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## **Feeling and the production of lesbian space in *The L Word***

**Sarah Cefai**

### **Abstract**

This article seeks to understand the production of lesbian space in the TV series *The L Word* (*TLW*) (Showtime 2004 – 2009). To do so, it departs from theories of the lesbian gaze to discuss the *visibility of feeling*. Specifically, I consider how *TLW* represents the visibility of feeling as constitutive of lesbian bodies, communities, and spaces. In *TLW* real spaces (actual locations) fold into virtual ones (on screen) in a deliberate construction of televisual lesbian space. *TLW* implicitly reflects and is embedded within real-life configurations of lesbian space. I identify four excerpts from the series – ‘gay LA’, ‘the pool’, ‘Olivia cruise’, and ‘*High Art*’ – that problematise lesbian visibility by foregrounding the relationship between feeling and place. Permission to feel, represented as permission to look, reproduces community as the threshold of lesbian identity. Critical to understanding this production of lesbian space is the way in which *TLW* associates feeling with social relationships as vividly depicted by ‘the chart’, a representational motif that maps lesbian sexual relations and the intelligibility of lesbian feeling. Finally, I develop my account of lesbian visibility through the example of the facial expression of feeling, at once a demonstration of the visible embodiment of lesbian feeling, and the intelligibility of lesbian space.

**Keywords:** lesbian; feeling; space and place; visibility; *The L Word*; representation

### **Placing feeling in *The L Word***

Having moved to LA, Jenny (Mia Kirshna) finds herself serving Marina (Karina Lombard) at the grocery store. Recently acquainted with Marina by a kiss at a neighbour's party, Jenny is caught off guard and embarrassed when Marina makes her advance: 'Come on. I wanna see you check me out' Marina says, 'You look cute with the little apron on'. As Marina leaves the store the camera pans to her backside. The frame then turns to Jenny who is standing behind the cash register watching Marina – as are we the viewers, watching Marina, and watching Jenny watch Marina. This framing of 'the look' introduces the audience to a specifically lesbian point-of-view and narrative premise.

Illene Chaiken, the executive producer of the American TV series *The L Word* (*TLW*) (Showtime 2004 to 2009)<sup>1</sup>, meditates on the sexual imbalance in the act of looking in this scene: 'I'd like to think the lesbian gaze transforms the meaning', she says.<sup>2</sup> Chaiken describes the shot of Marina walking away as 'a really familiar shot. It's a way in which men have looked at women for years and years'. Recalling herself and Rose Troche (writer and director on the show) talking at length 'about whether or not the lesbian gaze really does transform a heterosexist image', the question of whether it is 'just as objectifying because we're seeing it from Jenny's point of view' highlights *TLW's* engagement with feminist theories of the gaze.

Feminist media and film studies' theories of the gaze have been highly influential in understanding lesbian representation, in general, as well as the spatiality of lesbian visibility. The analysis of gender and relations of looking inaugurated by Laura Mulvey (1989) continues to raise questions in cultural studies about how representation, difference, resistance and culture in the realm of the visible could be understood from a feminist perspective (Gill 2003; Jones 2003). Filmed on set in Vancouver, Canada, *TLW* is set in Los Angeles and adopts a popular TV drama series format that differentiates itself from the mainstream by

focusing on the loves and lives of a tight-knit group of lesbian-oriented women (Showtime and Bolonik 2005). Previous interpretations have accounted for the ways in which heteronormative desire underpins the representational context of the show despite its lesbian content. Such analyses interrogate the paramount heteronormativity of the text, observing that *TLW* adopts many heteronormative conventions of mainstream television while also aiming to subvert their hegemony (McFadden 2010; Moore 2007; Rooney 2006).

The redeployment of the male gaze enables the show to communicate with ‘a *premium*-paying straight audience’ while simultaneously recognising the lesbian viewer’s habitual practice of translation by providing ‘specific pleasures’ to those ‘in the know’ (Moore 2007, 5). Feminist geographical uses of the male gaze, informed by critiques of cinematic structures of looking and by critiques of the disciplinary gaze of modern society (Foucault 1977), situate the visible as a hinge in the relationship between the intelligibility of gender and the social construction of space (see Bell et al. 1994). However, theories of ‘the gaze’, particularly as they are informed by psychoanalytic frameworks of desire and identification, present specific limitations to theorising lesbian ways of seeing. Subsequently, queer feminist scholars have developed alternative approaches (Dahl (this themed section), 2010; Heller 2006; Probyn 1995; Vanska 2005; Walker 1995) among which this account might be placed.

Theories of the gaze often invoke a foundational split between the subject and object of desire that is aligned to dichotomous paradigms of the masculine and the feminine. This split, rooted significantly in Freudian psychoanalysis (Freud 1955), associates desire with activity and masculinity. As a result, applying the gaze to the lesbian image raises the question of the gendered position of the lesbian spectator in terms of masculine identification (Clark 1993; Vanska 2005). This article refrains from taking up psychoanalytic theories of desire and concomitant theories of the gaze that prioritise subject/object power relations over-

coded by masculine/feminine subject positions. Instead, attention is given to the visibility of feeling, which I take up as a new critical approach to thinking about lesbian relations of looking and their relation to the production of space. The unfeeling gaze, I argue, (mis)represents women and diminishes the politics of feeling.

Jenny and Marina's practices of looking reflect relations of power arranged by age, profession, local knowledge, education, public and private space, experience of same-sex desire, and other forms of hierarchy. How Marina and Jenny see one another also articulates a recent history of how the characters' feel about one another. The qualities of being associated with positions of objectivity and subjectivity, experienced by Jenny and Marina in relation to one another, are represented in the display of affective properties in the characters' visual contact. Affects embedded in practices of looking augment the representation of intimacy between Jenny and Marina. In this vein, my article answers Chaiken and Troche's question of what constitutes the 'lesbian gaze' by claiming that *TLW*'s representation of the act of looking as an act of feeling transforms the (hetero)sexual meaning of the gaze.

By claiming that *TLW* nuances its field of vision through its representation of the visibility of feeling, I take up the question of lesbian space that has long engaged lesbian and queer enquiry within and beyond geography. I examine how space becomes lesbian through subcultural arrangements of lesbian desire that recognise intersubjective experiences of feeling as lesbian. This article therefore addresses the question of the visibility of lesbian desire and identity central to queer and feminist theories of lesbian representation (De Lauretis 1991; Jagose 2002; Munt 1998b), as well as the specific emphasis on the role of space in lesbian visibility significant within geography (Bell and Valentine 1995; Browne 2007; Valentine 1993) and beyond (Colomina 1992; Wallace 2009).

*TLW* exposes 'a normative straight male gaze' in order to show, 'if only indirectly, that another way to see is possible' (McFadden 2010, 435). This article examines the role of

feeling in making possible ‘another way to see’, arguing that *TLW* produces lesbian space by turning feeling ‘skin side out’ (Sedgwick 2003, 38) via the cultural recognition of lesbian desire. It is no coincidence that Sedgwick hones in on the capacity of shame to singularise experience in ‘the instant of seeing that one is being seen’ (Johnston 2007, 32). Sally Munt (2008, 8) similarly takes interest in the ‘mindful reflexivity’ and ‘self-attention’ that belongs to the shamed self. Pursing this interest in visible registers of embodiment, I examine the visibility of feeling, or *seeing* feeling, as a mode of turning feeling ‘skin side out’ (or even, queering skin). The representation of intimacy between Marina and Jenny relies on turning feeling ‘skin side out’, suggesting that the very embodiment of lesbian identity needs to be understood in these terms, through the conceptualisation of seeing lesbian as ‘twin skin’<sup>3</sup> to seeing feeling.

Reading *TLW* as a representation of people’s capacity to affect and be affected by social and cultural worlds because how they feel allows us to think about the role of feeling in the social construction of lesbian identities, communities, and spaces. Geographical interest in feeling extends the discursive space opened up by studies of embodiment, particularly studies that are feminist (Longhurst 2001). The increasing appearance of the terms ‘emotion’ and ‘affect’ in geography reflects a more direct engagement with feeling, although these terms have justly been subject to feminist scrutiny (see Anderson and Harrison 2006; Davidson and Bondi 2004; Thien 2005; Tolia-Kelly 2006). Brian Massumi’s (2002) reading of Gilles Deleuze, for instance, aligns emotion with feminist scholarship on structural issues of power, experience and subjectivity, in contrast to which affect has appeal in its transcendence of the miring spectres of structuralist thought.

The genealogy of the terms affect and emotion in contemporary theory is too important and too big to attempt a synopsis here. This article opts instead to take up ‘feeling’ in its everyday meaning, as ‘a synonym for emotion’ (Campbell 1997, 10). Theories of affect

as ‘force or forces of encounter’ (Seigworth and Gregg 2010, 2) are generally not governed by an epistemology of feeling. However, this does not preclude us from analysing the articulation of feeling in the register of affect, which is the approach pursued here. Influenced broadly by contemporary feminist studies of affect and emotion (Ahmed 2004; Munt 2008; Ngai 2005; Stewart 2007; Woodward 2009) and particularly by what might be called ‘Deleuze’s Spinoza’ current in cultural studies (see Probyn 2005), this article attends to how feelings lodge intractably in the affective properties of relations between bodies, objects and places. I analyse *TLW* as a representation of the embodied capacity to affect and be affected *by* feeling.

### **Community and the production of lesbian space**

Judith Butler’s (1990) work on the performativity of gender has been instrumental to the representation of lesbian experience, identity and place in geography. Geographers have drawn on Butler’s scholarship to open up critique of the performative status of space; spaces are not sexually neutral but performatively invest heteronormative structures of power. Often thinking of place as a means to the reproduction of behavioural norms, interpretations of Butler in the empirical study of identity can tend to locate the politics of sexuality in the individuated subject (a criticism to which Butler responded in *Bodies That Matter* (1993)). Such interpretations of Butler are illustrated by formative (Bell et al. 1994; Valentine 1993) and recent (Kitchin and Lysaght 2003; Nash and Bain 2007) accounts, which evaluate actions and practices as they belong to the individual even when research objectives focus on community (but see Muller 2007). The individuated subject is typified by scholarly modes of representation that land the politics of sexuality on an individuated model of intentional choice.<sup>4</sup>

This article takes an alternate route to the term lesbian, akin to that developed in the lesbian and feminist cultural studies scholarship of Sally Munt and Amy Villarejo, for

example. Like Munt (1998a, 4), I am committed to lesbian as ‘a powerful and strategic sign, an identity — or rather a set of identities — which is responsive and resistant to the nexus of censure which reduces us to absence’. Villarejo (2003, 5) helpfully identifies the difficulty of this sign, observing that lesbian ‘attempts to manage two meanings: both the ontological state of simply being a lesbian, whatever that might come to mean, and an ethicopolitical state wherein lesbian designates something like a progressive, emancipatory, or liberatory politics’.

Concerned too by the lack of ‘context’ surrounding the individuated subject, Villarejo (2003, 6-7) claims that:

The demand to make lesbians visible, whether as ammunition for anti-homophobic campaigns or as figures for identification, renders lesbian static, makes lesbian into (an) image, and forestalls any examination of lesbian within context.

Like Villarejo (2003, 4) then, I ‘take *lesbian* as a modifier, not as a noun but as an adjective’ (italics in original).

*TLW* constructs the sexual specificity of place by representing events and practices such as the pre-Stonewall police raids on bars, 1970s feminist consciousness raising meetings, and queer feminist art. The citation of lesbian and gay events and practices has the effect of problematising lesbian visibility and its relationship to a recent queer and feminist past. To understand the relationship that is constructed between the visibility of feeling and the sexual status of place, I analyse the mobilisation of specific lesbian, queer and feminist representations brought into focus in four excerpts from the show. Whereas the excerpts ‘Gay LA’, ‘the pool’ and ‘*High Art*’ each take as their focus a specific scene and its relation to the show, ‘Olivia cruise’ refers more to the theme of the episode.



## ***1. Gay LA***

Urban dwelling is important to the formation sexual minority communities. Earlier studies focusing on the ‘gay ghetto’ (Browne, Lim, and Brown 2007; Jackson 1989) have been followed by the study of the transnational commercialisation of gay culture and its colonisation of homosexual intimacy within emergent forms of neoliberal capitalism (Berlant and Warner 1998; Blum 2002; Nast 2002). This scholarship renews understanding of the role of space in restructuring the relationship between state and sexuality. Analysing the involvement of space in the unfolding of characters’ stories on *TLW* allows us to think about the intentional mobilisation of place as a trajectory of gay representation that shapes the visibility of feeling.

In an early scene (episode ‘Pilot’), Jenny is talking to her new neighbour Tina (Laurel Holloman). When a group of men with babies walk past Tina’s backyard, Jenny is puzzled. Tina responds to Jenny’s quizzical facial expression: ‘Gay dad’s group’. Jenny’s surprise, ‘Oh, my god’, articulates her cultural naïveté and her lack of what might be colloquially referred to as ‘gaydar’ (amalgamating gay and radar, this term usually invokes someone’s ability to detect who, in their vicinity, might be ‘gay’). Jenny does not know how to interpret the group of men with babies walking down the street, and her lack of knowledge is exposed by her arrival in West Hollywood. Jenny’s lack of perception (‘gaydar’) highlights the show’s very production of gay visibility.

The translation of feeling is central to Tina and Jenny’s contrasting perceptions of queer identity. *TLW* deploys place as a cultural signifier of sexual difference by making Jenny’s naïveté apparent as a lack of knowledge about the place in which she lives. This use of place to signify sexual meaning is affirmed by Tina who continues, ‘It’s all very LA, huh?’, furthering the representation of LA as that which makes sense of and gives meaning to her gay life. This scenario uses the representation of LA as potentially or in part gay to produce

fluency in the sexually specific language of intimacy. This points to the need for introducing the role of feeling to established understandings of the co-extension between gay identities and places (Browne 2006; Jackson 1989).

References to LA persist throughout the seasons: a copy of *Gay L.A.* (Faderman and Timmons 2006) sits on Alice's (Leisha Hailey) bookshelf, for example. The show's use of LA also permeates its marketing. The advertising slogan 'Same sex. Different city' positions *TLW* as a successor to *Sex and the City* (HBO 1998). 'Same sex' refers in the first instance to homosexuality, but in the second, to the 'same' postfeminist unabashed urban-American feminine sexual agency (see Gill 2003), implicitly white and middle class. This comparison is underpinned by a parallel use of the city to characterise the show's sexual landscapes and their inhabitants. In the way that the characters of *Sex and the City* are dramatised by their location in New York City, *TLW* dramatises its characters through the representational economy of LA. Monique Rooney (2006, 3) notes how West Hollywood, is 'an area known to be a gay ghetto' and 'represented as a technologically networked, metropolitan community built on strong in-group identification'. The representation of LA has the capacity to secure or suggest sexual meaning, making possible the representation of existent gay life. The use of place to characterise Jenny and Tina reflects Rooney's (2006, 3) observation that the LA lesbian has been characterised 'as a spectral figure who personifies the postmodern landscape she inhabits', displaying mobility in crossing 'mainstream/minority boundaries'.

## ***2. The pool***

By representing lesbian community as a taking up of space, *TLW* puts into motion the socially inscriptive capacity of place and contests heteronormativity as a spatial bind. The use of space to imagine community and the subsequent capacity of space to inscribe lesbian identity is illustrated well in a discussion between Jenny and her new housemate Mark (Eric Lively). In

this scene ('Lynch Pin'), Jenny and Mark sit the other side of the fence from Jenny's neighbour's pool. Mark starts to probe Jenny about her sexual identity. Asking Jenny if the girls in the pool are gay, she replies, 'They pretty much are'. When Jenny probes Mark back, asking how he knew the girls in the pool were 'pretty much' gay, he replies:

I don't know. I'd say it has something to do with their attitude. It's not that they're masculine or anything, 'cause actually some of them are pretty feminine. You know, it's... they have these haircuts ... it's not, more, it's obviously more than a haircut. But it's – no, it's true. It's this, something that they exude that's, I'm gonna try and put my finger on it.

Jenny rolls her eyes in frustration at Mark's view of lesbian visibility and responds with sarcasm: 'Good. Tell me when you do, Mark'. Mark's view represents the exclusionary premise of the heteronormative gaze, that markers of sexual difference are visibly fixed on the surface of the individuated lesbian body.

Mark's comments about haircuts and attitude associate gender transitivity with lesbian sexual identity. The juxtaposition of Jenny's sexuality with the women in the pool is highlighted by her long hair and demure feminine femininity – visible markers that according to gender norms do not signify lesbian sexual specificity.<sup>5</sup> Placing Shane (Katherine Moennig), Alice and their friends in the swimming pool displaces the visibility of lesbian sexuality from the individual to the group. The visibility of the collective over the individual is reflected in Mark's inability to discern individuated sexual minority subjects. The collective status of the lesbian body is legible via a spatial social context, namely, via semi-clad women frolicking in the backyard pool of a West Hollywood, suburban lesbian pad.

This scene is important in at least two regards. First, lesbian appears not as an individuated body but as a collective scene. As such, Mark, representing the white

heterosexual subject of the gaze (see Heller 2006, Moore 2007), is unable to render the lesbian an object of the gaze. Mark cannot see, for instance, that Alice is bisexual. Rather, she/they are 'pretty much' gay. Second, place is given an active role in the operation of the gaze. The place that Shane, Alice and their friends occupy takes on an inscriptive role. If Jenny was scantily clad in the swimming pool, Mark would be more likely to see her as 'pretty much' gay. In this scene, the pool is marked by its collective lesbian use and as such performs the representational threshold of community. The pool becomes inscriptive of the visibility of lesbian sexuality. As Mark's friend Gomey (Sam Easton) says, 'Whew. That *pool* looks so fine' (my emphasis).

While in the foreground of the scene the burden of representation is placed on Jenny ('is Jenny gay?'), in the background the threshold of representation is occupied by the group. The collective status of the lesbian body and the active role of place undermine the intentions of the masculine subject of the gaze. Mark's inability to perceive lesbian visibility, or to 'see the world through lesbian eyes' (www.showtime.com, cited in Heller 2006, 67) - like Jenny's failure of vision in 'gay LA' - renders legible the counter-hegemonic quality of lesbian space. These are figurations of seeing from the outside of feeling that communicate with a 'straight audience' (Moore 2007, 5). Depicting a register of lesbian visibility that is 'twin skin' to a register of feeling, it is as a subject of lesbian feeling that the world is seen 'through lesbian eyes'.

### ***3. Olivia cruise***

Space is rarely historically or structurally named lesbian and is instead largely presumed to be occupied by heterosexual social forms (Duncan 1996). The frequent representation of lesbian events allows *TLW* to create transitory lesbian places where otherwise there would be none. Geographers have already drawn attention to the creation of place through event as central to

the formation of lesbian community (Muller 2007; Nash and Bain 2007). In this framework, most urban lesbian spaces are transitory social club and bar nights hosted by otherwise heterosexual venues. The lack of permanently named lesbian space reflects the deployment of space in the public/private governance of sexual expression and affects the nature of the lesbian relations that form (in) space. By situating the transitory space of the lesbian gaze in places that are scenes for specific events, *TLW* problematises the heterosexual structure of space. In turn, specific events become the occasion for the manifestation of certain kinds of space.

Olivia is a real-life lesbian travel agency (<http://www.olivia.com/>).<sup>6</sup> The reconstruction of an Olivia cruise sets the scene for a number of interrelated spaces, including places such as bars, restaurants, swimming pools, and venues for dances, talks, meet and greets, and competitions. The proximity of many spaces in one location catalyses various narratives, one of which focuses on up and coming tennis player Dana (Erin Daniels). Dana recently outed herself by starring in a print campaign ‘Get out and stay out!’ for Subaru’s Outback, a model that carries an American subcultural reputation for being a lesbian car (<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=lesbaru>). Dana’s professional success is rewarded with corporate sponsorship. Dana comes aboard Olivia as a guest of honour. The episode (‘Land Ahoy’), set around the cruise, showcases the dependence of lesbian publics on corporate investment. In this example, the viability of the lesbian event is sutured to its profitability which entails the identification of a market. By capitulating to the commercialisation of lesbian space through the corporatisation of the event, *TLW* performs the increasing commercial encroachment on queer culture.

Given the intertwinement of place and event, Olivia cruise can be viewed as ‘a place that is the setting for a particular event’ (or particular events) and as such interpreted as a ‘locale’ (Probyn 1990, 178). For example, Olivia acts as a locale for Dana’s coming out. The

long anticipated and painful event of Dana's coming out takes a specific incarnation on Olivia. Rather than 'coming out' of the closet, as an individuated lesbian comes out to a heteronormative society, Dana 'comes in' to lesbian space and community. *TLW* constructs a lesbian perspective by including the 'motion of "coming in"—to the lesbian and gay community' (Munt 1998a, 15), thereby offering the 'conferral of selfhood through desire and identification' (20) to its viewers. Olivia is thus the locale for the event of 'coming in'.

Participating in a lesbian celebrity panel, Dana occupies a speaking position that allows her experience to be shared with an audience—the fictional audience aboard Olivia and the real audience of *TLW*—fostering potential recognition. While Dana's celebrity represents a form of sexuality based on her as an individual, her subjectivity is actualised only in relation to others as community. Again, the 'burden of representation' (see Jane Park in this themed section) is displaced onto the group.

*TLW* represents real national events such as the Dinah Shore Weekend (Season One), Gay Pride (Season Two) and the Pink Ride (Season Four) and local events such as house parties, club nights, and gallery openings. The events that take place range in scale from the macro-sociological to the interpersonal: people drink and lose their inhibitions (Jenny calls Marina and then realises she cannot speak to her), people start intimate relationships they usually would not (Dana meets and sleeps with an unlikely girlfriend Tonya), people create a space for telling stories (Shane, Alice, Danna, Jenny and Tina tell their coming out stories on a road trip) (all examples from Season One). Events shape possibilities for encounters that characterise spaces as locales. *TLW*'s locales are locations for events in feeling, such as Dana's coming out. Lesbian desire amalgamates locales in which the event of people meeting is the event of feeling.

#### **4. *High art***

‘Gay LA’, ‘the pool’ and ‘Olivia cruise’ illustrate the use of place to represent lesbian experience and the role of the event in creating lesbian disruptions to heteronormative space. In this context, lesbian spaces are those that possess representational qualities with the capacity to mark places and characters as lesbian. To further understand the inscriptive capacity of space I examine the territorialisation of space through the intertextuality of lesbian representation. The final textual excerpt in this section is selected for its portrayal of the territorialisation of space by lesbian desire.

The final episode of the Fifth Season (‘Loyal and True’) opens with a reproduction of the bedroom scene from the art house lesbian film *High Art* (Cholodenko 1998). Like Lucy (Ally Sheedy), Shane sets up her camera on a timer before entering into the viewfinder frame. The resemblance between the characters - Lucy and Shane, and Syd (Radha Mitchel) and Molly (Clementine Ford) - is highlighted by the way in which Shane mimics Lucy as she enters the frame with her lover, Molly. Creating a photographic space between lovers in the bedroom draws attention to the aesthetic aspect of feeling as well as the way in which representations of feeling through photography inscribe spaces with affective qualities. Shane and Lucy, and Molly and Syd, share gendered characteristics such as skin complexion (associated with race), hair colour and style (associated with gender), and bodily physique (associated with class through health). Reproducing the creative moment of the photograph articulates an aesthetics of feeling as an order of cultural continuity between *High Art* and *TLW*.

In this reproduction, *High Art* territorialises the space of *TLW* with a structure of lesbian desire. Particular to this form of lesbian desire is the articulation of proximities in feeling through the aesthetic sphere. These aesthetics, dramatised by the act of photographing contact between bodies, reflects a cultural trajectory of lesbian desire that shapes experiences

of feeling. The shape of feeling is created by the parallel between Lucy and Shane, characters familiar with the tactile world of feminine intimacy and sensual pleasure, and Syd and Molly, whose respective relationships with Lucy and Shane constitute a first time encounter with lesbian feeling. The parallel replicates the feeling of new sex, new love, and the morning after the night before. Intimate feelings for another woman are new for Syd and Molly and their unfamiliarity in feeling is associated with the unravelling of their heterosexuality. The tone and form of these scenes express these new feelings: these are quiet, delicate scenes with little dialogue. Lucy's photographs of Syd mark the pinnacle of their intimacy and the anticipation of its demise. Soon after Shane photographs Molly, their love is thwarted.

The story *High Art* tells about photography as a medium of representation that reflects the survival of subcultures of intimacy further situates Shane and Molly's intimacy in a trajectory of lesbian desire. *High Art* bases its story on the life and work of Nan Goldin, made famous by her 1970s and 1980s New York City portraits documenting post-Stonewall gay subculture and the post-punk new-wave music scene. A past of photographing intimacy in queer subcultural places, in which practices of looking are sutured to encounters in feeling, inscribes the visual tactility of feeling between Molly and Shane. New forms of intimacy are represented by an aesthetic that is culturally specific and has a traceable history (also see Beirne 2007). The beautiful bodies of *TLW* invite touch as a proximity in feeling with a past, reflecting a visual tactility that is historically evolved.

### **Community and social networks of lesbian feeling**

Consistent with the production of lesbian visibility by communities that take up space is the association of feeling with social relationships. Permission to feel, expressed as permission to look, is a central tenet of how *TLW* problematises lesbian visibility. Excerpts from the show I have discussed thus far reflect how this joining of permissions underlines the reproduction of



community as the threshold of lesbian identity. *TLW*'s use of lesbian and gay subcultural media structures lesbian desire by providing a representational infrastructure to organise norms that articulate feeling's visibility. Such queer representations do not equate visibility with image, but portray the realm of the visible as lived and embodied through, for instance, the telling of stories. In this regard, 'the chart', which is the 'web of lesbian connectivity' referred to by the character Alice, is an exposition of the show's accent on the visibility of feeling as a personal narrative with a social context.

In Season One the audience hears Alice unsuccessfully pitching a story to her editor about 'random acts of sex ... encounters, romances, one-night stands, twenty-year marriages' ('Let's Do It'). A journalist for '*LA Magazine*', Alice hopes to run a story on how, when any 'group of gay girls' get together, 'you are guaranteed someone slept with someone else, who has slept with someone else, who slept with someone else, and on and on'. Displayed on a whiteboard that hangs in Alice's living room, the chart is a spider-diagram of who has slept with whom. While the chart is based on the sexual encounter, 'the point is we're all connected', Alice tells her editor (and viewers), 'through love, through loneliness, through one tiny, lamentable lapse in judgment'. These L's – love, loneliness, and lapses in judgement – are part of *TLW*'s vocabulary of lesbian feeling. More than a graphic that represents real life, 'the chart' is a diagrammatic dramatisation of the formation of community through intimate relationships.

Progressing in her career, Alice gets a slot on 'KCRW radio' called '*The Chart*' (Season Two) on which she talks about the 'drama' of lesbian relationships. Later, she sets up the social networking site 'Our Chart' (Season Four), which broadcasts a biweekly podcast '*Alice in Lesboland*' (based on <http://www.sho.com/site/lword/community.do>). Following her success online, Alice progresses to TV's '*The Look*' (Season Five), which mimics real-life *The View* (ABC 1997). Each of these contexts of cultural production demands a specific

performance of lesbian identity – a performance made all the more apparent by Alice’s ‘forgotten’ bisexuality.<sup>7</sup> Opening Season Three, the camera follows Alice’s gestures closely as she speaks into the microphone:

I’m Alice Pieszcecki and you’re listening to *The Chart* on KCRW ... Tonight, we are talking about the connection between love and the senses. Your lover kisses you and, you feel a tremor in the back of your knees. The synapses fire, sending orders: move your legs, move your arms. She’s the one for you. She’s the girl of your dreams. She’s your one and only. And you know, because, the smell of her makes your head swim, because, you get a physical jolt every time she sends a glance your way. I mean, she touches you here [hand on neck], and you feel it, here [hand between legs]. You touch her anywhere, and you feel it everywhere ... [moving the story on] we could also talk about Gabby, otherwise known as Lesbian X, the point of origin for an entire geographical substratum of lesbian linkages.

As Alice speaks about the way Dana makes her feel she draws lines of connection in the form of memories and yearnings between feeling bodies. Speaking about her sensory experience of feeling for an other, as an experience that is performed as living in the moment of its telling, Alice generates a field of recognition grounded in feeling. Just like Dana constitutes her ‘audience’ on the Olivia cruise, the ‘audience’ of KCRW radio interpellates *TLW*’s viewers as an audience of the show. Speaking to the viewer as if they were a KCRW listener, the chart references storytelling as a method of cultural production (see Munt 1998a). Storytelling affectively joins up the present. ‘Meeting the present is like meeting a new lover: telling the story of how you got to be this way in the present moment suddenly changes its usual cadences because of the occasion of the telling’ (Berlant 2008, 9).

The chart represents touch as a proximity in feeling that personalises the space between subjects and mobilises the importance of naming to the sexual status of touch: being ‘on’ the chart means being legible within a structure of lesbian desire. The recognition of feeling is permeated with culturally specific practices of naming that place lesbian; it is not that being placed on the chart makes one a lesbian, but that the chart is ‘pretty much’ gay. In this sense, the chart is a mobile map or a technology of emplacement that wraps itself around its subjects. It is not the sexual encounter itself that places a character on the chart, but the lived histories of affect and the circulation of desire. The intimate encounter tells a story. While the chart mimics the taxonomy of a natural science, as a technology it plunges into intersubjective intricacies of feeling. The chart traces points of contact irreducible to what it purports to represent. Like a language, the chart traces what it leaves out, what it cannot hold, that which it does not adequately name.

The politics of naming is represented in the policing of the visibility of Alice’s chart. Alice loses her spot on *The Chart* when she continues to talk about her ex-girlfriend Dana. Here, grief stricken Alice (insincerely represented) is too traumatised by the end of her relationship to perform the emotional labour of her comedy—labour that is visible on the occasion of its failed performance. Later, *The Look* wants Alice to ‘out’ celebrities and be ‘happy gay’ (‘LMFAO’), exemplifying what Sara Ahmed (2010) terms the ‘happiness duty’ placed on marginalised subjects required to perform happiness as a sign of an institution’s progression beyond racism and homophobia. After she reads a letter on air from an adolescent girl whose brother was shot in the face by some kids who found out he was gay, Alice is not invited back to *The Look*.

The chart as a mapping of potential suggests its capacity as a diagram. Invoked by Alice’s reference to the ‘entire geographical substratum of lesbian linkages’, the chart is not so much a representation of relationships between characters within an imagined reality, as a

diagram of relations of ‘force’ (Deleuze 1986, 1—38). In this view, the chart establishes points of connection between bodies and parts of bodies, and the force that makes possible these relations of affect and their effects. As a diagram, the chart maps the social field that bears on ways of seeing and relating, producing a sense that events will happen, that places will be realised as locales of intimacy. In its narrative form, this is a story about lesbian as a mode of connectivity that refracts the potential of being and becoming lesbian in the lives of those it effects (see Probyn 1996). The chart gathers the capacity to struggle over intimacy and naming, grafting the potential to affect and be affected by feeling onto space.

### **The becoming intelligible of lesbian feeling**

One such place in which the chart exercises its capacity to graft struggles over feeling in space is ‘The Planet’ café. Owned and managed by various central characters, The Planet never transitions into a lesbian owned and run café. Rather, customers who patronise The Planet repeatedly undertake the spatially specific cultural and emotional labour necessary to construct it as lesbian. *TLW*’s vision of feeling as constitutive of lesbian bodies, communities and spaces is epitomised in a scene set in The Planet. Concluding the first episode of the last Season (‘Long Night’s Journey Into Day’), this scene further privileges socially networked events in feeling as inscriptive of lesbian locales. This scene’s depiction of yet another morning after the night before, gives particular attention to characters’ bodily and facial expressions.

The night before had ended painfully. Amongst a crescendo of storyline activity, Jenny interrupts her best friend Shane having sex with her ex-girlfriend Nikki (Kate French) with whom she has just publically declared to be in love. The morning after, several characters gather in The Planet, where joint owners Kit (Pam Grier) and Helena (Rachel Shelley) are serving tables, talking to friends and customers. Shane walks into the café. Tina

sees her first, then Bette (Jennifer Beals) sees Tina's attention caught by something and follows her gaze to see Shane. Alice sees both Tina and Bette looking and, turning around to follow their gaze, sees Shane behind her. Tasha (Rose Rollins) sees all three looking, and turns to see Shane too. This relay of looks takes place within a matter of seconds. Pulling out a chair, Bette says 'Shane why don't you have a seat?'. Jenny, who has not looked up, interjects: 'If she sits there, then I'm gonna leave'.

This rotation of looks constructs a space in which the characters share empathetic expressions of shame and pain. They are also bemused by the melodramatic intensity of Shane and Jenny's encounter: they do not know what to do. Still not looking at Shane, Jenny invites Tina and Tasha to sit at a different table. Shane watches them walk away. Bette again offers Shane a seat, and this time she accepts, placing herself between Bette and Alice. They start talking. The chart is in action.

Now a space has been constructed between the two tables, a passage that is marked out by separation and connection: girlfriends Tasha and Alice look at one another across the room. Shane looks over at Jenny, then looks away, then looks back at her. Jenny fans herself with a napkin. Then the camera fixes on Jenny's facial expression of hurt. This is followed by a shot of Shane's face, still looking over at Jenny, then away from Jenny. It is a conversation of gazes. Splitting the characters between two tables constructs a space within a place that is defined by its affective properties. Watching each character mirroring the hurt of the other in this sequence gives the viewer the impression that the pain between Jenny and Shane is a feeling that passes between them.

Kit is standing by Shane's table, looking back and forth between the two tables as if watching a tennis match. The camera is back on Jenny's face. She looks up at Shane for the first time. She looks at Shane. The camera returns to Shane looking at Jenny, looking for Jenny, then the shot cuts again to Jenny who is still looking at Shane. Jenny's eyes dart to the

side and she blinks. The camera focuses intently on Jenny and Shane's facial dialogue, where the actors make their characters' feelings legible: Shane makes legible guilt and sadness and Jenny makes legible hurt and betrayal. Actors' facial expressions constitute visibility that is intelligible as lesbian visibility.

This scene epitomises characters' expressions of feeling as affective properties that make intelligible lesbian identities and places, in turn representing the affective properties of lesbian intelligibility. Naturalised heterosexual space, including televisual space, is contested by a field of representation that marks out ways of seeing as specifically lesbian. Here feeling actualises already existent intersubjective relationships understood as community. Jenny's character is materialised by Shane's gaze even though she avoids looking back. Jenny's materialisation is an affect of the feelings she feels for Shane. Through her pain, Jenny realises she is in love with Shane, re-realising her relationship with Shane as love. Jenny's expression of feeling reproduces *The Planet* as a locale in which the event of self-realisation through the becoming intelligible of feeling takes place, reinstating *The Planet* as a location for further encounters in lesbian feeling.

Regular viewers of *TLW* are accustomed to watching stories develop through Jenny's eyes but not only because Jenny is a protagonist whose perspective shapes the show's narrative. From the first episode on, viewers see a lot of Jenny seeing. As Rooney (2006, citing the "wide-eyed" pose of critical amazement at the performance of the everyday' in Morris 1993, 300) puts it, with her 'huge eyes and tiny body' Jenny plays the 'wide eyed' subject, who is 'in a perpetual state of bewilderment' and self-confrontation. Viewers see Jenny seeing the feelings of others, and the feelings she feels seeing others' feelings. As her pupils dilate, the audience sees the world making an impression on Jenny. On the surface of her eyes, feeling 'skin-side out', the impression the world makes on Jenny makes an

impression on us, the viewers. As we look into her eyes we become part of the world that is making an impression on her (also see Moore 2007).

The affective properties of interpersonal relationships are also intelligible to viewers because they have watched the characters feel for five years. Whether in real or virtual time, by Season Six the audience is consuming five years of feeling. The time of feeling is caught up in the performative capacity of the chart to name lived histories of feeling. It is because feelings take time that the chart makes an impression in the present. The imagined belongings and contingent intimacies mapped by the chart inscribe the space of *The Planet* as a place that is a locale of the becoming intelligible of lesbian feeling.

### **Seeing feeling**

Notions of visibility are central to the politicisation of space in geographies of sexuality (Bell et al. 1994; Duncan 1996; Valentine 1993). But what, precisely, is visible about lesbian? Historically, Western discourses of sexuality have verified homosexual difference through the visibility of gender difference. Ideas of gender transgression continue to be influential in lesbian and gay counter-cultures that reappropriate the transgression of gender norms as a sign of liberatory difference from heteronormative culture (Munt 1998b; Walker 2001). This association of sexuality with gender in both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forms of sexuality articulates an historically specific connection between desire and visibility that is deeply ingrained in Western discourses of sexuality (Walker 2001) and epistemology (Sedgwick 1990). Indeed, the association between femininity and heterosexuality is so integral to Western epistemology that it is difficult to conceptualise the visibility of lesbian identity without recourse to the transgression of norms of feminine self-presentation.

While it is impossible to think of lesbian femininity entirely autonomously from heterosexual femininity, queer theory has sought to recognise the non-heterosexual potential

of feminine femininity in its uncoupling of sexuality from gender (Dahl, this themed section; Rose and Camilleri 2002). Uncoupling sexuality from gender entails the possibility of theorising feminine femininity that is specifically lesbian. Recognising femininity as lesbian, however, still requires the production of lesbian visibility. Indeed, the queer uncoupling of sexuality from gender theorises desire along an axis of visibility: the ambiguity of sexuality is reflected in the invisibility of sexuality, in contrast to the fixity of gender reflected in the visibility of masculine and feminine identity (Sedgwick 1990). Conceptualising ‘seeing lesbian’ as seeing feeling, skin side out, challenges the assumed invisibility of sexuality by recognising the visibility of feelings that are territorialised by trajectories of lesbian desire. Feeling’s articulation of trajectories of desire is organised by categories of sexuality in Western epistemology and so the visibility of feeling offers a way to think about the visibility of sexuality. Without further attention to the intersections of race and class, however, the visibility of feeling I have described thus far could be read in certain discourse as tacitly white and middle class.<sup>8</sup>

What is visible about lesbian on *TLW* is the visibility of lesbian feeling. *TLW* represents the embodied capacity to affect and be affected by feeling—how people affect and are affected by social and cultural worlds because of how they feel. Spaces become lesbian when they inscribe and are inscribed by potential for the expression of lesbian feeling. *TLW* capitalises on the recognition of the force of feeling, or forces of encounters in feeling, as specifically lesbian, thereby situating lesbian feeling in terms of collective histories rather than individuating identities. This is how thinking about feeling as something visible, expressed in registers of visibly embodied affect, contributes to understanding the sexualisation of space.



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## Notes

1. Created by executive producer Ilene Chaiken and produced by American network Showtime *TLW* aired from 2004 to 2009 and was distributed outside the US by MGM Worldwide Television. *TLW* was officially broadcast in thirty-four countries ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_L\\_Word](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_L_Word)), but has been watched all over the world through DVD distribution and the internet, including via fan communities' sites (e.g. [www.tibette.com](http://www.tibette.com)) and the use of the video platform site YouTube ([www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)).
2. The voiceover conversation between Jennifer Beals and Ilene Chaiken for the 'Pilot' is available on the DVD of Season 1.
3. I borrow this metaphor of doubled embodiment from queer china feminist writer and poet Gloria Anzaldúa ([1987] 2007: 81), who writes: 'Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language'. Anzaldúa's oft-cited term, 'twin skin', signals feeling and lesbian as two corresponding registers of the physiological, cultural, and personal make up of skin.
4. For discussion on the transposition of Butler (1990) in geographical contexts, see Lise Nelson (1999), Probyn (1995), Lisa Walker (1995), and Chengzhou He (this themed section). See Ulrika Dahl (2010) for an alternative methodology.
5. Indeed, many have criticised the lack of butch characters as poor representation (see Akass and McCabe 2006). Given that a sizeable discourse on butch/femme identities already

exists (Munt 1998b), I do not address the relationship between *TLW* and these discussions here. This ‘burden of responsibility’ would overwhelm the argument I seek to make, that lesbian visibility can be reframed in terms of the visibility of feeling.

6. The corporatisation of lesbian identity changes the value of lesbian subjectivity by entering the lesbian consumer into circuits of commodity culture. *TLW*'s product placement is necessary for commercial reasons - to make the show financially viable - but has the effect of producing a lesbian market. In this, the show reconstitutes lesbian visibility through commercial agreements (see Heller 1997; McFadden 2010).
7. The character is introduced as bisexual but storylines representing Alice's bisexuality barely persist beyond Season One.
8. I further examine race and class in an article in progress, titled ‘Epistemology of Invasion: Race, Class and Gender in the Territorialisation of Feeling in *The L Word*’.

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