constituted a last-minute retreat from realizing a lesbian marriage. At the same time, the dramatic twist followed soap tradition, in which weddings frequently end in disaster. In this sense, the lesbian wedding was normalized into soap convention, meeting the same end as many of its heterosexual counterparts. Furthermore, multiple images of Sian and Sophie in their wedding gowns circulated through the press and continued on in fan media, securing this the image of the lesbian bride in media imaginaries. Warner argues that 'marriage sanctifies some couples at the expense of others. It is selective legitimacy' (Warner 2000: 82). Indeed, that the image of *Coronation Street*'s lesbian brides works to imagine same-sex marriage as its legal possibility is debated relies on their presentation as young, white and feminine. They are Christians, Sophie is a member of a familiar soap family, and they have the approval of the soap matriarchs, from the liberal Rita to the pious Emily. Despite their end, they are clear examples of Siedman's 'good gays' (Seidman 2002).

Coronation Street *and social change*

In the same year that the *Coronation Street* wedding storyline was airing, the Conservative Prime Minister, David Cameron, declared his support for gay marriage. At the 2011 Conservative Party Conference his speech included the following statement:

> I once stood before a Conservative conference and said it shouldn't matter whether commitment was between a man and a woman, a woman and a woman, or a man and another man. You applauded me for that. Five years on, we're consulting on legalising gay marriage.   And to anyone who has reservations, I say: Yes, it's about equality, but it's also about something else: commitment. Conservatives believe in the ties that bind us; that society is stronger when we make vows to each other and support each other. So I don't support gay marriage despite being a Conservative. I support gay marriage because I'm a Conservative.
>
> (Cameron 2011)

In a notable departure from the party's homophobic past, Cameron's speech works to resituate LGBTQ+ rights within a conservative social agenda. This

reconfiguration both constitutes and requires a re-imaging of sexuality in the public sphere. Dorothy Hobson has argued that soaps 'form part of cultural exchanges that go on in both the home and the workplace' noting that 'a large part of the enjoyment which is derived from watching soap operas is talking about them with other people' (Hobson 1989: 150). Sophie and Sian's first kiss and the lesbian wedding, both highly publicized soap events, thus enter into these conversations. As they do so, they function as ways of imagining LGBTQ+ inclusion and lesbian weddings at this critical moment of social change.

As the marriage equality campaigns of the 2000s and 2010s gained momentum, as Walters describes, 'what was once unthinkable (by both gay activists and anti-gay conservatives)' became 'irrevocably part of the political discourse' (Walters 2014: 174). Indeed, proponents of same-sex marriage came to comprise a once unlikely combination of players: from rights-based campaign groups like Stonewall to companies like Starbucks, from LGBTQ+ journalists and activists to conservative political leaders, the 'gay activists' and traditionally 'anti-gay conservatives' found themselves on the same side of the debate. In the case of Cameron, the politician had historically been in the latter camp. Eleven years previously, Cameron was a vocal supporter of Section 28, legislation banning the 'promotion' of homosexuality in schools.[2] When then Prime Minister Tony Blair moved to repeal the law, Cameron accused him of being 'anti-family'. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, he voted against the (ultimately successful) repeal of Section 28 in 2003. In 2002, he voted against extending adoption rights to same-sex couples.[3] In 2004, however, he voted in favour of Civil Partnerships legislation, and in 2009 he apologized for the party's stance on Section 28 (Pierce 2009). By 2011, he was stating his support for same-sex marriage through a conservative social discourse. This shift came as part of Cameron's strategy to 'modernize' the Conservative Party, and attempts to 'rebrand the party as more socially inclusive and tolerant' (Hayton 2010: 497). Same-sex marriage works then to signify liberal progress, and contributes to the rebranding of a modern Conservative Party: The party of Section 28 is reconstituted as the party of same-sex marriage. These shifts were not, of course, universally celebrated. The Coalition for Marriage campaign group was set up in 2012, 'with the aim of opposing the redefinition of marriage and coordinating public opposition to this unnecessary change' (Coalition for Marriage n.d.). Outraged think pieces appeared in various sections of the press. British Barrister and Labour peer Daniel Brennan, for example, argued in *The Telegraph*: 'Marriage of a man and a woman has sacramental meaning for many religious believers. Such marriage is an institution in our society. It is not to be redefined and re-engineered to meet some contemporary sentiment' (Brennan 2012: n.pag.). *Coronation Street*'s pedagogic trajectory of acceptance, in which Sally and the Street 'get used to a different sort of normal', works to mediate this

contemporary redefinition, demystifying and destigmatizing in its reassuring soap opera realism.

The limits and losses of same-sex marriage

By 2011, when *Coronation Street* was airing its lesbian wedding scenes and Cameron was speaking out in support of gay marriage, the United Kingdom had entered an 'age of austerity', initiated by the Conservative-Liberal Democrats coalition in 2010. The aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008 was marked, in the United Kingdom, by spending cuts that have continued implications for deepening inequality. Cuts to welfare and public services particularly hit women, those already economically worse off, and disabled people. A 2012 report for The Fawcett Society argued that: 'the cumulative effect of fiscal measures taken to reduce net public spending will have a disproportionate effect on women' (Sands 2012: 3)[4]. In 2018, the Women's Budget Group on the impact of austerity on disabled women stated that 'austerity cuts to public spending, both in benefits and in public services, have had a disproportionate impact on disabled individuals' with 'disabled lone mothers [losing] out the most from tax and benefit changes since 2010' (Women's Budget Group 2018). By 2011, the Trussell Trust were announcing a 50% increase in the use of foodbanks from the previous year, and reports of increasing use have continued in the years since. Meanwhile, as Tyler outlined in 2013, 'alongside rising levels of social inequality and reversing social mobility, Britain has witnessed a serious erosion of workers' rights, civil liberties and human rights' (Tyler 2013: 7). This period also saw high-profile debates on reproductive rights, with a number of conservative MPs speaking out in favour of reducing the time limit on abortions, and a renewed interest in abstinence-based sex education. It is into this context of deepening inequality and conservative values that the UK government under the David Cameron and the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition passed the 'Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Act 2013'; a legislation that legalized same-sex marriage in England and Wales. Warner argues that the same-sex marriage debate and the celebratory progress narrative of its realization functions as 'an increasingly powerful way of distracting citizens from the real, conflicted, and unequal conditions governing their lives' (Warner 2000: 100). Indeed, as *Coronation Street* was celebrating the build-up to Sophie and Sian's wedding, and Cameron was making headlines as a proponent of equal marriage, Britain was experiencing the brutal and unequal impact of austerity. Gavin Brown argues:

> While marriage equality (re)privileges certain types of couples and domestic economies, simultaneous attacks on the welfare system are disproportionally

affecting single people and those couples who find their relationships outside the reconfigured normative values of austerity Britain.

<div align="right">(Brown 2015: 16–17)</div>

Thus, this legislative change has multiple functions, working to mobilize a celebratory image of modern, 'equal' Britain – contributing to the rebranding of the Conservative Party under David Cameron's leadership – whilst distracting from a Britain becoming simultaneously ever more *unequal*. As Duggan argues, homonormative inclusion is a neo-liberal project, tied up in the privatization of welfare as it shifts costs and responsibilities 'from the government to already overburdened private households' (Duggan 2008: 157). Nonetheless, as Kandaswamy argues of the US context, the same-sex marriage campaign invests in and benefits from the privileges of a system that works to marginalize others. Kandaswamy states:

> Notably, while the normalization of marriage as a marker of good citizenship has been the vehicle through which many women of color and working-class women have been denied social resources, gay and lesbian activists have drawn upon this normalization of marriage in an effort to secure access to many of the same social resources.

<div align="right">(Kandaswamy 2008: 716)</div>

The version of inclusion mobilized here is, of course, a limited one, inaccessible, and indeed, undesirable, to many queer people. It remains deeply conservative in its values. As Maria Miller reassured opponents of the change, 'extending marriage to same sex couples will strengthen, not weaken this vital institution [of marriage]' (Miller 2012: n.pag.). Thus, sexuality politics are also appropriated into an inclusion project that defuses a more radical challenge to 'the family', and closes down queerer, more feminist expansions of intimate lives. As Berlant suggests, 'for all the importance of survival tactics, a politics that advocates the subaltern appropriation of normative forms of the good life makes a kind of (often tacit) peace with exploitation and normativity' (Berlant 1997: 9).

Coronation Street *and the unsustainability of the 'everyday' lesbian*

Whilst Parkinson's exit from the programme signalled the end for Sophie and Sian's relationship, Sophie would go on to find romance again. What's more, *Coronation Street* would go on to introduce a number of other lesbian/bisexual/queer women characters, who, in various ways, complicate the visual and narrative archive of the lesbian figure. However, lesbianism in *Coronation Street* remains

unsustainable, everyday futurity remains unimaginable and the lesbian wedding never quite realized.

Sophie's first post-Sian romantic storyline was with physiotherapist Jenna Kamara (Krissi Bohn). Jenna was a woman of colour, disrupting the visual codes of white femininity that dominate lesbian representation. However, it is notable that this romance was comparatively short lived, and was not the media event that 'Siophie' was. Narratively marginalized, the pair had a low key break-up, and Jenna an even more low-key departure from the soap when Bohn's contract was not renewed. Following the departure of Jenna, Sophie's subsequent romance began in 2014 with newcomer Maddie Heath (Amy James Kelly). When the character is first introduced in December 2013 she is homeless, meeting Sophie when the latter volunteers to serve Christmas dinner at the local shelter (note: Sophie the good citizen). A 2015 Albert Kennedy Trust report stated that: 'LGBT young homeless people continue to be one of the most disenfranchised and marginalized groups in society' (The Albert Kennedy Trust 2015). In the introduction of a homeless young lesbian, the deepening class inequalities of neo-liberal Britain, and their sexual politics, are, in a sense, evoked. Maddie's sexuality, however, is never explicitly part of the homelessness narrative (and it is not the reason she is homeless), other than through its resolve. In fact, it is her relationship with Sophie that allows her to escape her initial classed precarity. As her relationship with Sophie develops, she, like Sian, is seen moving in with Sophie and her parents. A class tension is made visible in this storyline, with Maddie challenging what she describes as the Webster's 'cosy, middle-class lives' (Ep18359 2014). However, as the storyline continues, Maddie, initially characterized as fiery, non-communicative and untrustworthy (having stolen twice from the Websters) is represented as 'tamed' through her inclusion in the Webster family. Marion Jordan describes class in *Coronation Street* as emerging through personalized, individual narratives in ways that obscures the broader political material with which the drama is engaging:

> In narrative terms the soap-opera-realism of programmes like *Coronation Street* conventionally excludes everything which cannot be seen to be caused by the people who are plausibly allowed to be physically present […]. This means, in effect, that most social explanations, and all openly political ones are omitted. The differing situations, the troubles or successes, of the various characters are explained largely in terms of heir (innate) psychological make-up, occasionally attributed to luck.
>
> (Jordan 1981: 29)

Thirty-three years later, this argument continues to speak to the Maddie storyline. Her homelessness is attributed to her mother's 'psychological make-up',

and her move off the streets to Sophie's Christian charity and their subsequent romance. This genre convention makes for an ideal setting for post-queer popular culture's depoliticizing discursive manoeuvre, in which queer lives are distanced from broader sociopolitical contexts.

As Maddie and Sophie's narrative comes to a close, Maddie has a new job and the couple are preparing to move in together, with Maddie reflecting: 'It's like sleeping in that doorway was another life ago. If I hadn't met you […]' (Ep8644 2015). Maddie's inclusion in these markers of normative belonging seems to mobilize lesbian romance as class mobility, saving Maddie from social exclusion and re-moulding her as good citizen. As Lisa Henderson describes, 'good queers […] are moved from the class margins to the class middle' (Henderson 2013: 34). Nonetheless, being a good queer does not, ultimately, protect Maddie. The storyline draws to a close in June 2015 when Maddie dies in an explosion as she is on her way to warn Sophie and her father of a threat to Sophie's half-brother. On the one hand, the narrative framing of her death secures Maddie as heroine and good citizen, dying in the act of protecting a child and mourned and celebrated by the characters of the Street. Nonetheless, her death repeats the lesbian = tragedy and death trajectories, making Maddie yet another entry in the ever-expanding archive of dead media lesbians.

When Kate Connor (Faye Brookes) was introduced in October 2015, *Coronation Street* introduced another out lesbian. Like Sophie, Sian and Maddie, Kate is young, white, 'feminine' and conventionally attractive, conforming to the visual codes of the lesbian normal. The audience soon learns that her character is engaged to be married to fiancé Caz (Rhea Bailey), bringing the suggestion of a, now legal, lesbian wedding to the soap. Caz is a soldier in the British army and a woman of colour, evoking, like Tasha did in *The L Word*, the complex politics of gender, race, sexuality and the military. Caz soon becomes another unsympathetic character, however, characterized as jealous and controlling. The narrative sees Caz become increasingly aggressive – from threatening Sophie to being court marshalled due to a fight with a fellow soldier – and manipulative, ending with attempting to frame another character for her murder. As this storyline develops, Caz, as a lesbian woman of colour, comes to signify a convergence of the 'angry black woman' trope and the dangerous, pathological lesbian trope. She is ultimately sent to prison, her narrative conventionally resolved with her punishment.

Another wedding, another dead lesbian

In 2017, *Coronation Street* began a new lesbian storyline that would garner much press attention and, once more, bring a lesbian wedding (of sorts) to the screen. In

2017, *Coronation Street* character Rana Habeeb (Bhavna Limbachia) was married to Zeedan Nazir (Qasim Akhtar) when she developed feelings for her friend Kate. Revealing these feelings in October 2017, the pair would go on to have a dramatic romantic storyline that involved the breakdown of Rana's relationship with Zeedan, the suicide of Kate's brother Aiden and its emotional aftermath, and the disapproval of Rana's strict Muslim parents. The storyline saw Rana's parents refuse to accept the couple's relationship, and attempt to keep Rana married to Zeedan. When that failed, they attempted to take Rana to Pakistan against her will, before eventually disowning their daughter. As a queer Muslim woman, the character of Rana constitutes a notable and unusual representation within popular culture. Her narrative speaks to the continued rejection of LGBTQ+ people by their families, religious homophobia and the continued violence of 'conversion' approaches. At the same time, the mobilization of the homophobic Muslim parents, and their attempts to take Rana to Pakistan, risks reproducing the homonationalist discourse of the repressive other, mobilized against a progressive Britain. This is not the first homophobia we have witnessed however – recall Sally and, more explicitly, Sian's father. Critically, Rana's ultimately ex-husband Zeedan's family are also Muslim, and they do accept her sexuality. In the response, in particular, of Zeedan's grandmother Yasmeen, another Street matriarch, acceptance is once more modelled. The significance of these varying responses was noted by Shelly King, who portrays Yasmeen in the soap, and is herself an out gay woman (Masters 2018).

In October 2018, an article in the *Daily Star* proclaimed: '*Corrie* is ready to create history by screening its first gay wedding' (Lawton 2018: 19). Faye Brookes, who plays Kate, was quoted as saying: 'I would love a big gay *Corrie* wedding! I tell the writers that on the set. We're making history' (in Lawton 2018: 19). Indeed, November 2018 saw Kate and Rana propose to one another, and publicity for the soap report another 'history-making' portrayal of a wedding. Celebration would turn to disaster once more, however, as, on the day of the wedding, Rana is trapped under a collapsed factory roof and gravely injured. Kate rushes to her side and the couple, dressed in their white lace wedding outfits, exchange their vows as emergency workers work around them. Seconds after the couple exchange rings, Rana dies. Once more, lesbian romance leads to death, and, in this case, the death of an underrepresented Muslim, queer woman of colour. Notably, many viewers were dissatisfied with this ending: Twitter commentaries critiqued the show's mobilization of the 'bury your gays' trope (Harp 2019) and Ofcom received 236 complaints about the episode (J. Lee 2019). Lesbians have thus continued to be visible in *Coronation Street*'s fictional universe, but sustained trajectories continue to be a struggle.

Conclusion

Coronation Street's mobilization of 'everyday', working-class, northern England is a significant site of public culture, mediating an imagined 'British society' to a local and international audience. In the scripting of the characters considered in this chapter, *Coronation Street* mobilizes the lesbian figure through its terms of 'everyday' national belonging, expanding the 'moral consensus' of the soap opera to include lesbian romance. During a period of social and legislative change, the soap repeatedly mobilized images of same-sex proposals, engagements and, for Sophie and Sian and Rana and Kate, weddings. These representations offered frames for imagining what these shifts might look like, and modelled trajectories of tolerance through the guiding figures of the Street matriarchs. A new era of a more tolerant and inclusive Britain was declared, whilst anxieties around such shifts were voiced and patiently resolved. The lesbian figure continued to be decoded, in a way that simultaneously works to distance from visual and cultural codes of queerness or associations with feminism, reiterate the lesbian-that-doesn't-look-like-a-lesbian imperative, and queer the everyday, mobilizing the lesbian as potentially anyone and anywhere. Ultimately, of course, *Coronation Street*'s queer women remain precarious, and lesbian romance unsustainable. 2010 might, as Rita tells us, be a better time to be a lesbian, but familiar fates continue to await the soap lesbian, from prison (Caz) to the graveyard (Maddie and Rana). Furthermore, from a distraught Sian fleeing the church in her wedding dress to Rana dying in hers, the lesbian bride mobilizes a newly spectacular but conventionally tragic figure. Thus, struggles over the intelligibility of LGBTQ+ subjects, even those imagined through the regulations of the lesbian normal, continue.

NOTES

1.   A previous discussion of *Coronation Street* and the lesbian bride can be found in 'Lesbian brides: Post-queer popular culture' (McNicholas Smith and Tyler 2017).
2.   Section 28 was a 1988 amendment to the Local Government Act 1986, stating that local authorities were required to 'not intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality', or 'promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship' (Local Government Act 1998). This was further emphasized in the 1993 Education Act, which clarified that this specifically referred to schools.
3.   Adoption and Children Bill, Clause 131, 20 May 2002 (see The Public Whip 2002).
4.   See also: The Women's Budget Group (2018); The Centre for Human Rights in Practice, Warwick University; Women's Resource Centre.

6

'New Directions':
Glee, new queer visibility and post-queer popular culture

Welcome to Glee Club![1]

Glee is a hybrid musical comedy-drama created by Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk and Ian Brennan (known in the fandom as RIB) for 20th Century Fox Television. *Glee* first aired on US commercial broadcast television network *Fox* on the 19 May 2009, and ran for six seasons until the finale on the 20 March 2015. The programme centred around a teenage show choir at the fictional 'William McKinley High School' in Lima, Ohio, and the combination of pop culture, teen drama, camp musicality and comedy attracted a wide audience. Its first season alone was nominated for nineteen Emmys and four Golden Globes, and in 2012, *Forbes* reported the show as the fourth highest advertising revenue earner that year (Pomerantz 2012). Megan M. Wood and Linda Baughman describe *Glee* as 'pioneering in its combination formula of popular-music-meets-show-choir-meets-prime-time-television-series', with its high viewing figures going 'against the current niche marketing trend and [bringing] television back to the world of broadcast media' (Wood and Baughman 2012: 330).

Glee's premise of a high school show choir required a large ensemble cast as its core students and teachers. The original cast was created from a mixture of unknown actors (such as Chris Colfer) and Broadway performers (such as Lea Michele and Jenna Ushkowitz), with some more familiar faces making up the secondary cast (such as Jane Lynch as cheerleading coach Sue Sylvester). Like *Skins*, the premise also meant that some characters would 'graduate' from the school setting at some point (in *Glee*, after three seasons). The fourth season thus saw the introduction of new members to the central cast, with some of the 'older' generation leaving the show or appearing only sporadically. Alongside the

regular cast, as *Glee*'s success grew the show regularly featured well-known performers from screen, music and theatre (including Gwyneth Paltrow, Sarah Jessica Parker, Whoopi Goldberg, Britney Spears, Lindsey Lohan, Tyra Banks, Idina Menzel and Carol Burnett) in short-running storylines or guest appearances.

Stylistically, *Glee*'s hybrid nature means it evokes various generic conventions. In part a serial television drama, each season is at least partly structured around ongoing narrative arcs in which the show choir prepares for and competes in regional and national championships. As a comedy drama *Glee* is also characterized by irony, absurdist humour and meta-reference. As with Murphy and Fulchuk's other hit TV shows *Nip/Tuck* and *American Horror Story*, the writers 'use irony and satire to challenge decorum on broadcast television' (Marwick et al. 2013: 7). As a musical drama, *Glee* incorporates diegetic and non-diegetic performances of pop songs and musical theatre numbers. As teen drama, *Glee*, like *Skins*, emerges through the conventions of this youth-orientated genre portraying what Barrie Gelles describes as 'the trials and tribulations of high school life – first love, lost love, bullying, identity formation, and other social struggles' (Gelles 2011: 90). In style and subject matter *Glee* thus emerges through influences and generic conventions that range from the school-based drama (such as *My So Called Life, Beverly Hills, 90210, Dawson's Creek*), musical theatre (*Funny Girl, Wicked, West Side Story*[2]), the musical film/TV drama (*Fame, High School Musical*) and popular music videos. Indeed, musical numbers are often performed in the style of a music video; characters appear in external settings with costumes, sets, props, dancers, back-up singers and so on. Thus, as Kyra Hunting and Amanda McQueen argue, *Glee* draws on both 'a decades-long history of television shows pairing teens and music' and a recent 'revival in the musical genre' (Hunting and McQueen 2014: 291).

Musical numbers are often 'mash-ups'[3]; combinations of different songs (such as 'I Feel Pretty', from 1950s musical *West Side Story*, and 'Unpretty', RnB band TLC's 1999 hit) and of diegetic and non-diegetic performances (i.e. a performance might begin within the logic of the Glee Club rehearsal before shifting into an external narrative). For Hunting and McQueen, *Glee*'s 'mash-up aesthetic' underpins its style:

> *Glee* uses the mash-up as its governing logic, allowing the show to blend surprisingly disparate structural and aesthetic elements in innovative ways [...]. In *Glee*, the mash-up aesthetic allows for the evocation of the musical and the music video, as well as the drama, to please different demographics and provide a fresh aesthetic, and is used to support the series' progressive politics, particularly regarding issues of gender and sexuality.
>
> (Hunting and McQueen 2014: 289)

Glee is thus stylistically very different to *Skins* (and indeed *The L Word* and *Coronation Street*); where *Skins* evokes a more naturalistic, albeit exaggerated and sometimes comedic, realism, *Glee* evokes the theatrical. Whilst both are located in the school and share characteristics of the serial, they emerge in different national contexts. Whilst these differences have stylistic implications, both shows mobilize queer figures that play key roles in the constitution of the archive of new queer visibility, showcasing new possibilities of representation and mediating versions of contemporary queer subjectivity and inclusion.

Glee: *New directions in queer TV*

Glee's narrative premise is the re-formation of the school's show choir by Spanish teacher, Will Schuester (Matthew Morrison). Naming the club 'New Directions', Schuester initially enlists a small group of students; all positioned as 'unpopular' within the school hierarchy: '*Glee* began as a show about losers, outcasts, the wretched, slushie-drenched refuse of high school' (Poniewozik 2015: n.pag.). When Rachel Berry (Lea Michele) demands a male lead vocalist, Schuester tricks football quarterback, Finn Hudson (Cory Monteith), into joining. The following episode sees cheerleaders Quinn Fabray (Dianna Agron), Santana Lopez (Naya Rivera) and Brittany S. Peirce (Heather Morris) join in order, initially, to monitor Finn's behaviour, and secondly, to spy on the club for the cheerleading coach and Will's rival, Sue Sylvester. This introductory plot of the coming together of a disparate group of teenagers sets the scene for various narrative tropes. In particular, the foregrounded differences in these characters set up narrative tensions for various romantic relationships and friendships. Critically, however, *Glee* foregrounds the figure of the 'outsider'. The majority of the original choir begin as outsiders within the social hierarchies of the school setting, and various narrative twists position the rest in the same way at some point throughout the seasons. Furthermore, *Glee* evokes an, albeit familiar, 'expose' of the performative nature of high school popularity, revealing these characters too have insecurities of their own. Indeed, in *Glee*, the 'popular' kids learn tolerance and the 'outsiders' come to accept and celebrate their various differences. Ultimately, all the characters are shown to learn, in various ways, lessons of self-acceptance and forms of tolerance that cross the social barriers that divide them. Frederik Dhaenens argues that, 'in exposing how the social hierarchy operates and equally subverting its mechanisms, *Glee* opens up possibilities for representations that challenge heteronormativity' (Dhaenens 2013: 313).

Ryan Murphy is himself a public gay figure. To varying degrees, queer influences and representations run through Murphy's body of work: most explicitly in *Glee*, *The New Normal* (NBC, 2012–13) and, most recently, *Pose* (FX, 2018–),

but also in broader explorations of camp and the shock of the abject. As Emily Nussbaum describes: 'Murphy has taken this vernacular of the closet, and bent it, hard, toward an era of outness' (Nussbaum 2012: n.pag.). Murphy's mobilization of a queer aesthetic is visible in *Glee*, with its knowing pop cultural references, the attention it pays to queer icons (from Judy Garland to Lady Gaga), its spectacular performativity and the use of irony, satire and boundary-pushing humour. Unlike *Skins*, *Glee* is infused with queer references – from pop culture (from queer icons to lesbian pop culture site AfterEllen) to terminology (such as gaydar and 'beards'). As Marwick et al. describe, '*Glee* employs conventions of musical theatre, teen movies, music video, and melodrama to create an overwhelming sense of camp' (Marwick et al. 2013: 7). Murphy, the queer aesthetic, the centrality of the outsider narrative, Kurt Hummel's (Chris Colfer) initially closeted but clearly signposted homosexuality and the foregrounding of tolerance and inclusion meant that *Glee* emerged from the start with a strong LGBTQ+ appeal, and like *Skins*, quickly developed a large queer fandom. As Heather Hogan, writer and recapper, wrote of *Glee*:

> When *Glee*'s pilot episode aired all those many years ago […] what was stunning was how the melodies were woven through with a harmony of hopefulness and this idea that it's ok to dream big dreams, that it's ok to care, and that the most important thing you will ever do in life is create for yourself a family of people who will celebrate the weird and wonderful things that make you *you*. Nobody understands that sentiment better than the queer community. So even before Kurt and Blaine and Klaine and Santana and Brittany and Brittana and Dave K and Unique, *Glee* resonated with us. We just knew it was going to be our show.
> (Hogan 2012: n.pag.)

It's important to note that in 2009, when *Glee* first aired, the California Supreme Court had just upheld Proposition 8, 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' and the Defence of Marriage Act were still in place, and homophobic bullying and LGBTQ+ teen suicides were hitting the headlines. *Glee* emerged knowingly situated in this context, mobilizing its LGBTQ+ visibility tolerance project in direct response to this social and political climate; as Emily Nussbaum writes in *The New York Times*, *Glee* was, from the start, 'a staging ground for gay rights and the anti-bullying movement' (Nussbaum 2012: n.pag.). Indeed, as the series goes on, it includes a number of LGBTQ+ characters, including Kurt Hummel (Chris Colfer) and his boyfriend Blaine Anderson (Darren Criss), cheerleaders Santana Lopez (Naya Rivera) and Brittany S. Pierce (Heather Morris), one-time bully but secretly closeted Dave Karofsky (Max Adler), and transgender teen Unique Adams (Alex Newall). As Meyer and Megan M. Wood argue, the series included 'a number of queer characters, deviating from traditional teen television formats where

non-heterosexual identities are typically contained to one token character' (Meyer and Wood 2013: 435). Furthermore, *Glee*'s clear engagement with LGBTQ+ rights differentiates it from *Skins'* more individualizing romance, situating these queer figures in a broader social and historical context. Indeed, *Glee* is explicitly invested in the tolerance project that constitutes a central strand of contemporary LGBTQ+ rights. As co-creator Ryan Murphy has stated: 'the core of the show is really about tolerance' (in Dos Santos 2010). There are, however, critical limits to this project. Walters argues that 'the tolerance mindset offers up a liberal, "gay-positive" version of homosexuality that lets the mainstream tolerate gayness', but tolerance is an 'inadequate and even dangerous [mode] for accessing real social inclusion and change' (Walters 2014: 3).

Glee *as transmedia TV*

In a parallel with *Skins*, *Glee*'s commercial success was contributed to by the show's extension into surrounding media. Both programmes emerge in the context of what Wood and Baughman describe as 'the "enhanced television" phenomena': 'as a testimony to the convergence between television and the massive global network that is the Internet, television programmers have been cashing in on the "enhanced television" phenomena, with intentions of building viewer loyalty, widening audiences, and increasing retention' (Wood and Baughman 2012: 328). As well as the now standard DVD box-sets and an official website, a range of official *Glee* merchandise is available: including, clothing, music albums, a book series, Wii Karaoke games and an official 'app'. The songs featured in each episode are available to download through the iTunes store and a live concert tour produced a 3D film. A TV spin-off talent show, *The Glee Project*, also gave viewers a chance to compete for roles in the drama itself. Referencing Jenkins, Marwick et al. describe *Glee* as 'one of the more financially successful examples of "transmedia" – content produced for a variety of media platforms that takes advantage of digital venues for media consumption and fan engagement' (Marwick et al. 2013: 2). Like *Skins*, *Glee* made use of social media sites, in particular Twitter, with both actors and members of the production team using this space to interact with fans. As with *Skins* characters, official Twitter profiles of a number of the central characters ran alongside the series. Thus, fans could interact with a character, the actor who plays them and the person who writes them in the same virtual space. *Glee* and *Skins* thus both emerge as contemporary television programmes, expanding into multiple platforms. In part this mobilizes what Alex Weprin described in *Broadcasting and Cable* in 2009 as 'Twitter's single biggest advantage in the industry […] its marketing power and reach' (Weprin

2009: n.pag.). Not only does this work to engage viewers through new mediums, it also gives producers of media new ways of tracking audience response:

> Twitter, in this way, is like a market research survey, giving networks the ability to gauge audience reaction as it happens. Much the same way networks used to search message boards for fan feedback, they are now searching Twitter for real-time reactions.
>
> (Weprin 2009: n.pag.)

Whilst this is certainly the case, these platforms also allow for other uses. As Wood and Baughman argue, 'there are times […] where users utilize the medium as active fan practice rather than as a marketing scheme. Here, media like Twitter become a template for creative fandom practices online' (Wood and Baughman 2012: 329). Indeed, as with *Skins*, as well as these official extensions, *Glee* fans' own capacity for online production resulted in various and multiple *Glee* creations – from unofficial apps to fan and role-playing Twitter accounts, Tumblr pages, fanfiction stories, images, videos and discussion and recapping blogs. *Glee* thus had an extended presence that is both directly within and outside of the control of the production company that creates it. For Lori Montalbano, in '[positioning] itself as a leader in television and social media programing […] the *Glee* movement has garnered increased attention and provided a venue for increased dialogue regarding issues that directly affect the LGBT community' (Montalbano 2013: 62). These extensions might then, as Montalbano argues, offer 'an arena for young audience members to participate in the life experiences of the characters that represent *them*' (Montalbano 2013: 62).

Glee's *queer teens*

Central character from the start and early Glee Club member was fashion conscious, pop culture loving and queer-coded Kurt Hummel. Kurt 'came out' in Episode 3 of the first season. In the second season, he began a relationship with Blaine Anderson which would go on to become a central romantic narrative of the rest of the series. In the thirteenth episode of the first season, Brittany S. Pierce made what is generally considered to have been intended as a throwaway remark that she and fellow cheerleader Santana Lopez were having sex. In the first season Morris and Rivera were recurring characters, rather than series regulars. However, fan interest in this pairing quickly developed, and in the fifteenth episode of the second season Santana tells Brittany that she loves her, and, soon after, first describes herself as a lesbian. As a Latina woman, Santana is a particularly significant

character; mobilizing the lesbian figure as a woman of colour and intervening in the visual codes of white femme/ininity that dominate queer women's representation. Brittany is also a notable character, as she is represented variously as 'fluid' and bisexual – using a range of terms including bi-curious, bi-corn (as in unicorn) and bilingual. Brittany's bisexuality is consistent (if, for a period, contentious, as I will go on to discuss) throughout the series, in which she is always portrayed as comfortably attracted to and dating people of different genders. With some stumbling blocks along the way, the couple go on to develop a relationship that lasts, on and off, for the show's run, and the two become central characters (and Morris and Rivera series regulars). The eighteenth episode of the second season, 'Born This Way' (2011), speaks most directly to *Glee*'s representation of queer subjectivity, epitomizing *Glee*'s sexuality politics.

'Baby I was born this way'

The episode's title takes its name from a song by Lady Gaga, whose 'aesthetic and popularity' directly references the outsider and the gay teen: 'celebrating the "monster", the "freak", or the "misfit" in multiple expressions – not "fitting in" at school or being gay' (Corona 2013: 726). This episode's narrative ostensibly revolves around Rachel Berry's struggle with whether or not to undergo an elective rhinoplasty. Extending to the other characters, the Glee Club is set a task based on self-acceptance. In a speech echoing a language of gay pride, they are told:

> Each of you will be issued a beautifully fitted white t-shirt. We will then use this letter press to write a word of a phrase that best describes the thing about you that you are most ashamed of, or you'd like to change but you can't because you were born that way. Which is super terrific […]. I want you to love those parts of you, embrace them, wear them on your shirts with pride.
>
> ('Born This Way' 2011)

Each character is shown struggling with various insecurities, some of which stem from a wider social context of gender, sexuality, race and disability. The episode follows the generic structure of the prime-time serial, which as Newman describes, 'patterns its weekly episodes into structures of problems and solutions so that the central conflict introduced in the beginning of an episode has often been overcome by the end' (Newman 2006: 20). Culminating in a performance of the Lady Gaga song of the title – an 'anthem for acceptance' ('Born This Way' 2011) – the characters are largely shown to embrace and celebrate their suggested difference. Kurt, performing in a t-shirt with 'likes boys' written across the front, mobilizes queer sexuality through the shame-pride trajectory, in which pride is based on

the biological determinism of the 'Born This Way' discourse. This framing speaks to what Shannon Weber describes as, 'the resurgence of biological determinism in contemporary American queer political strategizing' (Weber 2012: 680). Biological determinist understandings of sexuality have a long and complex history; mobilized in deviancy and pathology frameworks, and to justify reparative or conversion 'therapies', as well as to call for inclusion and rights. Biological determinist accounts of gender and sexuality have long been critiqued by feminist and queer theorists; drawing attention to social and political contexts, and the power relations imbedded in the categorizations of 'Born This Way' discourse. Recent years have, however, as Weber argues, seen the re-centralization of biologically determinist discourse in LGBTQ+ rights. Whilst this may be an effective tool in achieving certain goals – it is, as Weber describes, 'undoubtedly useful in political strategizing and in navigating the homophobia of loved ones' – there are critical limits to this approach; as Weber and others have argued:

> Biological determinism works as a phenomenon that normalizes same-sex desire while leaving heterosexism in place and disenfranchising certain queer people from fully participating in an accurate articulation of their experiences in political and popular discourse.
>
> (Weber 2012: 685)

Don't be a bitch, be a lesbian

The celebratory resolution of this narrative foregrounds a message of self-acceptance. This is a theme that runs through *Glee*, as characters experience various crises, work through these in Glee Club rehearsals, and ultimately learn to love and accept themselves: to 'celebrate the weird and wonderful things' (Hogan 2012: n.pag.) that define them. The Glee Club may not be able to *change* the things they are 'most ashamed of', but they can *choose* to 'love' and 'embrace' them with 'pride' ('Born This Way' 2011). The context for these crises is often social – for example, heteronormativity and homophobia – but as self-acceptance is offered as resolution, characters are made responsible for individualized narratives of self-work.

When Brittany encourages a reluctant Santana to declare her sexuality through participating in the 'Born this Way' task, wearing a t-shirt she has made her with 'Lebanese',[4] a misspelling of lesbian, printed on the front, she tells her: 'clearly you don't love you as much as I do or you'd put that shirt on and dance with me' ('Born This Way' 2011). Santana's own choice of t-shirt, with the word 'bitch' printed on it, is met with a disappointed look from Brittany. Santana is to blame here for a lack of self-love, and refusing to take the necessary steps towards self-acceptance.

This speaks to a broader, and much critiqued, sensibility of individual choice and responsibility; a neo-liberal sensibility in which ideal subjects are 'self-disciplining, self-sufficient, responsible and risk averting individuals' (Ouellette 2007: 140). Angela McRobbie argues that, in a neo-liberal, postfeminist society: 'individuals must now choose the kind of life they want to live' (McRobbie 2009: 19), but 'the individual is compelled to be the kind of subject who can make the right choices' (McRobbie 2009: 19). Similarly, Gill describes postfeminism as 'a sensibility in which notions of autonomy, choice and self-improvement sit side-by-side with surveillance, discipline and the vilification of those who make the "wrong" "choices" ' (Gill 2008: 442). Ultimately, in this episode Santana 'fails' to choose acceptance and complete the task/trajectory. Notably, the alternative, and 'wrong', choice she initially makes is to identify as a 'bitch'. This gendered term evokes its long history in patriarchal discourse, as Anderson describes: 'when the "bitch" metaphor is invoked in popular culture it unleashes the myth of women's power as unnatural and threatening' (Anderson 1999: 602). This moment also speaks to the feminist reclamation of the term: as Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards suggest, 'given female socialisation, a not nice woman can be a beautiful thing' (Baumgardner and Richards 2010: 397). In the 'Bitch Manifesto', Joreen Freeman challenges that 'a woman should be proud to declare she is a bitch', describing the bitch as, amongst other things, 'rudely [violating] conceptions of proper sex role behaviour' (Freeman 2000: 227). Santana's sexy, 'bitchy' persona also evokes the dangers and pleasures of the femme fatale and the queer femme as 'bad girl' (Harris and Crocker 1997), with her challenge to the virginal, good girl conventions of ideal femininity. Santana's bitch t-shirt thus might offer a disruptive moment in which a proud declaration of bitch becomes a possibility, a symbolic moment for a character in which we might find the pleasurable mobilization of a bad girl queer femme. Critically, however, the possibility of the bitch as 'a beautiful thing' is quickly closed down. Three episodes previously, Santana had first expressed her feelings for Brittany, explaining to Brittany that she's 'a bitch all the time because [she's] angry […] because [she] has all of these feelings' (Sexy 2011). In one sense, this speech offers an interesting moment in which the struggles of living queer lives in hetero-patriarchal worlds are made visible. As the term is reiterated here, however, it brings with it connotations of fear (Santana is afraid to come out), negativity and bad femininity (the implication is that being 'such a bitch' is undesirable and Santana wouldn't be so, if she was not hiding her 'true' self). Critically, Santana as bitch is mobilized in opposition to a coming-out imperative, in which the 'right' path to choose is made clear.

As the rest of characters perform the narrative climax of the 'Born This Way' showpiece, Santana is shown sitting at the back of the auditorium with the other closeted gay teenager (and former bully), Dave Karofsky (Max Adler). Wearing

the misspelled t-shirt, Santana's literal inability to speak her own 'truth' is positioned as failure. With Kurt's confident statement of his 'likes boys' t-shirt mobilized in opposition to Santana's unhappy shame, *Glee*'s coming-out politics evoke the familiar dichotomy of shame/pride (Munt 2000). A normative account of the ideal queer subject and their trajectory from shame and silence to pride and visibility emerges. As Dhaenens argues, '*Glee* thus joins the range of teen dramas that represent gay identity formation as a staged process from sexual confusion to self-acceptance' (Dhaenens 2013: 309). Possibilities of queer subjectivity are divided into oppositional categories of negative/positive, shame/pride and bitch/*Glee*-ful lesbian; trajectories of moving from one to another become imperatives, the route to do so becomes the individual's responsibility. This is not to suggest that there is not power in visibility, or to romanticize shame, but to argue that what is missing in such narratives is, firstly, an account of the broader social structures, which limit such 'choices'. It is to turn attention away from structural change towards individual responsibility. Secondly, it is also to reproduce categories of good/bad gay subjectivity in which 'good gays' are those that conform to normative hierarchies of gender, race, class, ability, appearance and aspiration. As Steven Seidman describes: 'lesbians or gay men who deviate from the norm of the normal of good gay fall outside the charmed circle of social respectability' (Seidman 2002: 146). Nonetheless, *Glee* is not known for its narrative consistency, and Santana is not an entirely reformed character post-coming out. Despite the dominant narrative of homonormative inclusion, Santana is never entirely a good girl/gay, retaining elements of bad girl disruption throughout.

Everybody's different, everybody's the same

As the Glee Club members accept themselves, they also accept one another. In a flashback episode in the final season, Rachel Berry (Lea Michelle) describes Glee Club as 'something special […] somewhere safe where we can learn from each other and be who we are, including people who are different than us' ('Loser Like Me' 2015). *Glee*'s sentimental premise, in which a disparate group of unlikely companions are united despite their differences, is both a common narrative trope and, as we have seen, a specifically LGBTQ+ message. Yet, whilst the 'Born This Way'-themed episode makes explicit reference to LGBTQ+ rights, it is not only the queer characters that follow (or fail to follow) the shame to pride trajectory. The 'Born This Way' performance/narrative is an ensemble piece, with all the characters learning to love and embrace various aspects of themselves. With an ensemble that includes young people of colour and disabled teens, as well as LGBTQ+ youth, these characters and their struggles are shaped by social differences and inequalities. The aspects of themselves they 'embrace' and 'wear on their shirts

with pride' include explicit references to these differences, alongside other character traits; with t-shirt statements ranging from 'likes boys', and 'no weave' to 'can't dance' and 'can't sing'. In this ensemble narrative, sexuality is mobilized as one of many differences. Whilst this might work to mobilize a rare intersectional representation, it also has more limiting effects, as sexuality, and other socially constructed points of difference, are both clearly named as a source of struggle and universalized in an emotive narrative of overcoming self-doubt. As Walters notes, 'Kurt's gayness is in many ways signified as analogically identical to any of the outsider statuses that the *Glee* kids inhabit – from fat girl to wheelchair-bound boys to teen moms' (Walters 2012: 928); even more notable, to not being able to sing or dance or having a 'butt chin'. Difference emerges but is both universalized and transcended through individualized narratives of self-acceptance. In doing so, the social conditions that constitute differences as meaningful, and critically, the power relations through which 'differences' produce both privileges and exclusions, are obscured. Berlant writes of sentimental rhetoric:

> Here is what is paradigmatic: when sentimentality meets politics personal stories tell of structural effects, but in doing so they risk thwarting the very attempt to perform rhetorically a scene of pain that must be soothed politically. Because the ideology of true feeling cannot admit the non-universality of pain, its cases of vulnerability and suffering can become jumbled together into a scene of the generally human, and the ethical imperative toward social transformation is replaced by a passive and vaguely civic minded ideal of compassion.
>
> (Berlant 2008: 41)

The anxieties foregrounded in *Glee's* accounts of living as a gay teenager 'tell of structural effects'. Yet, as queerness is subsumed by a generalized notion of difference and resolved through compassionate tolerance, broader social change might be displaced.

The limits of inclusion

As this account of the 'Born This Way' episode suggests, the ways in which Kurt, the white, gay, male figure and Santana the Latina lesbian figure emerge here are very different. This difference is not restricted to this episode. Santana and Brittany's relationship develops later and more slowly than either Kurt's own story or his relationship with Blaine. More importantly, when this narrative does emerge it is afforded considerably less screen-time and narrative development. Whilst Kurt's relationship with his father, for example, is represented in a long-running, nuanced and highly sympathetic manner, Santana's relationship with her family

is represented in a few brief scenes. Furthermore, we do not see Santana and Brittany kiss on the lips on screen until Season 3 Episode 13, two whole seasons after we first learn that they are having sex. In comparison, we first see Kurt kiss Blaine in Season 2 Episode 16, at the very start of their relationship (Blaine first appears in Season 2). Critically, whilst Kurt is very much the centre of his coming-out narrative, Santana is outed against her will. In the midst of an argument with Finn Hudson, the football player is the one to first make her sexuality public.

The show's claim to diversity is further troubled by various other aspects of its representational politics, and the lack of intersectionality in its inclusion project. *Glee* has been critiqued, for example, for its representation of disability and 'the series' use of crip drag' (Kociemba 2010: 1.2). Or, as Erin Tatum summarizes: '*Glee* is offensive to pretty much anyone who isn't an able white male' (Tatum 2013b: n.pag.). Hannah Ellison has also critiqued the show for what she describes as 'the reductive approach it has to writing women' (Ellison 2012: n.pag.). In just a few of many examples: central character Rachel Berry's relationship with Finn Hudson for example, increasingly revolved around conventional tropes of hetero-patriarchal romance, epitomized in his violent attack on Rachel's subsequent boyfriend, framed as romantic gesture. Later seasons introduced a transgender character to the series. This representation was much critiqued however, as one article succinctly summarized: 'the show treated her like garbage' (Rude 2015: n.pag.). The intersections of gender and race also mobilize particularly problematically. The characterization of core Glee Club member Mercedes Jones (Amber P. Riley), for example, repeatedly evokes 'the stereotypical portrayal of an overweight, lonely, black woman with an attitude' (Turner and Nilsen 2014: 69). Similarly, prior to Santana's coming out, her characterization as 'oversexed Latina cheerleader' (Dubrofsky 2013: 84) evoked the 'hot blooded, tempestuous, hypersexual' figure of the mediated 'Latina Body' (Mendible 2010: 1). Throughout the seasons she continued to evoke the representational trope of the 'Latina spitfire': visually coded, as Isabel Molina Guzmán and Angharad N. Valdivia describe, 'by red-colored lips, bright seductive clothing, curvaceous hips and breasts, long brunette hair, and extravagant jewellery' (Guzmán and Valdivia 2004: 211). This was, however, complicated by her emergence as a lesbian character. The 'oversexed' Santana is reframed as *closeted* Santana; her previous sexual experiences are explained as attempts to hide and refuse her lesbianism. Kathryn Hobson reads Santana as 'queer-femme', arguing that whilst she is 'traditionally beautiful, skinny, and traditionally sexy and sexualized, her snarky comments, humorous quips, and cynical attitude defy traditional nurturing and caretaking elements of both her femininity and her identity as a Latina woman' (Hobson 2015: 103). Whilst Santana does evoke the femme as disruptive femininity, this is, as previously argued, narratively curtailed. Furthermore, as Naya Rivera's inclusion in *Rolling Stone* magazine's

'Latin Hotlist' suggests, this figure emerges through complex textual and *extra-textual* codes of gender, race and sexuality. Described on the November 2013 cover as '*Glee's* bad girl' (2013) and pictured dressed in a 'sexy' school uniform, this image points to the ways in which representations of queer women can be repackaged as a site of a heteronormative gaze. Lesbianism emerges here as subtextual titillation; the school-girl staple of mainstream pornography is evoked alongside the sexualized Latina and fetishized female body. Thus, her multiple codings position Santana as open to contradictory queer, heterosexist and racialized readings.

As is visible in the 'Born This Way' episode, race, gender, sexuality and disability are mobilized in *Glee* as sites of difference and struggle. However, *Glee's* complex evocation of stereotypes works in ways that simultaneously challenge and reproduce. Critically, Glee utilizes irony and satire to voice homophobia, sexism, racism and able-ism. In doing so, *Glee* mobilizes a postfeminist use of irony as means of, as Gill describes, 'having it both ways': 'of expressing sexist or homophobic or otherwise unpalatable sentiments in an ironized form, while claiming it was not actually "meant"' (Gill 2007a: 266–67). As Rachel E. Dubrofsky argues, *Glee* similarly emerges as 'a conflicted postracial text' (Dubrofsky 2013: 83). In mobilizing dialogue around race and, again, inclusion, *Glee* defines itself 'as not racist' but does so in a way that 'perpetuates racism and relies on racist tropes' (Dubrofsky 2013: 83). Critically, Dubrofsky argues, 'musical numbers and humor are used to obfuscate troubling racial dynamics' (Dubrofsky 2013: 83). Similarly, whilst representing the violence of homophobia, *Glee* simultaneously mobilizes homophobia through irony. Sue Sylvestor, for example, repeatedly mocks Kurt through homophobic verbal references to sexuality. Thus, *Glee* repeats the problematic 'post' sensibility in multiple ways, reproducing, even as it posits itself as transforming, continued inequalities.

Glee *and 'the lesbian blogging community'*

As with *Skins*, *Glee's* transmedia presence extends not only through official channels, but also through fan-led online platforms. Twitter, for example, is used by fans not only to share their fandom (such as in fan accounts) but also to communicate in real time as episodes air. Following a remark made by Brittany in Season 1 Episode 14, that 'dolphins are just gay sharks', fans started using the hashtag '#gaysharks' to communicate commentary on *Glee* episodes. The use of this hashtag signals not only *Glee* fandom, but specifically gay fandom, and was predominantly used by fans invested in the lesbian narrative and relationship between Brittany and Santana. Writers on sites such as AfterEllen regularly used this hashtag, and the site began to post weekly selections of the 'best #gaysharks

tweets' alongside their regular episode recaps. The use of this hashtag speaks to the collective character of *Glee*'s lesbian and queer fandom, and the sociability mobilized through these televisual representations. Twitter's function as a mediator of immediate communication allows its participants to engage in publics that emerge out of the original media text but also through the extended sites of public discourse they mobilize. As suggested, what emerges through Twitter is connected to other spaces, such as AfterEllen's website. On sites such as AfterEllen and Autostraddle, weekly recaps provide analysis and critique of television shows such as *Glee*, and their representations of lesbian, bisexual and queer women and transgender characters. As well as other blogs and fan sites, fan-led conversations were also playing out on sites such as micro-blogging site, Tumblr. Using these spaces and the access they allow to technologies of cultural production, fans are able to bring new media into circulation. With easy access to programmes such as Photoshop and other editing software, fans produce their own versions of film trailers, promotional material, manipulated screenshots and moving GIF files. On sites such as Tumblr, Twitter and Fanpop.com these new objects are circulated freely. As they do so, they intervene in public-making texts and the cultural knowability and liveability they make possible. In the case of *Glee*, the extended media of fandom reveals various struggles and tensions over the narrative of queer belonging *Glee* makes visible.

Fan protest

Mid-Season 4, one pair of *Glee* fans announced on their Tumblr page ('Lima Designs') their departure from the *Glee* fandom. Arguing that *Glee*'s original premise had been diminished over the show's run, they explicitly rejected what they saw as the shift from its original celebration of the outsider to something far more conventional:

> *Glee* has not been the same since the beginning of season four and arguably even earlier. The show began as a satirical show about the underdog in all of us striving for our dreams. From being shy and edgy to annoying and talented, the show celebrated the characteristics of what made us unique. Now it has transformed into a show about popularity and relationships and is filled with continuity-less storylines, offensive jokes and a never-ending pool of characters.
> (Charlie and Driz of Lima Designs 2013: n.pag.)

These ex-fans mobilized this moment as 'a protest of what *Glee* has become', drawing particular attention to the show's treatment of its queer characters (and in the case of Faberry – the fan term for the much desired coupling of Rachel Berry

and Quinn Fabray – its lack of development of queer potential): 'This is a protest for the untold Faberry storylines, the deleted Klaine scenes, Brittana's missing kisses and for whatever made us angry during our time as Gleeks' (Charlie and Driz of Lima Designs 2013: n.pag.). Asking other Tumblr users to submit responses to the questions, 'What I loved about *Glee* is/are', 'What I miss about *Glee* is/are' and What I want from *Glee* is/are', they produced a series of final images incorporating various other dissatisfied fans' critiques. In doing so, they utilized this space and its potential as a collective to stage a fan protest against the narratives in which they were once so invested. The number of images published on the site attest to the shared sense of dissatisfaction in the way in which *Glee* produced its figures of difference. Multiple responses directly cited issues of inequality and (in)visibility, and called the show out for its 'offensive' representations. For all that *Glee* once seemed to offer the possibility of recognition, the terms of this recognition proved too conservative for these and many other fans.

Brittana

If *Glee's* overarching narratives are met with resistance from *Glee* fans, so too is the development of Santana and Brittany's characters. The marginalization of the lesbian narrative argued for above was much critiqued by fans, who foregrounded the differences in narrative development and screen time noted above. Furthermore, Finn's outing of Santana is widely rejected as a gendered disavowal of her ability to speak on her own terms. Various images, tweets and pieces of writing speak to these concerns. In other images produced by Lima Designs, *Glee* publicity posters are reworked; in one image, a screenshot of Santana standing closely behind Brittany's back and wagging her finger to someone just out of shot is edited to look like a poster for Season 3 Episode 7, titled 'I Kissed a Girl'. Underneath the heading are the words 'lol. jk. no they didn't', and at the bottom of the image: 'they have to wait six more episodes'. Another shows an image of Finn singing, with the words: 'when Finn sings this heart-breaking song after blackmailing Santana and forcing her out of the closet', and underneath, 'thank you Finn'. Tumblr saw the circulation of texts edited to mimic *Glee* scripts that rewrote Santana coming out, and saw the pair engaging in sex scenes. Multiple 'manips'[5] and fanfictions imagined Santana and Brittany in erotic scenes, working both to foreground the lack of sexual interaction between the two characters within *Glee* on television, and to write sexual desire into the public speech of the lesbian figure. Countless posts, tweets and blogs expressed fans' dissatisfaction with Brittany's subsequent relationship with fellow Glee Club member Sam (Chord Overstreet), a coupling often referred to in the fandom by the portmanteau 'Bram'. Whilst this storyline is consistent with Brittany's bisexuality, in its broader representational context it

also evokes the familiar temporary lesbian trope, in which relationships always follow this trajectory (where a relationship with another woman is repeatedly followed, and, critically, surpassed, by a relationship with a man). Critically, however, fans were also able to use these spaces to rework this narrative on their own terms. In multiple examples of fan media, text, images and animated gifs are utilized to create trajectories in which the Bram narrative is rejected or ended and the Brittana one re-instated.

Faberry

As was apparent with *Skins*, new queer visibility has not replaced conventions of the appropriative queer gaze. Similarly, *Glee*'s queer content is not confined to its explicitly, or 'canonically', gay characters. Most notably, *Glee* inspired the above-mentioned fan pairing of Rachel and Quinn. In fanfiction, images and videos, this coupling is written into *Glee*'s extended narrative world. The contemporary context of participatory media, in which audiences can easily learn to manipulate images and footage and create media of their own, queer subtexts can be fully realized; possibilities of lesbian desire become a visible reality. Platforms such as Tumblr produce and circulate a constantly evolving set of images that position Rachel and Quinn within various romantic settings, both within and beyond *Glee*'s fictional world. YouTube videos, often set to romantic music, cut together various scenes between the two characters and make visible a coherent and believable queer romance. Screenshots of the pair kissing other (male) characters are reproduced with the respective partners replaced with one another, and these canonically heterosexual characters are recoded. Thus, fans mobilize new technologies to rework and recode television images. They are able to circulate media that reproduce the conventions of the original object, bringing into being a series of new ones. As they do so, they create queer possibilities that extend beyond the fixed world of the television programme. In the technologies of fandom, the borders of new queer visibility become flexible ones. In these fan creations fandom might work to resist the terms on which *Glee* mobilizes queer inclusion. Certainly, the fantasy of belonging promised in *Glee* is rejected on a number of terms by these critical fans. Furthermore, if publics are produced through the circulation of texts, fans are constantly producing images, narratives and media objects of their own.

Opposition

Warner writes of counterpublics as *publics aware of their oppositional status* (Warner 2005). Certainly, a self-aware oppositionality can be found within this fandom. If *Skins* fandom had, at least initially,[6] a relatively friendly relationship

with the programme's production team, *Glee* is a different matter altogether. Tensions between the *Glee* fandom and the production team, in particular co-creator Ryan Murphy, intensified as the series went on. The contemporary nature of transmedia television and the potential for public communication between fans and producers altered the context in which this plays out. In particular, the use of Twitter meant the criticisms raised by fans played out in direct communication with the production team, and Murphy in particular. When Murphy tweeted a picture of Brittany and Sam with the caption 'wedding of the year', Brittana fans reacted, unsurprisingly, negatively. Images soon emerged on Twitter and Tumblr, however, that both protested this move and reworked it on queerer terms. One notable image, for example, reproduced Murphy's tweet with a manipulated image of Brittany and Santana as the wedding couple.

As is suggested by Murphy's provocative posting of the 'Bram' wedding, this oppositionality is far from one sided. *Glee* has also positioned itself against the fandom community and, in particular, lesbian fandom. Episode 9 of Season 4 features the beginnings of the relationship between Sam and Brittany. The fan dissatisfaction with this narrative shift was unexpectedly mobilized with the drama itself. Initially, Brittany is shown to be hesitant to become involved with Sam. In the following dialogue, she explains her hesitancy by directly referencing the 'Brittana' fandom:

> Brittany: I just like you too much to put you in danger. Sam: Santana broke up with *you*. Brittany: No, it's not just Santana. It's like, all the lesbians of the nation, and I don't know how they found out about Santana and I dating, but once they did they started sending me, like, tweets and Facebook messages on Lord Tubbington's wall. I think it means a lot to them to see two super-hot, popular girls in love and I worry that if they find out about you and I dating, they'll turn on you and get really violent and hurt your beautiful face and mouth.
> ('Swan Song' 2012)

Later in the same episode she agrees to the relationship. In a strange evocation of the language of both gay pride and feminism, Brittany tells Sam that 'the lesbian blogging community' might not 'like it, but the way I figure is that they know they're my sisters and love is love' ('Swan Song' 2012). Whilst *Glee* regularly incorporates meta-reference into its dialogue and conventions, this is a particularly explicit breaking of the fourth wall. Dana Piccoli, alongside other bloggers, responded to this exchange on AfterEllen:

> What it showed me was that Ryan Murphy and company wanted to make damn sure we knew what they thought of us. Had the scene just happened without all

that 'lesbian nation' nonsense, it wouldn't have bothered me nearly as much. Would they have singled out gay men? Any other subset of *Glee* fans? I doubt it. This was a message. A loud one […] 'look at the angry lesbians, aren't they so stereotypically angry' […] it's about power: the power to give and to take away, and I think that's sad. I don't think that the *Glee* folks realised how deeply important Brittana is to a lot of people. A reflection of themselves, finally.

(Hogan et al. 2012)

Her response highlights the struggle between, specifically, lesbian fans and spectators and the creators of the television programme. The ways in which *Glee* mobilized lesbianism – both as temporary (in terms of Brittany) and as unreasonably angry (in terms of the fans) – is clearly resisted here. Furthermore, the recognition *Glee* offers is mobilized as central to its importance, and to why this move was such a problematic one. Interestingly, the following episode featured Santana making an appearance in which she referenced AfterEllen directly. This gesture was generally considered an attempt to reconcile with the blogging community; albeit one that was varyingly received.

Happily ever after: Glee *does same-sex marriage*

In 2015, *Glee* aired its sixth and final season, drawing the Glee Club's narratives to a close. The Santana and Brittany break-up and Brittany's relationship with Sam remained unpopular with 'the lesbian blogging community', and mid-way through the fifth season Brittany and Santana reunited. The ongoing critique of the narrative treatment of these characters seemed finally to be heard. As Riese argues: 'for six seasons, lesbian fandom demanded to be heard, to be represented fairly, to be able to watch see [sic] story that was meant to be, right on their TVs. Every milestone of Brittany and Santana's relationship happened because of lesbian fandom' (Riese 2015). Indeed, this case does seem to point to the possibilities opened up in convergence culture for audiences to intervene in representation, complicating, as Jenkins suggested, the producer/consumer relationship (Jenkins 2006). In the third episode of Season 6, on 16 January 2015, audiences were offered a romantic happy ending as Santana asked Brittany to marry her. In Episode 8, the pair were married, in what turned out to be a double same-sex marriage, when Kurt and Blaine were persuaded to join them in walking up the aisle. Thus, in its final season, the topical issue of same-sex marriage is brought to the forefront of *Glee*'s narrative world. *Glee* secures its investment in what Walters describes as the 'new queer familialism', a sensibility 'over determined by two linked tropes: the same-sex marriage mania and a newly resurgent biological essentialism (the "born with it" or, to

quote Lady Gaga, the "born this way" refrain)' (Walters 2012: 918). As explored, the ' "born this way" refrain' was established early on and here, its counterpart, the iconic same-sex marriage debate, takes centre stage.

In 2009, when *Glee* first aired, same-sex marriage was only legal in four US states. In 2012, Barack Obama became the first US president to publically endorse same-sex marriage. Mobilizing marriage equality through a distinctly homonormative and homonationalist discourse, he described what influenced his changing politics on the matter:

> Over the course of several years as I talked to friends and family and neighbours, when I think of members of my own staff who are in incredibly committed, monogamous relationships, same sex relationships, who are raising kids together. When I think about those soldiers or airmen or marine or sailors who are out there fighting on my behalf and yet feel constrained […] because they are not able to commit themselves in a marriage.
>
> (ABC News 2012)

By the time of the *Glee* wedding, same-sex marriage was legal in all but 14 US states, and four months after *Glee*'s double wedding, the US supreme court ruled that same-sex marriage was a legal right, legalizing it across all states. When Brittany encourages Kurt and Blaine to take part in a double wedding, she tells them: 'I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for you guys, ok, I looked up to you as a couple in high school. You showed me there was a place for me and Santana too' ('A Wedding' 2015). Brittany's appeal suggests as a meta-commentary on the significance of LGBTQ+ visibility for queer youth. As Heather Hogan, who has both celebrated and critiqued *Glee*, reflects:

> In ten years, the gay teenagers who stuck with this show – whether they knew they were gay or not, whether they were out of the closet or not – will remember what it was like to watch Kurt come out to his father, to watch Santana come out to her grandmother, to watch Kurt and Santana's friends accept and adore them, to watch them fall in love. For lots and lots people this will be the very first time they ever see themselves reflected on a screen, and they will store up those images and treasure them in the [*sic*] hearts for always.
>
> (Hogan 2011b: n.pag.)

For its gay teenager viewers *Glee* mobilizes an 'It Gets Better' trajectory, evoking the hopeful message of the high-profile video campaign launched in 2010 by activist and author Dan Savage and his husband Terry Miller in response to LGBTQ+ youth suicides. *Glee* sets out a pedagogical path to it 'getting better',

albeit one that, as the campaign too has been argued to do, follows a particular trajectory of what 'better' might look like and how to get there. *Glee* also works to make such shifts imaginable to a broader audience, offering, as *Coronation Street* does, a guide to LGBTQ+ inclusion (particularly notable due to its broadcast on conservative network Fox).

A *Glee* wedding

The two brides and two grooms walk down the aisle, dressed in white wedding dresses for the women and dark suits for the men. They are serenaded by Glee Club members Mercededes (Amber P Riley) and Artie (Kevin Hart) singing 'At Last', made famous by Etta James. If *Skins* fans imagined Naomily weddings at a time when it was not quite yet possible, these representations are, 'at last', depicting a legal reality. From once struggling with his son's sexuality, Burt Hummel (Mike O'Malley) continues with the promise of 'it gets better', as he officiates his son's wedding, now an assured advocate for LGBTQ+ rights. Burt's speech speaks to the heteronormativity of the institution of marriage, as he acknowledges the fact that, as a heterosexual man, marriage has always been available to him. He notes the need to 'drive over the state line to be able to come here to officiate the weddings of these two lovely couples' ('A Wedding' 2015); as Santana states earlier in the episode: 'gay marriage is illegal in Ohio but legal in Indiana, it makes absolutely no sense' ('A Wedding' 2015). Brittany and Santana are dressed in white wedding dresses. White wedding dresses are, as Chris Ingraham argues, 'laden with symbolism' (Ingraham 2009: 27), evoking a powerful convergence of hetero-patriarchy, racialization and class (Ingraham 2009). Santana mobilizes the lesbian bride as a woman of colour, a divergence from the dominant images of homonormative inclusion. With their classic white dresses, carefully styled hair and make-up, however, they conform in all other ways to conventions of ideal femininity.

If *Glee* has always engaged with LGBTQ+ rights, its depiction of same-sex marriage delivers a clear message, with repeated references to legislative change. Same-sex marriage is mobilized as symbol of queer progress, and celebrated as an expansion of the institution of marriage. As Burt tells the two couples: 'I want to thank you guys for being so brave and so honest, and for standing up here and showing all of us that love and marriage is so much bigger than we thought it could be. And also so much simpler' ('A Wedding' 2015). This evokes the framing of same-sex marriage as a symbol of a progressive shift towards a more tolerant and inclusive society. As Katrina Kimport describes, 'with same sex marriage, some see an opportunity to disrupt the relationship between marriage and heteronormativity and to transform society by undermining (a component of) heterosexual privilege'

(Kimport 2013: 9). The couples exchange vows and Kurt tells his soon to be husband, friends and gathered crowd: 'it is time for all of us to walk into the sunshine together, forever' ('A Wedding' 2015). This sentiment has resonance both within and outside *Glee*'s fictional universe. For Santana, Brittany, Blaine and Kurt, the wedding acts as narrative resolve. The struggles they have experienced and the work of becoming ideal queer subjects is complete; it got better and they are awarded their happy ever after. More broadly, this dialogue speaks to the 'us' of the LGBTQ+ community: it is time, the drama posits, for LGBTQ+ people to 'walk into the sunshine' of tolerance and inclusion, epitomized in the legal right of same-sex marriage.

The other weddings

Long before Santana and Brittany were married on screen, they were married (multiple times) in fan media. Countless images and stories circulated through online platforms that, as with *Skins*' Naomi and Emily, secured this pairing in romantic narratives of futurity, signified by marriage and motherhood. Numerous manipulated images of Brittany and Santana, and Rachel and Quinn, imagined them as brides prior to their televisual wedding. These images were similarly coded; a visual semiotics of white dresses, bright lighting, flowers, hearts and butterflies dominate this archive. When Brittany and Santana were broken up within the series, these romantic conventions worked to secure this coupling in the face of what appeared to be another unsustainable lesbian narrative. They did so, of course, by imagining access to a normative fantasy of the good life. In the repeated imagining of the same-sex marriages of both *Skins* and *Glee*'s queer, or appropriated as queer, figures, the 'cultural normativity of marriage' (Warner 2000: 109) is reiterated and expanded to include lesbian and gay couples. Its repetition speaks to the closing down of other possibilities that queer and feminist (and queer-feminist) critics of same-sex marriage have drawn attention to: as Butler argues, 'marriage … becomes an "option" only by extending itself as a norm (and thus foreclosing options)' (Butler 2004: 109). Critically, the repetition of the wedding narrative as happy resolution mobilized in *Glee* and through fan media might also speak to a desire to resolve the violence of exclusion through participation in the very institutions that sustain it. A form of 'cruel optimism': what Berlant defines as 'a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility' (Berlant 2011: 24). Berlant argues that 'a relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing' (Berlant 2011: 1). The repeated desire for the happy ending of the symbolic wedding trope is arguably a hopeful investment in an institution that simultaneously functions to maintain the exclusions that structure queer lives, particularly queer lives doubly or triply marginalized through

intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, disability and/or nationality. For all that they might offer individual pleasures and possibilities, the reorganized 'post-queer' institutions of marriage and motherhood arguably also function as sites of cruel optimism, offering inclusion on limited terms and pulling attention away from the continued violence of unequal social worlds.

Postfeminist lesbian brides

In Season 3 Episode 7, Santana's narrative sees her coming out to her Abuela (grandmother), Alma Lopez (Ivonne Coll) ('I Kissed a Girl' 2011). The strictly religious Alma rejects her, telling her she never wants to see her again, making visible the painful exclusions many continue to experience. When Brittany tries to reconcile the pair in the lead up to the wedding, she too is rejected. Evoking a queer progress narrative, Alma is positioned as representative of an older generation, struggling to come to terms with a new era of LGBTQ+ rights. As Brittany angrily informs her: 'You know, the *New York Times* said half the increase in support of gay marriage is due to generational turn over. That's what smart people call crazy uptight bitches dying. You guys lost, ok' ('What the World Needs Now' 2015). In the wedding episode, however, Santana and her Abuela are reunited and Alma attends the wedding, offering a more hopeful resolve. Whilst Alma states that she is still opposed to same-sex marriage, she tells her granddaughter: 'I love you Santana, I don't want to be the person in your life that causes you pain. I don't want to miss a day that I've been dreaming of my whole life, or the birth of your kids or any other important days' ('A Wedding' 2015). In Santana's Abuela, and in Kurt's dad – Burt, a football supporter and mechanic, is characterized as the conventionally masculine, 'everyday', all-American guy, who initially struggled with his son's sexuality – *Glee* offers a pedagogical imagining of tolerance and inclusion. The path of LGBTQ+ progress offered here, however, speaks to Walters' account of the limits of tolerance. As Walters argues, 'tolerance almost always implies or assumes something negative or undesired […] it doesn't make sense to say that we tolerate something unless we think that it's wrong in some way' (Walters 2014: 1–2). Alma's views remain unchanged, but she will tolerate her granddaughter's relationship. Critically, the gendered limits of new queer visibility are reiterated as the possibility of tolerance is made imaginable at the moment Santana moves from queer teen to bride and potential mother.

The figure of the bride has long-held symbolic and material significance for gender politics. As Barbara Ettelbrick wrote in 1989, marriage has its roots 'in a patriarchal system that looks to ownership, property, and dominance of men over women as its basis' (Ettelbrittelck 1989: 119). Theorists of postfeminism have identified the re-centralizing of marriage and motherhood in the postfeminist

era, and its reconstitution as untethered to its patriarchal past. Despite reports of declining marriage rates in OECD countries, the wedding retains its cultural significance. As Jilly Boyce Kay, Melanie Kennedy and Helen Wood note: 'fewer people are getting married, and yet weddings are becoming more economically and symbolically significant in contemporary culture' (Boyce Kay et al. 2019: 3). In these representations, and indeed their real-life counterparts, marriage and motherhood are extended to the lesbian subject. The re-imagining of these signifiers as inclusive of lesbian and bisexual women is complex in its effects, working both to disrupt the 'heterosexual imaginary' of 'the wedding industrial complex' (Ingraham 2009: 32), and reiterate the significance of the marriage ceremony. As Santana as lesbian is made intelligible through these markers, they are queered but also secured as the structuring norms of female subjectivity. The postfeminist repudiation of feminist critique is compounded; after all, how could marriage be sexist, when it is now queer? Critically, however, whilst lesbian brides might enter unions that diverge from the conventions of hetero-patriarchal marital intimacy, many other brides do not. As Nicola Barker argues:

> There is, perhaps, a myth of equality, which along with increasingly neoliberal and post-feminist discourses of freedom of choice in this context, lead to an assumption which posits those *individual* women who are still exploited within heterosexual marriage as willing victims who have *chosen* this rather than being structurally disadvantaged by the institution.
>
> (Barker 2012: 4, original emphasis)

Thus, the lesbian bride can be mobilized as a postfeminist figure, the convergence of signifiers situating both queer and feminist politics as taken into account and surpassed. Whilst the exclusions of homonormativity are multiple, the centrality of marriage and family has distinctly gendered implications.

Post-queer popular culture

In the first episode of Season 6, *Glee* introduces another gay teen. Spencer Porter (Marshall Williams) is introduced as a stereotypically masculine-coded football player, with little interest in joining the Glee Club (although he eventually does). Spencer describes himself as a 'postmodern gay', stating that 'positive representation of gays in the mass media has given me the confidence to be myself, which turns out is kind of an arrogant jerk' ('Loser Like Me' 2015). Later, he tells Kurt: 'I know when you were in high school, being gay was how you primarily identified yourself, but that's not my thing'. He informs him that when he 'told people

[he] was gay, only two people had a problem with it' and they were immediately kicked off the football team. Kurt tells him: 'you're naive if you think you're not standing on our shoulders. You owe Glee Club'. To which Spencer replies, 'please, I owe Modern Family' ('Homecoming' 2015). This dialogue recalls the mobilization of homophobia as old fashioned evoked in the *Skins* diva cover, *Coronation Street*'s Emily Bishop and the positioning of Alma Lopez's generational beliefs. If Alma Lopez represented an older generation, however, so too now do Kurt and Santana: Spencer, emerging post-Glee Club's early 'Born This Way' days, represents a new LGBTQ+ generation. Spencer is gay in a transformed social context, or so we are told; the struggles experienced by Kurt and Santana are no longer an issue. Critically, media representation, from *Glee* to *Modern Family*, is positioned as to thank for these changes. The explicit mobilization of 'postmodern gay teen' speaks directly to the post-queer sensibility; mobilizing a post-queer era in which the struggles of LGBTQ+ rights activism are appreciated for their achievements but mobilized as complete, redundant in a new era of normalization.

Throughout its run, *Glee* takes us on a journey from new queer visibility to post-queer popular culture. We begin with frameworks for new lesbian and bisexual figurations, coming out, self-acceptance and tolerance. We end with happily ever afters and a claim for a post-queer era in which we 'all walk into the sunshine together', into a new era in which queer identifications are no longer so important. *Glee* offers powerful moments of LGBTQ+ representation, but it also offers a fantasy of completion that leaves much intact. Whilst *Glee* speaks more explicitly to ongoing struggles of queer subjectivity than *Skins*, it seems to resolve those struggles through a narrative of queer progress. What is obscured, however, are the continued exclusions this 'happy ever after' holds in place. Inclusion comes with conditions, as an intersecting framework of classed, racialized and gendered norms produce the newly tolerated queer subject. *Glee*'s gay characters' central preoccupation is, and must be, self-acceptance and the promotion of social tolerance. Located within the familiar conventionality of the school setting, these figures seek acceptance within the normative context of the school and the family; inclusion, however, rather than change, is required of these institutions. *Glee* appeals to a sentimental rhetoric to mobilize a narrative in which kindness and love are enough. It mobilizes a discourse of coming out as a reveal of an essential self that is fixed and accessible through self-love and understanding. The desire for acceptance also emerges as a desire for the good life, albeit one with a queerer set of intimacies. Or as Walters argues, Kurt emerges as embodiment of 'the glib "it gets better" ethos, turning ostracised anguish into empowered identity politics in the move from sophomore to junior' (Walters 2014: 255). In the central tenets of this campaign, and in *Glee*, hopeful futurity is imagined through inclusion in these symbolic markers of money, marriage and family. In this sense sexuality is

paradoxically reprivatized at the very moment it appears most public. Critically, normative futurity is shaped by hetero-patriarchy: the good life is gendered. The lesbian figure thus configures a new iteration of normative femininity; defined by beauty and desirability, her future is made possible through newly imaginable access to marriage and motherhood. The postfeminist repudiation of particular forms of feminist critique allows for these symbolic markers as to be resignified as liberatory symbols of LGBTQ+ progress. This, in turn, further closes down the possibility of feminist critique, as the institution of marriage appears transformed. Thus, the post-queer sensibility mobilizes a convergence of the homonormative and the postfeminist.

Conclusion

Glee, like other images and narratives circulating through contemporary media culture, both fractures the heteronormative fantasies of a dominant public and reproduces newly normative terms. New queer visibility mobilizes lesbian and bisexual figures that reorganize public belonging through an opening up of the heterosexual imperative of the public sphere. They do so, however, through a neo-liberal normalization and a claim to post-queer fantasies of completion. *Glee* both offers a welcome scene of identification and reproduces new boundaries. In its mobilization of sentimental rhetoric, *Glee*'s terms of inclusion prioritize an ethics of compassion over an impetus to change. The tensions of living queer lives are articulated in *Glee,* but resolved through reformulated investments in the good life, rather than towards a critique of their reproduction. Critically, its liberal approach is limited by its reproduction of normative prejudices and representational tropes. For the lesbian figure, coded through conventions of racialized femininity, the queer-feminist possibilities opened up in *The L Word* are closed down.

Despite this, the *Glee* that moves through fan spaces is open to struggle and negotiation. Within these struggles, different accounts emerge that challenge *Glee's* normative terms in the creation and extensions of fan media. In the production and circulation of these images and discourses, new possibilities emerge. The relationship between *Glee* and 'the lesbian fandom' is defined, to a certain extent, through opposition, as both fans and producers struggle to hold on to and control the narrative trajectories of the fantasies of love and desire emerging from these televisual figures. At the same time, these spaces too fall back on the sentimental promise of conventionality. Thus, the public speech of these world-making texts is unstable and contradictory. The archive of new queer visibility has unstable boundaries, extending in ways that push against and trouble the limits of normative inclusion offered in the post-queer era, as well as ways that reproduce its terms.

NOTES

1. Another version of this discussion, focused on the queer wedding spectacle, is published as a chapter in the edited collection *The Wedding Spectacle across Contemporary Media and Culture: Something Old, Something New* (Boyce Kay et al. 2019).

2. Songs from these and other shows have been performed as well as referenced in *Glee*. Season 5 sees Rachel performing in *Funny Girl* in her Broadway debut.

3. Hunting and McQueen note that the definition of a mash-up used within *Glee* is 'different from its definition in the extant musicology scholarship on the form' (Hunting and McQueen 2014: 291), which usually refer to digital technologies, multiple tracks, copyright violation and online distribution (Hunting and McQueen 2014).

4. This also functions as an intertextual reference to Ellen's use of 'Lebanese' in sketches leading up to her coming out in 1997, which in turn referenced a joke made in US sitcom *The Golden Girls* (1985–92) (see Bociurkiw 2005).

5. Edited or 'Photoshopped' images.

6. This was impacted upon in part by the Sophia narrative and further by the resolution of the 'Naomily' narrative and Naomi's death.

7

'A new kind of family': *The Fosters* and the radical potential of the lesbian normal

In June 2013, ABC Family, now Freeform, aired a new teen drama, *The Fosters*. Originally founded as a religious channel in 1977 by the Christian republican Pat Robertson as an extension of the *Christian Broadcasting Network*, ABC family was by this point run by the Disney-ABC Television Group. In 2006, the channel rebranded under the tagline 'A New Kind of Family', and its programing became more teen focused. The 2016 rebranding as 'Freeform', without the family in the title marked, as Jacqui Shine describes, 'a decisive effort to finally shed the neoconservative Christian ethos that has dogged the channel's branding, however mildly, since Fox bought the network from Pat Robertson in 1998' (Shine 2015: n.pag.). Emerging into this context, *The Fosters*, a family drama featuring an interracial lesbian couple and their blended and extended family, is both a striking example of a cultural shift, and, of course, evidence of the newly marketable nature of LGBTQ+ representation. In many ways, *The Fosters* represents the logical extension of the lesbian normal (from teen romance to marriage to motherhood). In this attractive couple, their beautiful children and their sprawling house and garden, the hopeful inclusion narratives of queer futurity mobilized in post-queer popular culture are, in a sense, fully realized. Thus, one way of interpreting *The Fosters* would be to read this representation as an ideal imagining of liberal assimilation, mobilizing a lesbian 'good life' for the same-sex marriage era. Whilst this is, in part, what emerges here, I would argue that *The Fosters* simultaneously exceeds the normativity of liberal inclusion, mobilizing a more complex representation that resists the privatized depoliticization of the post-queer and its homonormative-postfeminist convergence. Instead, this ABC teen drama mobilizes powerful moments in which the happily-ever-after progress narrative is disrupted, and collective struggle and social justice are imagined back into public culture.

The Adams-Fosters

The Fosters revolves around central characters Stef (Teri Polo) and Lena Adams-Foster (Sherri Saum), an interracial lesbian couple and their blended family of Brandon (David Lambert), Stef's biological son with ex-husband Mike (Danny Nucci), adopted twins Mariana (Cierra Ramirez) and Jesus (Jake T. Austin/Noah Centineo), and, initially fostered and then adopted, Callie (Maia Mitchell) and Jude Jacobs (Hayden Byerly). The show was created by Bradley Bredeweg and Peter Paige, who, in a notable nod to the archive of LGBTQ+ visibility, played Emmett Honeycutt on the US version of *Queer as Folk*. Both Bredeweg and Paige are openly gay, and have spoken about drawing on their own experiences in developing the story. Notably, Bredeweg reflected: 'Peter and I always wanted to write a family drama that reflected the modern American family' (Bredeweg in Queer Voices 2014: n.pag.). Despite some initial hesitation, the backing of singer, actress and producer Jennifer Lopez, whose company, Nuyorican Productions, were 'looking to branch out into scripted television' (Bredeweg in Queer Voices 2014: n.pag.), saw the drama realized with Lopez as executive producer. In an account that speaks both to the changing social context of LGBTQ+ lives and the significance of visibility, Lopez recalls the experiences of her gay aunt Myrza: 'At that time, families didn't sit around a dinner table and talk about tolerance and acceptance. Life was different and it is heartbreaking for me to think about it now' (Lopez in Gomez 2017: n.pag.). Despite initial hesitation about the controversy the show would cause, Lopez hoped that the drama might 'be the show [Myrza] didn't have growing up. A show that holds a mirror to society and shines a light on what love looks like' (Lopez in Gomez 2017: n.pag.).

Actress, writer and producer Joanna Johnson also joined the show at its start as writer and executive producer. Johnson is best known for her starring role on US daytime soap *The Bold and the Beautiful,* in which she appeared from 1987 to 1994, then again in 2001 and 2011–14, playing both Caroline and (following her death in the series) her twin sister Karen Spencer. When Johnson returned to the show in 2012, Karen's storyline saw the character come out as a lesbian, and introduced her wife and daughter. Also in 2012, prompted by her character's storyline, Johnson herself came out as a lesbian in an interview with *TV Guide* magazine: 'Exclusive: *The Bold and the Beautiful*'s Joanna Johnson Comes Out of the Closet' (Logan 2012: n.pag.). In the interview, Johnson described her fear of coming out prior to that moment: 'I was so worried I wouldn't be employable as an actress if people knew I was a lesbian. Or that I wouldn't be believable in romance stories. I had to deal with a lot of self-loathing' (Johnson in Logan 2012: n.pag.). In her reflection on her own experience, Johnson referenced the initial impact of coming out to Ellen DeGeneres' career: 'When Ellen came out she took a big hit.

It certainly hurt her career as an actress' (Johnson in Logan 2012: n.pag.). In the accounts of Lopez and Johnson, strands of LGBTQ+ social and cultural history emerge to shape the development of the drama. Johnson's story in particular speaks to the tensions, limits and possibilities of lesbian visibility, and the changing contexts mapped in this book: from the unsustainability of Ellen Morgan/DeGeneres as an out lesbian figure and soap stars firmly in the closet, to soap brides and an ABC family drama with two lesbian moms. Noting the significance of these changes, Johnson reflects: 'For ABC Family to embrace this show and want to tell this story is just amazing' (Johnson in Schenden 2017: n.pag.).

How do you define family?

The introduction of *The Fosters* brought new significance to ABC Family's tagline, 'a new kind of family'. Publicity shots for the series featured this phrase and the question: 'how do you define family?' This campaign spoke directly to contemporary debates around same-sex marriage in which the definition of family is repeatedly invoked, both from those for and those against the legislative change (albeit in very different ways). It also, of course, speaks to other legislative changes affecting LGBTQ+ families and the increasing visibility of LGBTQ+ parenting. In this sense, *The Fosters*, like *Glee*, emerges embedded in the politics of its era, and is explicit in its LGBTQ+ rights standpoint. The family is, of course, a familiar televisual trope, long utilized across genres from drama to sitcom to reality TV. *The Fosters* both repeats and reworks this convention, expanding the media archive of 'the family' by placing a lesbian couple at its centre. As it does so, the show depicts the possible families at the heart of these legislative changes. Like *Coronation Street* and *Glee* did for the wedding, *The Fosters* thus offers a site of imagining what such families might look like, mediating their normalization into public life. Furthermore, the show might offer a site of identification and comfort, as the hopeful portrayals of lesbian futurity repeated through fandom are realized on screen. As Carmen Phillips reflects in a recap of *The Fosters* for Autostraddle:

> What has kept me watching *The Fosters*, despite its flaws, is that on the days when I'm brave enough or optimistic enough to imagine my future self, I am most often sipping tea somewhere that looks like Stef and Lena's kitchen. I have writing to attend to, or a stack of papers to grade, and a wife who loves me. I have kickass feminist kids like Callie or Jude or Mariana. *The Fosters* has been my safe space to dream.
>
> (Phillips 2018: n.pag.)

Lucy Hallowell evokes a similar sentiment for AfterEllen, when she writes:

> I didn't have a dream of getting married when I was a kid. I never thought
> anyone would want to marry me because I thought there was something wrong
> with me. I never thought the world would allow me to get married or to have
> kids. Sometimes we can't dream the things we can't see. It heartens me to know
> that there are millions of people who won't have to feel that way, they won't
> have to struggle to imagine a world where they could have a wife and a family
> because they can see it on television.
>
> (Hallowell 2013: n.pag.)

These accounts evoke both the intelligibility making power of visibility and the 'trouble with normal' (Warner 2000). As previously argued, the ability to imagine future selves speaks to the possibilities of living liveable lives in exclusionary social worlds. The mobilization of the lesbian wife and mother offers symbols of futurity on queerer terms, but, as it does so, it both subverts these icons of hetero-patriarchy and re-affirms their centrality. For all their significance, there are, of course, limits to the worlds being imagined through these figurations, as they repeat the 'wife and family' as queer futurity trope. Indeed, the defining characteristic and function of Stef and Lena resides in their role as mothers. In this sense, we see in *The Fosters* the post-queer reiteration of marriage and motherhood as converging symbols of queer progress and (post-)feminist freedoms, and the repudiation of queer-feminist critique. As Walters argues, the increasing visibility of lesbian and gay families emerges 'as the sanitizing counterpart to gay sexual liberationist images' (Walters 2014: 220), and indeed feminist challenges to the institutions of marriage and motherhood.

Paige and Bredeweg stated their intention with *The Fosters* was to create 'a traditional family drama about a nontraditional family' (in Bennett 2018: n.pag.), a statement that speaks to the tensions of this period of resignification. The opening sequence speaks to this convergence. Accompanied by the show's theme song 'Where You Belong', sung by Kari Kimmel, the sequence evokes a cosy image of 'family life' that simultaneously hints at the differences that distinguish this family drama. The sequence opens on a close-up shot of a copper pan base. Whilst the shot doesn't show the whole pan, we see enough to observe that the pan is engraved with the phrase, 'home sweet home'. The shot cuts to show a chalkboard and notice board: on the chalkboard is written 'Homework!' and a chores reminder, on the notice board is a 'family chore chart'. There are two pink invitations to a quinceanera tucked into the corner of the board, speaking to the twins' Latino heritage and Mariana's quinceanera that takes place in the fourth episode of the first season. The following shots include: a spoon dipping into a bowl of cereal;

letters, papers and magazines piled on the edge of stairs; loose coins and a police badge scattered on a wooden surface; drying dishes and a blue sponge; a hand plumping a pillow; syrup drizzling on pancakes; a wall with children's growing heights marked on it, and a fridge adorned with recipes, magnets and photos of children. So far, for the most part, so conventional. The penultimate shot shows a close-up of a couple in bed, only their arms on top of a bedspread in the frame as they take each other's hands. Here, the lesbian couple are made visible, as we read the arms as belonging to two women. The final shot draws these images together, cutting to a medium shot of the outside of the large, grey house in which these snapshots of family life take place.

The visual semiotics of the opening sequence connote the imagined everyday of the American home. As Paige reflected: 'We asked ourselves, "What are those things that evoke home for all of us?"'. The assumed universality of the scene speaks to *The Fosters* investment in the tolerance project of the lesbian normal: 'The whole conceit of the show is this is about a family. It may not look like yours, but it probably feels like yours. We're inviting our audience into the home. The hope is that there's something in that title sequence that triggers a visceral memory of home' (Paige in Thomas 2015: n.pag.). Yet, in the joining of the two hands, an interracial lesbian couple (and, in the bed setting, the possibility of lesbian sex) are brought into the iconography of the home. The whiteness of the lesbian normal is complicated in this moment and in the reference to Latino culture. The theme song also functions to complicate the codes and conventions of family life. Including the lyrics, 'it's not where you come from, it's where you belong', and telling the listener to 'never feel alone', the song challenges the reproductive imperative of hetero-patriarchy and the biological family. The lyrics speak both to the narrative centrality of fostering and adoption, and to a broader sense of queer kinship and chosen families. As we begin to see here, *The Fosters* mobilizes a complex representation that seems to both reproduce and exceed the terms of the lesbian normal; or, that might speak to the more radical potential of the lesbian normal, and its mobilization of 'everyday' queerness.

For all the focus on family, the one at the centre of this drama certainly exceeds the biological, heteronormative imperative of the 'ideal' family; in a statement that runs through the drama, Lena reminds Mariana: 'DNA doesn't make a family, love does' ('Vigil' 2013). With Lena and Stef and their biological, adopted and foster children at the centre of the series already complicating the reproductive ideal, the family also extends to a much wider network of intimacy and kinship. The Adams-Fosters' extended family includes: Stef's parents, Sharon (Annie Potts) and Frank (Sam McMurray) and Lena's parents, Dana (Lorraine Toussant) and Stewart (Stephen Collins/Bruce Davison), as well as Stef's mother's boyfriend Will (Rob Morrow) and Stef's ex-husband Mike (Danny Nucci). The twins' biological

parents, Ana (Alexandra Baretto) and Gabe (Brandon Quinn) are also present to varying degrees throughout the series, as are Callie and Jude's fathers Donald (Jamie McShane) and Robert (Kerr Smith). During the series Callie discovers that Donald, who raised her as a young child is in fact not her biological father; her discovery that Robert is her father also brings a half-sister, Sophia (Bailee Madison), into her life. Stef's ex-husband and Brandon's father Mike ends the series in a relationship with Mariana and Jesus' birth mother, Ana, stepfather to Ana's youngest daughter Isabella and foster father to AJ Hensdale (Tom Williamson). At the end of the series, Ana is also pregnant with Mike's child. In this complex set of connections, *The Fosters* answers its publicity question (how do you define family) with an expanded definition, in which the hetero-patriarchal core family is disbanded, and replaced by a more open and multiplicitous kinship. Thus, *The Fosters* evokes a complex entanglement of the conventional and the progressive; invested in the family unit, the monogamous couple, weddings and so on (Stef and Lena are married twice in the series), whilst at the same time evoking the chosen family of queer discourse.

Notably, the family is also mobilized in *The Fosters* as a site of violence and exclusion. Walters argues that 'family remains a vexed and contradictory site, at once the place of continued stigma and rejection and the expansive location for creative new configurations of kinship' (Walters 2014: 215). Arguably, *The Fosters* mediates family in ways that speak to these complexities. Stef's father is characterized as struggling, and largely refusing, to accept her sexuality, and does not attend her wedding. As Callie and Jude's backstory is revealed we learn that their previous foster father beat Jude on discovering him trying on a dress. In a storyline that is returned to throughout the series, we also learn that, in a previous foster home, Callie was raped by her foster brother. Callie's friend Cole was rejected by his family when he came out as transgender, leading to his entry into the foster system and his meeting with Callie. Thus, for all its investment in 'a new kind of family', *The Fosters* does make visible the continued tensions of family, particularly for women and queer people.

Expanding the lesbian normal: The Foster's *LGBTQ+ representation*

As in *Glee*, LGBTQ+ visibility is both a central narrative and a broader sensibility of *The Fosters*. Emily Nussbaum wrote in the *New York Times*: ' "The Fosters" is a perfect example of why it makes sense to bake diversity into the premise of a TV show—once it's there, you don't have to add it later, through romantic interests or a "diverse" plot in Season 3, as many cable dramas have done' (Nussbaum 2014: n. pag.). Indeed, 'diversity' is, to a certain extent, explicitly mobilized through *The*

Fosters' ensemble of characters, who mobilize various gendered, racialized, sexual and class codings. Also like *Glee*, the drama foregrounds the outsider; exclusion and difference run through *The Fosters* in multiple ways, from negotiating the foster system to dealing with homophobic bullies. Hallowell speaks to this sensibility when she writes: 'I am glad that this show exists so all of us freaks can empathize with some foster kids, a transgender teen, a boy who likes to wear nail polish, the girl who can't seem to find where she fits, and the boy who lost his gift. We're all freaks, man. I hope the kids watching see that' (Hallowell 2014: n.pag.). Notably, *The Fosters* mobilization of 'diversity' extends in an unusually broad and politically engaged way, explicitly tackling topics including homophobia, sexism, sexual violence, racism and shadeism, transphobia, police brutality and corruption, and immigration. In this the show evokes the 'issue-based' convention of many teen dramas (including *Glee*), but, I would argue, expands the standard range of 'issues' tackled. Notably, whilst Lena and Stef are the central LGBTQ+ characters, the show also includes a number of other queer characters and storylines, extending queerness beyond the individualized trope.

From the lesbian and gay couples in the background of party scenes, to recurring characters such as Jenna, Stef and Lena's friend whose storyline involves a number of lesbian romances throughout the series, Lena and Stef are not isolated individuals but situated within a community that includes multiple queer figures. In one notable example, Stef's first love – and the girl her father caught her 'cuddling' – Tess (Kristen Ariza), joins the series in Season 5, when she and her husband and son unexpectedly become the Adams-Fosters' neighbours. This narrative introduces another queer woman of colour, as over the series Tess reveals that she too had feelings for Stef when they were younger. This twist recalls and rewrites the temporary teen lesbian trope, disrupting the heterosexuality as closure imperative. Ultimately, Tess and her husband break up and she begins dating the aforementioned Jenna.

Stef and Lena: The lesbian moms

To a certain extent, Stef and Lena can be read as symbolizing the ideal maturation of the LGBTQ+ teens of the lesbian normal, bringing to life the hopeful fantasies of marriage and motherhood of the Naomily and Brittana fandom. A monogamous couple in a long-term relationship, the pair have not one but two weddings within the space of the series, and are defined by their roles as mothers: they are collectively referred to as 'moms' throughout the series. Both Stef and Lena (and Saum and Polo) are able-bodied, slim and recognizably attractive on normative terms, as are their fashionable teenage children. Their house is familiarly connotative of

the middle-class American family home; and their characterization as school principal and police officer mobilize these characters as 'good citizens'. As such, Shine writes: 'Stef and Lena are, respectively, a cop and a charter school principal, a shot of neoliberalism with your assimilation politics' (Shine 2015: n.pag.). Indeed, in many ways, this representation mediates the lesbian 'good life': futurity defined by a homonormative assimilation. Yet, there is, I would argue, more to this representation than this reading allows for. In this imagining of an LGBTQ+ family and their extended kinship network, there are powerful moments that exceed the post-queer and speak instead to the more radical potential of new queer visibility and the lesbian normal. Puar noted that Dan Savage, creator of the It Gets Better campaign, 'is able-bodied, monied, confident, well-travelled, suitably partnered and betrays no trace of abjection or shame', and offers a call to: 'Come out, move to the city, travel to Paris, adopt a kid, pay your taxes, demand representation'. Puar asks: 'how useful is it to imagine troubled gay youth might master their injury and turn blame and guilt into transgression, triumph, and all-American success?' (Puar 2010: n.pag.). Whilst Stef and Lena mobilize some of the qualities of the aspirational homonormative subject that Puar critiques, they also open up notable ruptures in its regulatory coherence.

In Lena, *The Fosters* mobilizes a lesbian woman of colour, a figuration still marginalized in LGBTQ+ visibility and particularly, as a 2018 *Vice* article argued, in teen drama: 'If and when we see a queer female protagonist in a teen-oriented TV show, she's almost always white, and it's been that way since the dawn of the teen TV drama' (Gutowitz 2018: n.pag.). Indeed, broadcast television has 'rarely acknowledged the queerness of blackness' (Day and Christian 2017: 5.1). As Faithe Day and Aymar Jean Christian note, black characters have been 'mostly confined to family sitcoms', with little 'little narrative space for nonnormative sexual expression' (Day and Christian 2017: 5.1). As a biracial woman and central character, Lena offers a notable exception, emerging in this contemporary reiteration of the television family. Lena is represented as the more 'feminine' of the couple – a familiar distinction coded through differences in their clothing, characterization and jobs, with Lena inhabiting the conventionally 'female'-coded role of teacher, and Stef the more 'masculine' role of police officer. Lena both repeats and rejects some of the representational tropes previously noted; a queer woman of colour, she disrupts the whiteness of femme/ininity ('the femme body is necessarily a white body, so a Black lesbian cannot be a femme' [Ciasullo 2001: 579]). She is, however, like all the examples discussed, slimly built and conventionally attractive. Unlike Santana, however, she is not coded through a racialized sexualization, although, in the context of the normative sexualization of young femininity, this is likely also shaped by age and her narrative coding as 'parent' in a teen drama. Lena and Stef are represented as sexually active, however; if this is sometimes given less air

time than it might, it is explicitly represented on the show, with Lena worrying at one point that they are experiencing 'lesbian bed death' – one of many notable LGBTQ+ references. In a Season 1 storyline surrounding Lena and Stef's adopted Latina daughter Mariana's quinceanera, the complexities of cultural identity are explored in Mariana's relationship to Latina culture. This provides the setting for a conversation in which Lena and her mother, Dana, discuss their different experiences of race and identity. This unusual televisual dialogue speaks to the experiences of Black women in the United States, shadeism, privilege and the significance of cultural heritage. As Manisha Aggarwal-Schifellite writes of the scene for *Shameless* magazine: 'This dialogue is pretty revolutionary in terms of discussions of race in popular culture – both characters are given the opportunity to express their unique position as women of colour and then tie these personal experiences into wider issues of racism and shadeism' (Aggarwal-Schifellite 2013: n.pag.). *The Fosters* thus makes the opposite discursive move to *Glee*, in which social issues are made personal responsibility; here, personal experiences are explicitly situated in their social context, and the structuring of that context through sexism, racism and homophobia is explicitly named. As Melanie Kohnen argues, 'instead of presenting a happy multicultural façade or confining explorations of diversity to the "special" episode, *The Fosters* engages with questions of identity formation and cultural difference in ongoing story arcs' (Kohnen 2016: 166). Indeed, Lena is not a temporary, or isolated, character, and these issues are not simply resolved but rather thread throughout the drama's five seasons. They also continue into the subsequent Callie and Mariana spin-off series *Good Trouble* (2019–), where a cameo appearance portrays Lena encountering racist abuse on her campaign trail for a seat on the State Assembly. *The Fosters* mobilization of a lesbian woman of colour thus refuses a post-racial positioning, increasingly situating this character in the tensions of the sociopolitical context into which she emerges.

Stef also mobilizes an intersecting set of identities as a white, lesbian woman with (relatively) working-class coding, particularly visible in relation to Lena's more middle-class family background. A police officer like her father, Stef also mobilizes a more butch characterization and visual aesthetic. Whilst this coding certainly echoes earlier conversations on soft butch representation that doesn't stray too far from conventional femininity, Stef does connote a lesbian coding, departing from the lesbian-who-doesn't-look-like-a-lesbian imperative of the lesbian normal. What is particularly notable about this character is the way in which a struggle over gender, sexuality and appearance is explicitly mobilized. In Season 3, a cancer storyline sees Stef undergo a double mastectomy. Whilst this storyline raises fears of the dead lesbian trope, and a repetition of *Skins*' Naomi's tragic end, Stef survives and the storyline opens up some interesting representational moments. For example, in the lead up to the mastectomy surgery, Stef worries

about looking more butch. After an emotive scene in which Stef meets two other women – one who has and one who has not had reconstructive surgery – Stef is shown to come to terms with her decision and is also inspired to cut her hair short. This moment speaks to the symbolism of hair and femininity, and the significance of hairstyles discussed in relation to *The L Word*. In a dialogue rarely voiced on television, let alone on such a mainstream and family-focused network, Stef explains her decision to cut her hair: 'It's my symbol of confidence, I've always wanted to cut my hair really short'. When Lena asks why she hasn't done so before now, she explains: 'Because I was afraid I was going to look like a dyke. I hate that I have my own internalized homophobia but I've just really been struggling […] with the way people are going to look at me without breasts, as if I'm somehow less of a woman, less feminine. But you know what, breasts and long hair do not make me a woman, and what the hell do I care if people think that I'm butch because they have an idea of what women is supposed to look like' ('Rehearsal' 2016). Whilst the connotations of looking butch could be further unpacked here, this account speaks to the regulatory femininity and the complex intersections of gender and sexuality that lesbian and queer women embody. Halberstam argues that 'the butch […] gets cast as anachronistic, as the failure of femininity, as an earlier, melancholic model of queerness that has now been updated and transformed into desirable womanhood, desirable, that is, in a hetero-visual model' (Halberstam 2011: 95). This manoeuvre is characteristic of the lesbian normal, in which 'lesbians are well cool, especially the lipstick ones' (*Coronation Street*, Ep7434 2010). In Stef's negotiation of a butch identity and her struggle within and against the desirability imperative of the lesbian normal, however, these tensions are evoked. Whilst Stef does not, ultimately, depart too radically from the visual codes of the lesbian normal, there are nonetheless ruptures in its coherence. Critically, Stef's storyline disrupts the post-queer by mobilizing a complex evocation of shame and internalized homophobia that situates these firmly within a hetero-patriarchal social world.

Stef's queer shame

This is not the only reference to shame mobilized through this character. If *Glee* reiterates the 'binary opposition of pride/shame' (Munt 2009: 4), the neatness of this distinction is disrupted in *The Fosters*. In *The Fosters*, coming out is not a singular process nor does it offer narrative resolve. We never see either Stef or Lena's first experience of coming out on screen, as these happened prior to the narrative; in this, *The Fosters* is already a departure from much LGBTQ+ representation, in which the narrative catalyst of coming out is central to visibility. Whilst Stef and

Lena are already 'out' when we meet them, however, the repercussions of coming out and, critically, living as queer women are represented as ongoing. Season 1 begins to explore Stef's relationship with her father, a conservative Christian and traditionally masculine figure. We learn of a backstory in which Frank, upon discovering Stef 'cuddling on the coach' with a close girlfriend, locked Stef 'in a room with a man [a minister] who proceeded to tell me being gay was a sin' ('Just Say Yes' 2018). It is clear that Frank's views haven't really changed, as the character criticizes Stef for making 'wrong choices' i.e. leaving Mike and 'making the choice to be gay', and states his anti-same-sex marriage stance: 'I believe marriage is between a man and a woman' ('Saturday' 2013). Unlike the happier resolves of the *Glee* wedding, Frank does not attend Stef and Lena's wedding, after Stef tells her father he should only attend if he supports them. In this representation, we are denied a simple narrative happy ever after as Stef rejects mere tolerance. Certainly, it has 'got better' for Stef, but getting better does not preclude continued struggle or, indeed, shame.

The discourse of shame emerges at multiple points throughout Stef's narrative. Critically, shame, negotiated for Stef through her relationship with her father, the symbolic figure of the literal patriarch, is explicitly framed as the shame of being 'other' in a hetero-patriarchal social world. In Season 5, this is represented as manifesting in anxiety and panic attacks. In her writing on queer shame Munt describes, 'shame becomes embodied, and the body begins to speak for itself' (Munt 2009: 2). Stef begins to see a therapist, who connects her feelings of shame around her sexuality – the experience of living as subject who knows themselves to be other – to her experiences of anxiety: 'unlike guilt, which is the feeling of doing something wrong, shame is the feeling of being something wrong. And this assault on the self, it can cause deep depression and severe anxiety' ('Mother's Day' 2018). This storyline speaks to the distress experienced by many LGBTQ+ people: as one report states, 'LGB&T mental health is poorer than that of the mainstream population as a result of the impacts of heteronormativity on LGB&T people's lives' (Nodin et al. 2015).

In Episode 18 of the fifth and final season, Stef's subconscious is animated in the form of an emotive visit from her now dead father, Frank ('Just Say Yes' 2018). This storyline evokes Warner's account of 'the profound and nameless estrangement' and 'sense of inner secrets and hidden shame' (Warner 2000: 8) that can be experienced when children 'grow up in families that think of themselves and all their members as heterosexual' (Warner 2000: 8). As Stef tells her father: 'your rejection of me and my sexuality made me feel so ashamed of myself and I still feel ashamed of myself'. When the ghostly/imaginary father asks Stef what it was she wanted from him, her answer speaks to the oppressive normativity of hetero-patriarchy, and brings an interesting nuance to the representation of this character

as a police officer. The character tells her father she wanted: 'what every kid wants dad, your approval. its why I became a cop, its why I married Mike, its why I tried to be straight'. If the normativity of Stef's role as police officer seems to embody the tensions of state inclusion/power symbolized in same-sex marriage, this is re-contextualized here through this evocation of the draw, and limits, of assimilation in a context in which 'difference' can make life unliveable. If the post-queer sensibility mobilizes an ideal queer citizen, and calls on the queer subject to become it, this moment fractures its trajectory. In fact, her investment in the inclusion narrative of the lesbian normal also makes Stef's life unliveable. When Frank asks Stef what she wants him to say, she replies with a plea for validation: 'that you're sorry, that you love me, that you're proud of me, of who I am, of who I love and my beautiful children. That there's nothing wrong with me'. Stef both seeks acceptance on normative terms – notably, she evokes her wife and children – and asks for more than simple tolerance, demanding an apology and a change in Frank's worldview. Critically, he refuses, and we are not offered a simple sentimental resolve. The father figure of Stef's subconscious – he reminds her and us he is not really there: importantly, this is Stef's imaginary and not the real father – encourages Stef to say these things to herself instead, and she does so: 'I love me, I love who I am, I'm proud of me and who I love, my beautiful Lena, and my beautiful kids and this life we have made and there's nothing wrong with me' ('Just Say Yes' 2018). The power of the patriarch is mobilized in her desire for his approval, but also disrupted, as he ultimately fails her and she must find the validation she seeks elsewhere. The following scene sees Stef continue this conversation with Lena. This dialogue speaks to the pain of being made other, the desire to be 'normal' and the awareness of the vulnerability of state protection:

> This shame that I carry around in me, that keeps me from being completely vulnerable with you, that sometimes, when we make love, makes me feel like what we're doing is not right, like I am not right. I love you and I am so proud of our family and yet I carry around this fear that it could be taken away from us, our right to love each other, because we're not normal.
>
> (Stef, 'Just Say Yes' 2018)

Whilst the father figure was unable to offer love and acceptance, Stef finds comfort in Lena, who tells her: 'my love can show you that you're enough. To me you're everything. You're my everything' ('Just Say Yes' 2018). Ultimately, it is from herself and her wife that Stef is offered words of comfort and healing; a symbolic move that seems to reject the power of hetero-patriarchy, and its often painful consequences for women and queer people. Whilst *The Fosters*, like many of these representations, offers a narrative of investment in normative structures, the drama

is unusual in its situating of this in the social context of marginalization. Furthermore, investment in post-queer futures does not turn out to offer a utopia of inclusion and flourishing, opening up, perhaps, space for alternative investments (such as queer feminist ones). The representation of these tensions refuses a simple narrative of closure, and might leave space for a more expansive set of responses to queer suffering; for the 'not normal' to be the point of departure, rather than the thing we try to disavow.

Queer parents and queer teens

Alongside Stef and Lena, the most central LGBTQ+ character in *The Fosters* is their foster and then adopted son Jude. Jude's sister Callie is the show's central teen character; it is her storyline that provides the drama's narrative catalyst, when Lena and Stef agree to foster Callie on her release from a juvenile detention centre. Soon, however, we learn that she is in the centre due to her attempts to protect her younger brother, Jude, who, as noted above, was experiencing violence at the hands of the siblings' foster father; the foster father, we learn, beat Jude on discovering him wearing a dress, and later pulls a gun on him. Whilst on the surface it is Callie's story that is central, and indeed, in many ways it is, this narrative detail further situates the drama in the context of queer identity and anti-queer violence. Again, this speaks to the far from post-queer reality in which LGBTQ+ lives remain subject to violence and exclusion; as Walters writes, 'studies document the continued rejection and violence against LGBTQ+ youth in their families of origin or foster families, violence that prompts a disproportionate number of queer kids to end up on the streets' (Walters 2014: 217).

In a long-running storyline that received notable press attention, Jude's narrative portrayed a nuanced exploration of gender and sexuality. A poignant early storyline, for example, sees Jude wearing blue nail varnish to school, and his subsequent bullying from his classmates. This is not in itself an entirely unusual storyline for contemporary teen drama. As Meyer and Wood argue, 'perhaps one of the most defining features of teen television is its ability to address issues of identity formation' (Meyer and Wood 2013: 438), including, as we have already seen, sexual identity. There are, however, notable distinctions in this iteration. These distinctions are evident in a subsequent scene, when Lena is shown finding Jude attempting to scrub the nail varnish off his fingernails. Understanding the situation, she tells him:

> When Stef and I are at home, we hold hands and kiss […] sometimes when we're
> out in a new neighborhood or walking home late to our car, we won't hold hands

[…] Some people out there are afraid of what's different, and sometimes they want to hurt people like Stef and me. So, every time we're out and I want to hold Stef's hand, but I decide not to, I get mad. I'm mad at the people who might want to hurt us, but mad at myself, too, for not standing up to them. 'Cause the thing is, if you're taught to hide what makes you different, you can end up feeling a lot of shame about who you are, and that's not ok. There's nothing wrong with you for wearing nail polish, just like there's nothing wrong with me for holding Stef's hand. What's wrong is the people out there who make us feel unsafe.

('The Morning After' 2013)

This short and understated scene on a bathroom floor offers a rarely seen on TV image of inter-generational queer care and guidance. As Stephen Vider and David S. Byers write in *Slate* magazine, scenes between Lena, Stef and Jude offer 'a model of queer parenting that neither assumes the heterosexuality and gender normativity of any child, nor waits for children to "come out" before showing acceptance' (Vider and Byers 2015). Lena's speech also speaks to a shared experience of the everyday violences of living queer lives. In a social world in which 'the negation, through violence' of queer bodies (Butler 2004: 34) continues, a teenage boy with painted nails or two women holding hands can be dangerous acts (especially when one of these women is a woman of colour). Again, these dangers are not neatly resolved. Instead, we are offered frames of imagining otherwise, and modelled small acts of social change. When Jude returns to school the following day, he is joined by another student, Connor, his nails painted blue in solidarity. In moments such as these, *The Fosters* departs from the pedagogy of tolerance and mobilizes a more actively 'queer-positive' approach. Audiences are asked not simply to tolerate the LGBTQ+ friends and family they encounter – there is no appeal to normality or universality – rather, audiences are called upon to take steps to create worlds that are less unsafe, and challenged to extend that safety to those that trouble normative codes of inclusion, such as a gender non-conforming teen.

In the first season of *The Fosters*, Jude is depicted as continuing to explore gender and sexuality, but refuses a simple coming-out narrative. In Season 2, the Connor and Jude storyline is developed further, as the pair begin to display romantic feelings towards one another. They eventually become a couple, and, at thirteen, share the youngest same-sex kiss on US television. As the GLAAD blog stated: 'ABC Family's *The Fosters* breaks new ground with Jude and Connor kiss' (Townsend 2015). Interestingly, whilst Connor quickly identifies as gay, Jude is depicted as reluctant to define himself with a label. In Season 3, the couple attend an LGBTQ+ prom. Asked to identify his sexual orientation with a sticker, Jude is again shown refusing labelling, choosing to define himself only by his name. Another queer youth in attendance at the prom warns Connor off Jude, telling

him he will end up 'dumping you and breaking your baby gay heart' ('More Than Words' 2015). Here, the tensions of heteroflexibility are explicitly evoked once more, but complicated and exceeded. In a moment of narrative tension, Jude and Connor fight over Jude's reluctance to identify as gay. The tension is resolved however, and they make up, as Jude assures Connor he is: 'super gay for you'. Here, Jude continues to refuse a neat classification, but nonetheless explicitly expresses his queer desire. A later scene sees the organizer of the LGBTQ+ prom, Cole (Tom Phelan), a transgender teen that we know from Callie's time in a Foster home in a previous season, offer Jude advice on the limits, and power, of labels:

> Look, I understand not wanting to have to check a box or whatever, but there's power in labels too, you know? When I was at Girls United [foster home], most of the girls refused to call me 'he', and my label is what got me through. My label got me into an LGBT home where I can just be, you know […] me. No questions asked. I'm not saying labels are for everyone, but sometimes they can make us feel not so alone.
>
> ('More Than Words' 2015)

This discussion evokes Butler's theorizations on the 'necessary error' of identity categories (Butler 1993), mediating an unusually nuanced depiction of queer identity and identification on television.

In Season 4 of the drama, when the school fails to offer LGBTQ+ inclusive sex education, Jude protests, asking Lena: 'We have gay rights, and we have marriage equality, so why don't we have gay sex ed?' ('Sex Ed' 2017). Lena attempts to challenge this absence but is met with resistance, leaving her to offer an independent out-of-school LGBTQ+ sex education class. This storyline speaks to ongoing debates around sex education in schools, and various 'real-life' cases in which schools have instated, or attempted to, LGBTQ+ inclusive sex and relationships education. This remains controversial and contentious, as examples from Austin, Texas to Birmingham in the United Kingdom attest. Homonormativity requires queerness to retreat from the public sphere into the private, or, as Berlant and Warner argued in 1998: 'the nostalgic family values covenant of contemporary American politics stipulates a privatization of citizenship and sex' (Berlant and Warner 1998: 550). The critique mobilized through this storyline challenges this distinction, bringing 'gay sex' into the public, educational sphere. If homonormativity constitutes 'marriage equality' as sanitizing counter to 'gay sex', this manoeuvre is challenged here in Jude's claim to both. Thus, throughout the series, Jude mobilizes a particularly nuanced portrayal of queer adolescence. Through this character the continued violence of homophobia is made visible at the same time as queerer possibilities of living and belonging in contemporary worlds are imagined.

The Fosters's trans visibility: Or, we've come a long way from The L Word

In Cole himself, *The Fosters* introduces a rarely televised representation of a transgender teenage boy. Notably, Cole is played by Tom Phelan, a non-binary trans actor. As suggested above, his initial storyline sees him battling to be recognized within the foster system, as he has been placed in a foster home for girls. Interestingly, this foster home is run by Rita Hendricks, a character played by the politically outspoken and public lesbian figure, Rosie O'Donnell, adding another notable extra-textual connotation to the drama's narrative world. Although only a secondary character, Cole's storyline makes reference to a range of issues around mis-gendering, transphobic violence and access to medical support.

In Season 4, *The Fosters* introduced another notable transgender character, Aaron Baker (Eliot Fletcher), who became, for a while, the love interest of central character Callie. This was a significant move, as 'the first time a lead heroine of a teen drama has entered into a romantic relationship with a transgender character' (Vick 2017: n.pag.). Aaron and Callie's romance also included what Vanity Fair described as a 'groundbreaking' sex scene: 'although teen dramas have featured trans characters now and again, it's still exceedingly rare, if not unheard-of, to see a trans character date a main character, let alone have sex on screen' (Bradley 2017: n.pag.). As with Cole, Aaron is portrayed by a trans actor; notably, Fletcher has been outspoken about the significance of casting trans performers and the representation of trans characters, appearing in the ScreenCrush and GLAAD collaborative campaign video, 'Why Hollywood Needs Trans Actors' (2017). Aaron is a sympathetic character – 'an attractive and intriguing law student' (Goldberg 2016: n.pag.) – his characterization both exceeding a reductive narrative confined to his trans identity, and a universalizing narrative in which this is mobilized as insignificant. On the contrary, the character's storyline includes a struggle with family acceptance, and, more unusually, a story arc that speaks to the violence and discrimination experienced by trans people in the prison system, when Aaron is arrested after intervening in an ICE raid. These representations are particularly important, as they emerged into a particularly concerning period for transgender rights, marked by examples from Donald Trump's election to the US presidency in 2017 (and his subsequent moves against LGBTQ+, and particularly trans, rights) to the transphobic backlash circulating around proposed changes to the Gender Recognition Act in 2018 in the United Kingdom. That *The Fosters* chooses to represent its trans characters in the ways that it does suggests a move towards, rather than away from, the political; the latter being a maneuverer central to the postfeminist and the homonormative, and its convergence in the post-queer.

The personal is political

As Aaron's storyline suggests, a number of explicitly political issues are incorporated into *The Fosters* fictional world. From same-sex marriage to immigration, reproductive rights and sexual violence, *The Foster*'s familiar family set up is constantly situated in a sociopolitical context. Indeed, citing feminist discourse, co-creator Peter Paige described: 'For us, the truth is the political is personal, and vice versa'. Critically, as Paige notes, 'for these people, for anyone who's a member of a marginalized community, that's more true than ever' (in Bennett 2018: n.pag.). Indeed, the sociopolitical context of *The Fosters* is a complex one. On the one hand, the show emerges in the era of same-sex marriage. As noted throughout this book, same-sex marriage dominates public discourse around LGBTQ+ rights, and has become a distinctive trope of contemporary lesbian and gay representation. Unsurprisingly then, same-sex marriage is mobilized repeatedly in *The Fosters*, with the first season seeing Stef and Lena marry (in a scene filmed on the same day the Supreme Court struck down the Defence of Marriage Act). The wedding scene, located in the garden of the couple's home, decorated with white flowers and sparkly lights, repeats the visual conventions of the lesbian wedding seen in both *Coronation Street* and *Glee*. Certainly, then, *The Fosters* too is invested in this symbolic victory of contemporary LGBTQ+ rights.

At the same time, however, as the series went on, *The Fosters* found itself in a seemingly contradictory political climate. On the one hand, homonormative inclusion is being realized to a previously unimaginable degree. At the same time, however, a right-wing backlash is both increasingly visible and institutionalized. As Rosalind Gill writes:

> These are dangerous and frightening times […]. The waves of misogyny, racism, homophobia, Islamophobia and xenophobic nationalism that are evident in the vote for Brexit and its aftermath; the election of Donald Trump as the US President; the rise and 'respectabilization' of the Front Nationale in France under Marine Le Pen, and the growing strength of right-wing parties and movements across Europe mark a new moment in political life.
>
> (Gill 2017: 608)

This moment strengthens threats to marginalized communities, including LGBTQ+ people, and *particularly* to LGBTQ+ people who are also people of colour, immigrants, Muslims, disabled, transgender and women. In 2016, Donald Trump told the Republican National Convention: 'as your president, I will do everything in my power to protect our LGBTQ citizens from the violence and oppression of a hateful foreign ideology' (Trump in Weigel 2017: n.pag.). Here, a homonationalist

manoeuvre appropriates LGBTQ rights in service of Trump's anti-Muslim and anti-immigration discourse. Meanwhile, as president, Trump has made significant moves *against* LGBTQ+ rights: moving, for example, to re-instate the ban on trans people serving in the US army, and to remove various legal protections for queer citizens. This context makes the limits of the post-queer sensibility more visible, as the progress narrative is revealed as limited in its protections.

As a drama centred on an inter-racial blended family with two moms and a queer teenager, with a central focus on the foster care system, *The Fosters* was always situated in a broader sociopolitical context. Critically, rather than obscure or offer sentimental resolutions, this context is (increasingly) explicitly engaged with throughout the drama's run. As Paige explains, 'with this family, they would be politically engaged, and they would be confronted with the challenges of the system, with institutional bias and racism, with homophobia, with all of those things' (in Bennett 2018: n.pag.). Indeed, the limits and exclusions of social and political institutions run through *The Fosters*. From Callie's battle with the foster system, in which she is shown to be repeatedly failed, put at risk and unfairly judged, to Aaron's aforementioned prison storyline, to the teenage characters' friends' experiences of the immigration system, institutions are mobilized as variously fallible, open to critique and downright oppressive. Whilst Stef and Mike's characterization as police officers mobilize the figure of the 'good cop', the police force is also shown to be open to corruption and bribery, and a site of racialized power: portrayed, for example, in the racial profiling of AJ, Mike's African-American foster son. If post-racial discourses work to 'obfuscate institutional racism and blame continuing racial inequalities on individuals who make poor choices for themselves or their families' (Squires 2014: 6), *The Fosters* both evokes and exceeds this in its narratives. Whilst there is an emphasis on 'making good choices' and personal growth, there are also constant reminders of the structural context for those choices.

Season 5 introduces another queer character, art student and roller-derby player, Ximena Santiago (Lisseth Chavez). Speaking directly to the limits of Trump's homonationalist claims, Ximena is revealed to be an undocumented immigrant, living in the United States under DACA, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals policy. After Ximena makes her status public at a campus protest, the storyline comes to a climax as she is targeted by ICE agents and forced to seek refuge in a church ('Prom' 2015). Notably, the episode aired on the same day it was announced that President Trump wanted to end the DACA program. During this storyline, Ximena comes out to Callie and kisses her, situating Ximena as another of *The Foster*'s queer characters. Unfortunately, the Callie/Ximena storyline is left undeveloped by the series' close, and the series retreats from fully realizing the possibilities of representation with Ximena's future left uncertain.

Nonetheless, the portrayal of Ximena mobilizes a timely and intersectional portrayal of a queer, immigrant, woman within the archive of the lesbian figure, and does so in an explicitly political context. It is also worth noting that, if Ximena and Callie were left unrealized on screen, fan media does see their storyline taken up. Here, the extended media of contemporary television allows, or insists upon, a more expansive imaginary of queer subjectivity.

Feminism and The Fosters

Alongside the rise in right-wing political discourse and legislative shifts, recent years have also seen the rise of high-profile left-wing political figures, such as politicians like Bernie Sanders in the United States and Jeremy Corbyn in the United Kingdom, as well as a renewed energy around social activism and political critique. This period has also seen feminism revitalized in public debate. With celebrities increasingly embracing the feminist label, social media facilitating newly visible forms of feminist debate and activism and high-profile campaigns bringing issues such as the gender pay gap and sexual violence into the public eye, popular culture is increasingly infused with feminist discourse: a 'new cultural life of feminism' has emerged (Gill 2016). As Gill points out, however, popular culture is also infused with misogyny: 'alongside all these different iterations of contemporary feminism is an equally popular misogyny' (Gill 2016: 619). Whilst this is certainly true, and the contemporary visibility of feminism, and in particular its most popular iterations, has garnered much consideration and, indeed, critique, there is no denying that this marks a significant shift in public discourse. Whilst, as I have also suggested in my analysis of the lesbian normal, 'the persistence and tenacity of a postfeminist sensibility' (Gill 2016: 625) continues to require critical engagement, the repudiation of feminist politics of previous years is also being powerfully challenged.

Reflecting the 'new cultural life of feminism', characters in *The Fosters* refer to themselves as feminists throughout and a number of feminist issues are raised within the narrative. The characters of Mariana and her friend (and Jesus' girlfriend) Emma, in particular, mobilize encounters with sexism – their narratives depict them struggling to be taken seriously in classes and in the coding club they both attend – and navigating the body politics of normative femininity. In one notable narrative, Emma's storyline sees the character have an abortion. Whilst teen pregnancy is a familiar narrative of teen drama, its treatment here is refreshing (and timely, as this period sees various moves against reproductive rights), as Emma is supported in her decision, and shows no regrets about her choice. In an earlier storyline, Jesus' previous girlfriend was shown to be supported by Stef and

Lena in taking the morning after pill. All of the teenagers are encouraged to practice safe sex, and references are made to condoms being provided to them by Stef and Lena. Portrayed navigating masculinity, the character of Jesus is utilized to challenge expressions of sexism, with Stef's character stating the importance of teaching sons, as well as daughters, to be feminists. In these multiple examples, encompassing both moments of narrative crisis and 'everyday' dialogue, a feminist discourse is made explicit.

In the first season of the drama it is revealed that Callie was raped by an older foster brother at a previous home. This develops into a long-running storyline, as Callie seeks legal justice and attempts to protect another girl under the family's care. Once more, the idealization of the family is troubled here, and the continued gendered violence of the domestic sphere is brought into this imagining. Notably, there is no simple narrative resolve to this storyline: whilst Callie succeeds in saving the other girl, the legal system fails her and Liam is not prosecuted. This storyline speaks to the systematic barriers faced by victims of sexual violence, and the ways in which 'the "ideal victim" myth' (Randall 2010: 398) works against girls and women, particularly those doubly marginalized through class, race, ethnicity and experiences of care or juvenile systems. If postfeminism constitutes feminist concerns such as violence and inequality as old-fashioned, *The Fosters* brings them to the heart of its narrative. A postfeminist distancing is rejected here in favour of an explicit representation of structural inequality that does not shy away from the violence of unequal social worlds. Thus, whilst on the surface a drama invested in the inclusion fantasies of post-queer belonging, there are moments of radical rupture in this family drama that far exceed its terms. A feminist sensibility runs through the drama, which, if not always fully developed, nonetheless exceeds the postfeminist, as it re-centralizes the personal as political.

Conclusion

In Season 1, Callie stops Brandon when he tries to tell her everything will work out in the court case against Liam, telling him: 'I don't live in this magical world where everything always works out' ('I do' 2015). This statement speaks to *The Fosters* evocation of a complex and unfair world, in which, against narrative convention, it doesn't always work out. Whilst we are certainly offered hopeful narratives, and some storylines are neatly and sentimentally resolved, many others deny us a neat happy ever after. *The Fosters* makes explicit that, as much as we live in worlds of beautiful lesbian moms offering condoms and queer advice, we also live in worlds where marginalized subjects experience violence and exclusion, and institutions fail to protect them (on the contrary, they maintain their

suffering). As *The Fosters* mediates social worlds as messy, and queer progress as uncertain, it complicates the limits of the lesbian normal. Mobilized through its conventions, *The Fosters* expands the terms of the lesbian figure; re-coding her through a political sensibility. If *The Fosters* functions in some ways to normalize queer families, it also speaks to the specificities and differences of living queer lives in heteronormative social worlds. If the figurations of lesbian, bisexual and queer women of new queer visibility have tended to mobilize them as isolated individuals, *The Fosters* imagines a broader community. Critically, *The Fosters* feminist inclinations open up possibilities of troubling the postfeminist repudiation central to the post-queer. There are, of course, limits and tensions to *The Fosters* I am leaving unexplored here. I do wish, however, to draw attention to the radical possibilities mobilized within popular culture, even in what might seem the most unexpected of places, and the expanded forms of imagining they might open up. As we know, mediations are not limited to their on-screen lifespans, but have dynamic and unpredictable trajectories. As fans and audiences continue to take up these images, characters and narratives, *The Fosters* offers a more expansive set of discourses through which to imagine queer futures. The drama speaks to the meaningful possibilities of popular culture as a site of struggle, and the complexity of the contemporary postfeminist debate.

Afterword:
Reflections on the limits and possibilities of new queer visibility and the lesbian normal

In 2018, GLAAD announced record highs in LGBTQ+ representation: 'LGBTQ representation on television hit a record high this year' (Liao 2018: n.pag.). Notably: 'for the first time in the history of this report, LGBTQ POC outnumbered white LGBTQ characters on broadcast television' (Deerwater 2018: n.pag.). Times, clearly, are changing. In her analysis of the contemporary relevance of the concept of postfeminism, Rosalind Gill argues for the need to retain a critical eye on both 'continuity and change' (2017: 611); new queer visibility requires a similar approach. Much has changed, but much remains in place. Furthermore, these changes are multiple in their effects, and themselves require critical interrogation. The contemporary formation of the mainstreamed lesbian figure is a change that both queers the dominant markers of social belonging and mobilizes queerness on postfeminist terms, re-centring gendered norms of bodies, desirability, marriage and motherhood. Representations continue to mobilize lesbian and bisexual subjects that are queer in their identifications and romances, but distinctly 'normal' in everything else. These characters are mobilized through dramatic conventions, in particular romantic narratives, that assimilate their depictions into popular (and palatable) conventions. As girls and women in love, who happen to be in love with one another, the post-queer sensibility makes lesbian and bisexual women intelligible through newly imaginable frames of 'sameness'. The repetition of these codes produces new disciplinary norms for the intelligible lesbian. As they offer up generic frames of identification, they function through a regulatory 'normalizing' of the lesbian subject. As the lesbian normal claims a new space of post-queer belonging, those without access to its terms are made newly abject. Old, butch, disabled, non-binary queer people, lesbians less easily consumable to the heterosexist gaze and

the market, are all made increasingly absent from this new social imaginary. Furthermore, the ideal lesbian subject is largely required to make themselves a particular kind of self, as Naya Rivera's character, Santana, illustrates. She must follow a trajectory towards acceptance and a rejection of shame and stigma and, as the Glee Club's imperative towards self-love suggests, she must take responsibility for the production of her own inclusion. In this sense, she must perform as neo-liberal subject – self-regulatory and autonomous. Critically, she must invest in normative fantasies of the good life, albeit on queerer terms. Her trajectory is completed by celebratory entry into the institutions of marriage and motherhood, as images and narratives of monogamy, marriage and family continue to saturate spheres of representation. As the lesbian figure is normalized into their terms, and as these images repeat and become generic, other forms of sexual experience, intimacies and identities are made less and less imaginable. Critically, these figures often function through representations of individualized lives – a shift from the (albeit contradictory) lesbian community of *The L Word*. Meanwhile, damaging tropes continue to be reiterated; queer characters continue to be killed off so regularly 'bury your gays' has become a familiar phrase, bisexual characters continue to be represented as untrustworthy and lesbian desire continues to be mobilized for the male gaze. Indeed, these new representations continue to reframe the lesbian figure as available both to a lesbian public and a male gaze. Codes of femininity are mobilized in ways that simultaneously open up possibilities of inauthenticity and heterosexual appropriation; recall, for example, '*Glee's* bad girl' Naya Rivera's re-presentation in *Rolling Stone* magazine's 'Latin hot list'.

In the fantasy of the post-queer, the resolution to social exclusion is mobilized as domestic happiness and privacy on normative familial terms. As such, these new forms of belonging work to desocialize and depoliticize the structures of inequality that shape sexuality. They disguise both the actual struggles of queer people and the ways in which heteronormativity maintains and reproduces its dominance. Furthermore, as the lesbian family comes to signify inclusion, the family itself is re-centralized. The ways in which the institution of the family continues to function as normalizing force is obscured; the gendered norms and exclusions of motherhood and marriage are re-naturalized. Critically, the feminist and queer critiques of the hetero-patriarchal family are disavowed as family is reorganized with inequality 'taken into account'. As entry into the national symbolic shifts to incorporate queer lives, the need to challenge its terms is deemed over, even as it continues to function in ways that damage queer subjects. Marriage and motherhood appear transformed, as they are 'liberated' from their heterosexual imperative. This, however, risks reproducing the postfeminist reiteration of these symbolic markers of ideal femininity. Thus, the same-sex marriage era has particular implications for queer women, and, critically, for gender equality more broadly. These concerns

are often absent from the same-sex marriage debate, but are, I would argue, central to its workings.

Yet, as I have suggested, the effects of normalization are unstable. In part, the decoded lesbian works to reject the stereotypes, stigmas and forms of othering that have historically marked queer women. Furthermore, they destabilize the certainties of gender and sexuality, as, for example, the everyday teenager becomes a potential lesbian figure. In this sense, contemporary representation opens up the possibilities of the lesbian subject, no longer containable as marginal. Furthermore, new queer visibility has opened up powerful moments of representation that disrupts these limits, as *The Fosters'* expanded queer family suggests. In other notable examples: Netflix's *Orange Is the New Black* brought mainstream visibility to 'butch dyke' performer and activist Lea Delaria, the recent adaptation of Margaret Atwood's feminist classic *The Handmaids Tale* has paid significantly more attention to queer women than the book specified and *Black Lightning* brought the first Black lesbian superhero to the TV screen. Thus, there is also cause for optimism in new queer visibility, as possibilities of troubling the post-queer imperative are also opened up.

What has been clear throughout this discussion is the existence of a rich and ever-expanding world of fandom through which these representations circulate, and are re-made. Perhaps it is here that the lesbian figure opens up the most interesting sites of identification, collectivity and world making. New media technologies facilitate new forms of public engagement, opening up the processes of making and sharing media objects, images and practices. These engagements offer new forms of production and participation, as images, narratives, commentary and connections emerge through media platforms such as Tumblr, Twitter and online fanfiction. Opening up the images and narratives of television by engaging in their re-making, fans and viewers both resist and reproduce the terms of new queer visibility. As *Glee's* resistant fans critique the programme's gender or race politics and *Skins'* viewers re-write Naomi into a future, fan publics might become counterpublics. There are countless examples of fans understanding themselves in oppositional relationships to the terms of public discourse, rejecting the compromises of commodified representation. In this sense, what emerges in these publics cannot be entirely contained, but produces moments of fracture that open up the possibilities of queer futures. At the same time, as the repetition of generic future narratives suggests, the desire for recognition can also return the lesbian figure to the normative fantasies of belonging. As fans work to secure themselves in narratives that protect them from the violence of exclusion, they might be limited to hegemonic terms. Fandom thus exists at a site of tension, struggling against and reproducing the terms of the lesbian normal and, in doing so, the terms of their own marginality.

New queer visibility and the lesbian normal, thus, offers reason for both optimism and concern; they symbolize both continuity and change. Certainly, however, critical attention must continue to be paid to the losses, as well as the gains of the same-sex marriage era. A feminist critique is essential to highlight the gendered implications of lesbian brides; or the patriarchal in the homonormative. Our analysis must be intersectional, recognizing the ways in which marginalities and exclusions might be reproduced through the dominant fantasies of inclusion. The lessons of queer, feminist, anti-racist and class critique must be retained, and not closed down in the progress narrative of new queer visibility. The intelligibility making possibilities of this moment might be celebrated and cherished, but also pushed further, their more radical potentials taken up. Popular culture holds, however, powerful possibilities, functioning sometimes to limit and obscure but also as a site of struggle and critique. Furthermore, television is undergoing significant transformation, as the medium expands onto new platforms. At the same time, sites of audience engagement become ever more visible, facilitating new expressions of cultural critique. Media industries are being visibly interrogated over their biases and exclusions, challenges taking place in the context of a broad range of social justice movements such as Black Lives Matter and Me Too. This book emerges in a complex sociopolitical context, which is simultaneously mediated and critiqued through popular culture. There is power in these popular sites and the pleasures and possibilities they mobilize: in the representations that reveal the violences of unequal social worlds and open up ways of imagining otherwise, and in the resilience and creativity of fandoms, as they move, make and re-make representations across multiple sites, intervene in the limits of visibility, and open up forms of intimacy and identification. And yet, we remain far from living in magical worlds 'where everything always works out'. Access to such fantasies is harshly regulated, and much is obscured in the spectacular narratives of completion epitomized in the public imagining of same-sex marriage. Rather than 'walk off into the sunshine' then, there is much more work to be done to transform and expand the possibilities of popular culture, and the possibilities of living intelligible queer lives.

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LESBIANS ON TELEVISION

NEW QUEER VISIBILITY & THE LESBIAN NORMAL

The twenty-first century has seen LGBTQ+ rights emerge at the forefront of public discourse and national politics in ways that would once have been hard to imagine. *Lesbians on Television* maps the contemporary shifts in lesbian visibility within popular media in Europe and North America and, from this, extracts a figure of the new 'lesbian normal' that both helps and hinders those it represents. This book offers a unique and layered account of the complex dynamics in the modern moment of social change, drawing together social and cultural theory as well as empirical research, including interviews and multi-platform media analyses. Structured around five central case studies of popular British and American television shows featuring lesbian, bisexual and queer women characters – *The L Word*, *Skins*, *Glee*, *Coronation Street* and *The Fosters* – the book develops a detailed analysis of the shaping of a new 'lesbian normal' through representations of lesbian teenagers, cheerleaders, wives and mothers amongst other LGBTQ+ figures.

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