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## **The Lesbian Intimate: Capacities for feeling in convergent media contexts**

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### **Abstract:**

This article claims that the expression of the 'lesbian intimate' is both a condition of possibility and the outcome of convergent lesbian media. The claim is grounded on the intersection of two major shifts in the publicity of feeling: the civic incorporation of lesbian desire (culminating in legislative equity for lesbian and gay subjects) intersecting with the shift of intimacy from private to public life (epitomised by the elevation of the intimate to a national concern). To understand how the lesbian intimate contributes to and is expressed in the formation of specific convergent media, the article draws on Deleuze's writing on Spinoza (1988). A Spinozist conception of bodies and images is used to situate and think through *The L World's* (Showtime 2004-9) lesbian media milieu as an environment of images that responds to—and is dependent upon its production of—capacities for feeling. In so doing, the article conceptualises lesbian as a mode of affection that modifies bodies *as* lesbian by modifying their feelings. Here lesbian intimacy is viewed as an effect of the contact between the affective capacity of images to modify viewers' feelings and the social and cultural legitimacy of lesbian intimacy that arises through the civic incorporation of lesbian desire and the shift toward the intimate in national cultures. This way of viewing intimacy is illustrated through a discussion of the circulation of images in *A Photographic Journal* by Jennifer Beals (Beals 2010); images that hide (while purporting to show) their material conditions of production by seeking to affect intimate contact between bodies.

**Keywords:** lesbian, intimate, media, audience, mode of affection

### **Lesbian images, from media effects to media affects**

... *Blue is the Warmest Color* expresses the frequently abstracted concept of love—and loss—as it's actually experienced: by way of the flesh ... The visual

intimacy effectively communicates what it feels like to be in love—like there is no world outside of these two characters, only the here and now ... No matter where you fall on the homo-hetero spectrum, this film insists that you inhabit it. (Myers 2013)

They never fuck. Lots of open mouthed heavy breathing, much less scissoring ... A no lesbian sex movie renowned and lauded for its bold lesbian sex ... This film rejects every suspicion that lesbians have any interiority never mind sex. (Myles 2013)

It is because sex is not a ‘thing’ but ‘a relation’ (Berlant 2011, 81), occurring *between* one body and another (and another and ... ) (an assemblage, even), that sex expresses epistemological and other kinds of contradiction. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick pointed out some years ago in her *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), all forms of Western intimacy are fraught with the epistemological contradiction between ‘minoritizing’ and ‘universalizing’ views of ‘homo/heterosexual definition’ (1). In mediated responses to the Palme D’Or winning film *Blue is the Warmest Color* (Kechiche 2013), the minoritizing and universalizing status of the image fuels its fraught, contested and undecided status *as* lesbian. The contradiction—between the idea that homosexuality affects only a specific minority (gay people) and the idea that homosexuality universally affects everyone (as latent desire, as homophobia)—latches on to lesbian images and the anxieties they provoke about authenticity, exploitation, and possibilities for love. According to the above viewer responses, the same film can be read alternately as visual intimacy that communicates the feeling of being in love universally (Myers 2013); and, as intimacy bereft of lesbian interiority—an aesthetic without sex (Myles 2013). The quality of the involvement of one (lesbian) body in another and the naming of that involvement (as lesbian) is necessarily historically inflected by the epistemological space of hetero / homosexual definition and its discursive capacity to make us speak (Foucault 1976).

What do lesbian images make us speak of? This essay proposes that lesbian images make us speak of the intimate; that, a convergence of historical transformations in formations of sexuality and publicity has come to bear on the modification of relations between bodies as lesbian. The ascendance of media images from a fairly discrete realm of ‘the media’ to a ubiquitous yet pivotal presence in governing structures of consumerism and citizenship has propelled the circulation of lesbian intimacy. This proposition builds on but also traverses scholarly discussion on the emergence of the term lesbian in the context of representation (on this, see Butler 1991; Jagose 2002; Villarejo 2003). To intimate expression is to speak but also to be affected by the process of speaking, as Foucault (1976) illuminated. Intimacy is the provision of a body that is expressive, that pulsates as well as articulates. In their encounters with images people are directly affected by the aesthetic expression of affect, and they learn which types of affective reciprocity can come to express intimate affection.

As I have begun to intimate, we can attend to the lesbian intimate by examining images as affective modifications of viewers' capacities to feel (see also Cefai 2014b). In his writing on Spinoza, Gilles Deleuze (1988) illuminates how bodies enter into relations of affection through images. Deleuze's thinking of how images directly modify bodies can be used to bring the realm of the aesthetic into view as an affective realm. The affective aspect of the image as a modification of the body can further be interpreted for the way in which it expresses an historically formed idea—here, the idea of intimate expression. Images exist within women's ways of relating by directly affecting their capacity to feel. By thinking lesbian less as a subject position and more as a mode, open to reconfiguration by the changing circulation of images, Deleuze's work on Spinoza opens new consideration of lesbian media images.

Lesbian modes are linked to systemic changes in media. Convergent media (Jenkins 2006) and the use of social media platforms in particular, spawned new lesbian media.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to 'one to many' broadcasting that allows systemic control over the heterosexuality of media, the convergent 'media environment' (Couldry 2012, 2) composed of user-generated content is conducive to the production of lesbian media content. The broadcasting of *The L Word* (Showtime 2004-2009) facilitated but also benefited from the growth of convergent media. In this new social viewing context, media 'suffuse our sense' (Couldry 2012, 1). *A Photographic Journal by Jennifer Beals* (Beals 2010), marketed to fans, expresses some of the defining features of the fold of the audience into the TV series. The cultural politics of emotion takes particular form in digital media cultures (Karatzogianni and Kuntsman 2012; Kember and Zylinska 2012). Rather than situating *The L Word* as a 'specific media considered in isolation' (Couldry 2012, 2), the cultural politics of emotion in contexts of digital and convergent media calls for an understanding of how 'feelings and affective states can *reverberate* in and out of cyberspace, intensified (or muffled) and transformed through digital circulation and repetition' (Kuntsman 2012, 1, italics in original).

The 'folding of internet information-space into everyday action-space' (Couldry 2012, 3) challenges previous understanding of lesbian images and their audiences with respect to dominant cultures. *A Photographic Journal* is neither mainstream nor subcultural. Although the book takes the conventional media format of a hardback publication, it is part of a circuit of images; a convergent media milieu understood here as 'a language that captures the ways in which affect and emotions take shape through movement between contexts, websites, forums, blogs, comments, and computer screens' (Kuntsman 2012, 1). *The L Word* is the first major lesbian cultural production (on lesbian production, see Hankin 2004) to incorporate lesbian culture into the mainstream (see Danae 1993; Duggan 2003).

The lesbian intimate can be understood as a form of expression that expresses social and political change beyond the lexical application of each term taken separately. The lesbian intimate is the result of the convergence between the rise of lesbian publicity (culminating in the legislative production of gay citizenship (see Bell and Binne 2000; Paur 2007)), and the simultaneous rise of intimacy as a national publicity (the development of the intimate public (Berlant 2008, see also 1997)). The exchange between mainstream

aesthetics of heterosexual women's intimacy (Berlant 2008) and the counter-cultural aesthetics of lesbian and queer cultures (Cvetkovich 2003; Munt 1998a, 1998b, 2008) in lesbian media milieu is made possible by these broader historical transformations in the publicity of gay and intimate life.

*The L Word's* media milieu expresses the contradictory status of the minoritising and universalising status of the lesbian image, but moves this contradiction into a problematic of consumption. *A Photographic Journal* is not simply a mainstream cultural text because its mainstream aesthetic resonates in a lesbian way—with an audience affectively moved by the show's lesbian content. The audience's capacity to feel contributes to *The L Word's* existence. However, masking the capital transaction that provides the opportunity for intimate expression, what must be worked out by viewers is less a question of identification and representation, and more the necessity of imagining ways of relating. A Deleuzian engagement with lesbian centres on the body, not as fixed entity, but as the substantive affective realm of sexual politics traversed by images whose production incorporates the body in relations of capital and material exchange. As a 'primary site of ethical problematization' (Hunter 1992, 367), the challenge and opportunity of the mainstream media aesthetic of lesbian sex is to keep open the possibility for (new) images.

### **Lesbian modes after Deleuze and Guattari**

Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 1994) subvert the primacy of signification in Western philosophical thinking and this subversion provides the theoretical grounds to rethink the relation between bodies and images; to reengage the term lesbian as a modification of the body by images as affections and corporeal traces. The model of representation predominant in Western thought produces a communications discourse in which the 'content' of representation has 'an objective existence proper and exterior to the form of its expression' (Massumi 2002, xiv-xv).<sup>2</sup> In media studies and related disciplines, the distinctive existence of representational content predominantly manifests in the distinction between the viewer (subject) and the text (object). This distinction has particular consequences in lesbian and queer media theory, splitting lesbian representation off from its material milieu and then seeking a rejoinder through the presence of 'real lesbians' in scholarly research. By limiting the sphere of meaning to interpretive rational thought the materiality of the image is bypassed. The resolution of the subject-object dialectic in the apparent correlation between representation and reality is the result of a representational image of thought. Seeking to break away from this latter image of thought and its translation of the image as representation, Deleuze and Guattari relocate the nub of analysis 'in the middle' (Grosz 2001, 69). Relinquishing the arrival of meaning, thought might be freed 'from that which captures or captivates it ... from the image ... from representation' (2001, 62). In the in-between, Deleuze and Guattari interrupt the structural homology in the thought machine that 'overlays the product onto the process' (Massumi 2002, xviii): the process is expression.

In this schema, expression bears a more impersonal character that relates to Deleuze's (1988) Spinozist concept of the body. Spinoza's 'kinetic proposition' (Deleuze

1988, 123) defines bodies 'by relations of motion and rest, slowness and speed between particles ... not ... a form or by functions'. Bodies are also defined by 'the capacity for affecting and being affected' (1988, 123). These Spinozist propositions realise that bodies and minds 'are not substances or subjects, but modes' (1988, 123-124). Affections, Deleuze explains, are the 'modes themselves' (1988, 48). Images, smells, and voices are modes of affection: 'modes are the affections of substance or of its attributes' (1988, 48). Further, affections 'designate that which happens to the mode, the modifications of the mode' (1988, 48). Deleuze thus describes affections as 'images or corporeal traces first of all' (1988, 48). Through texture, image, sound, 'their *ideas* involve both the nature of the affected body and that of the affecting external body' (1988, 48). Spinoza calls these ideas of bodies, that are present in us but that belong outside us, 'images of things' (1988, 48). This idea of affection is distinguished from affect—the altered 'state (*constitutio*) of the affected body and mind' (1988, 48). This state is more or less 'perfect' than it was prior to the presence of 'image affections' (1988, 48). These states have a duration 'that attaches them to the preceding state and makes them tend towards the next state' (1988, 49). Affection passes through 'social imaginaries' (Gatens 2009, 203) in which bodies take up positions of in / action as expressions of the capacities of identities.

The duration of the affected body and its susceptibility to images of things prevents the body from being fixed as a discrete and bounded entity. The refusal of the representational conflation between a subject and its body allows us to think lesbian only as a mode; bodies in-between, in the process of becoming, affecting and being affected by other bodies. In this vein, rather than making 'lesbian into (an) image' (Villarejo 2003, 7) images can be thought as affections that are corporeal traces and ideas modifying the body *as* lesbian. Elspeth Probyn puts this simply when she proposes a conception of the lesbian image as 'that with which we think and feel our way from body to body' (1996, 60). Probyn claims that the image is lesbian 'only through the force of desire and the ways in which images are reproduced' (1996, 60).<sup>3</sup> To 'take *lesbian* as a modifier, not as a noun but as an adjective' (Villarejo 2003, 4) allows us to attend to the force of the image as that by which lesbian connections are made. 'The image is lesbian only inasmuch as it allows for carnal lines of connection, the way it engages desire and the ways in which desire moves it' (Probyn 1996, 60).<sup>4</sup>

### **From desire to publicity**

The visibility of homosexual difference by which sexuality distributes power (Foucault 1976) relates to visibility of another type. Closeted homosexuality set up the conditions for a register of homosexual meaning whose construction was contingent upon a refusal or inability to be passed through verbal and linguistic content. Able to communicate through hand gestures, gait, facial expressions, body language, and dress, the closet gave (in)visibility a second skin. This second order of visibility, the realm of the aesthetic, was able to express gay life—a life different from that which heterosexuality made it possible to represent. The flick of a wrist and a glance are 'images of things' (Deleuze 1988, 48) that allow bodies and

minds to take up positions of action into a continuum of exchange (Gatens 2009)—what Foucault (1997) might have called friendship as a way of life.

A 'sensualization of power and a gain of pleasure' (Foucault 1976, 44) sutured emotionality to the visibilities of the body: 'The power which thus took charge of sexuality set about contacting bodies, caressing them with its eyes, intensifying areas, electrifying surfaces, dramatising troubled moments' (1976, 44). By theorising gender as the expression of patriarchal power through the stylisation of the body, Judith Butler (1990, 1991, 1993) developed many of Foucault's ideas. Like Foucault, Butler makes oblique reference to her own experience of sexual subculture, drawing on lesbian and gay cultural texts and practices to theorise the performativity of gender (1990, 1993). Such accounts can be reread as descriptions of how sex, as a 'form of expression' (Massumi 2002, xxvi) passes into aesthetic content—the stylised body, the body that enacts the fantasy of gender in every aspect of its life, through health, education, recreation. In relation to juridical heteronormativity, sexual 'minorities have responded with the language of the visible' (Walker 2001, 1). The 'demand for social justice' articulated in the celebration of those 'identifiable marks of difference' used to 'target ... for discrimination' (2001, 1) transmuted private desire (private from the mainstream) into public intimacy: intimacy as a political demand. With the absorption of ideas about gay experience into mainstream cultural and national practices of identity (see Blackman 2009) the threshold of that demand has shifted, as has its use of aesthetics.

The photography of Del LaGrace Volcano illustrates a gay or queer aesthetic that expresses the desire not to be assimilated into mainstream cultural ways of relating. Responses to the heterosexual / homosexual system in the language of the visible is the subject of the photographs in Volcano's collaboration with Ulrika Dahl, *Femmes of Power* (2008). The photographs are images of an aesthetic that seeks to render visible a critical encounter with patriarchal sexuality, and in that visibility, to constitute an arrangement of bodies and touch that contests heterosexuality. Seeing one another as lesbian, feeling in relation to one another's feeling, is possible only through defying the heterosexual organisation of desire by masculine signification. The attitude of defiance takes an aesthetic form—becomes expressive of a lesbian aesthetic.

Defiance is expressed *in situ*, in the fold of 'bodies-cities' (Grosz 1995). For example, the last photograph in the book, 'The New Three Graces' (Volcano and Dahl 2008, 188), depicts three women on a grassy slope. With their backs to the camera, the women face an unidentified cityscape; they enter the world as they face it, and the viewer enters their interface. Hands on hips, the women look at a distance to the horizons of race, class and gender privilege built into the skyline. They share ways of standing, dressing, and arranging their hair; big hips, arm tattoos and black clothing; white skin and golden brown hair. The textures and colours of clothing, adornments, hair and skin, with the urban touch of concrete against asphalt, express defiance by engaging the senses. Falling sunlight fulfils the potential of colour in its touch. The green of grass and blue of skies, the whiteness of fat fleshy bodies contrasting with the blackness of clothes and boots, are pathways of

perception, sensation, texture and touch—aesthetic sensory assemblages that make way for feeling and track feeling's trace.

Despite the intractability of visibility to lesbian identities the relationship between aesthetics and the capacity for feeling is rarely theorised. This is certainly so in discussions about *The L Word* that focus on the show's interface between media industry, consumerism and specific types of audience reception (Akass and McCabe 2006; Beirne 2007; Burns and Davies 2009; Keller 2013; McFadden 2010; Moore 2007; Rooney 2006; Wolfe and Roripaugh 2006). Localised queer cultural aesthetics are largely at odds with the mainstream aesthetic character of *The L Word*. Lesbian media<sup>5</sup> tacitly endorse the show's success in bringing about a new type of visibility of which they themselves are very much a part. Picking up community responses, Kelly Kessler (2011) analyses how web platforms devised by Showtime ([www.sho.com](http://www.sho.com)) produce structural constraints around issues of identity and participation. Subsuming images to norms, Kessler explains how 'good gays' (2011, 125) in *The L Word* migrate into the Showtime's online platforms. Kessler argues that representing gays who are 'good-looking, flashy, upwardly mobile purchasers' (2011, 125) and 'tweaking' fans' conversations about 'who she or he is and what she or he desires' (2011, 125), imposes norms on viewers' online participation.

While the choice of bloggers' voices, subject headings for conversations, and the availability of specific gendered visages, surely does allow Showtime to promote specific identities online, Kessler's analysis is prefigured by a dyadic conception of normativity: 'the lives of a handful of (mostly) feminine, (almost entirely) white, and (unrealistically) economically flush lesbians living in Los Angeles' (2011, 128) are juxtaposed with the 'continued invisibility of nonwhite, butch, and middle- and working-class lesbians' (2011, 128). This conception of the show's 'reinforcement of dominant norms' (2011, 128) is a familiar avenue of queer critique that relates resistance to normativity but within a philosophically normative frame of understanding (through a representational dialectic).

Likewise, Samuel Chambers' (2006) discussion of *The L Word's* lesbian media reception draws on a dialectical critique that subsumes the show to a hermeneutic analysis of norms. Insisting on 'moving away from a politics of representation and toward a politics of norms' (2006, 85), Chambers discerns between 'identity ingredients' and the 'narrative structure' (2006, 85) of the TV series, the latter of which he identifies as 'heteronormative' (2006, 82). Through the semantic distinction Chambers suggests that *The L Word* is a 'show about lesbians [that] reinforces heteronormativity', 'preserves traditional concepts of femininity' and 'rejects queer sexuality' (2006, 87). Accordingly, and tacitly assuming a media effects discourse, Chambers anticipates that such lesbian representation will 'make it *harder* to challenge gender norms in the future' (2006, 87, italics in original).

These accounts illustrate the positioning of gender as a semiotic repository for the image. Splitting gender from sexuality at the level of meaning (the meaning of visibility) denies lesbian as a bodily mode. In this schema, images can be interpreted as heteronormative, 'mimicking heterosexual structures' (Chambers 2006, 87), and as lesbian, and without addressing the roots of this paradox in homophobic epistemology. While

Kessler and Chambers both engage with *The L Word's* media milieu as part of their analysis (also see Walker 2010), they disregard the show's portrayal of a lesbian perspective (discussed in Akass and McCabe 2006; Cefai 2014a; Rooney 2006), the show's reflection on its practices of representation (Wolfe and Roripaugh 2006), and the popularity of the show among lesbian and queer viewers (whether or not their viewing is 'ironic' (Ang 2007)). As Rosalind Gill (2007, 44) reminds us, the 'idea that the media act or should act like a mirror for society has been roundly challenged by many media scholars as at best naïve and at worst extremely dangerous for our understanding of media/gender relations'.<sup>6</sup>

The discourses on universal love in popular media concerning lesbian life and the mediation of lesbian experience by images of intimate equity express the lesbian intimate as both the condition of convergent lesbian media and that which the media produces. Media / gender relations give an intimate publicity to the lesbian archives of feeling (Cvetkovich 2003). Mainstream news programs reveal the centrality of images to statutory recognition (via both civil recognition of gay partnerships and recognition of lesbian and gay identities as axes of prejudice meriting redress through anti-discrimination law). These legislative developments reflect the civic incorporation of lesbian desire and the normative premise of the lesbian intimate. Civic incorporation refers, however, not only to the statutory inclusion of gay subjects and the celebrated image of this inclusion as evidence of the humanitarian achievement of neoliberal nation-states (on the US see Puar 2007), but to the governing effect of legislative recognition as a liberatory ideal for gay and lesbian 'imaginaries' (as before, see Gatens 2009). Lesbian consumer culture self-generated through spawning *The L Word* media milieu, contributing to growing lesbian communities but only via their existence as markets (for advertisers).<sup>7</sup> Through forming lesbian publics and publicity the civic incorporation of lesbian desire has transmuted ways of modifying and being modified, (the necessity of) ways of communicating and taking up space.

### **The promise of love drifts: Love story as lesbian aesthetic**

A specific type of intimacy has passed into gay life. At the L2 Convention (2006) in London, an audience member of a question and answer session asks actor Mia Kirshner (playing Jenny) to perform a line from the TV series. Shy but obliged, Kirshner delivers the line: 'Every time I look at you, I feel so completely dismantled' (L2 Convention 2006). It is with these words that Jenny expresses her love for Marina (Karina Lombard). Dana Heller suggests that this line embodies the trope of the episode—Stendhal's Syndrome. To dismantle means 'to take to pieces; *also*: to strip of dress or covering' (Heller 2006, 63). Earlier in the same episode (103, 'Longing'), Bette (Jennifer Beals) and her compatriot, art collector and benefactor Peggy Peabody (Holland Taylor), recall the origins of the Syndrome. Bette explains: upon seeing the Caravaggio in Florence, the French art critic was so overwhelmed that he 'burst into tears, and then he fainted' (cited in Heller 2006, 57). 'The work of art was beautiful and moving, he couldn't withstand the impact' (2006, 57-58). Peggy chimes in, citing Stendhal: 'I had obtained that supreme degree of sensibility where the divine intimations of art merge with the impassioned sensuality of emotion' (2006, 58).

Bette, and Jenny, are affected by the affective capacity of art, understood as the production of intensity that ‘directly impacts the nervous system and intensifies sensation’ (Grosz 2008, 3).

The trope of Stendhal’s Syndrome highlights the impersonality of Jenny’s response to Marina. Earlier in the season (100, ‘Pilot’), the audience is introduced to Jenny looking at Marina, ambivalently constructed as a performance of the male gaze (Cefai 2014a). Whereas the gaze organises relations of desire and looking through an objectifying and hierarchical pattern of signification, the feeling of being dismantled is a performance of being affected (see Cefai 2014a). This performance foregrounds the scene of desire in which subjects of feelings are remade through their encounter with one another’s feeling. Despite its narration as a love story, the scene of becoming undone is a vehicle for ‘impersonal speaking’ that constitutes ‘a modification—a change’ (Massumi 2002, xvii). The characters’ “‘affects”, or feelings (*affectus*)’ that constitute ‘continual durations or variations of perfection’ (Deleuze 1988, 49) are modified to express the lesbian. Falling in love is expressed in the ‘lived duration that involves the difference between two states’ (1988, 49). Being affected is a precondition of love; being affected by the possible worlds of the other, and the narration of discovering that possibility within ourselves (Cefai 2014b). Every time I look at you, I feel so completely dismantled: the impression of being affected enters into narration but narration also makes affection expressive of something else.

The mainstream aesthetics in *The L Word* create visual surfaces that incite touch. The incitement of touch through beauty dramatises the interplay of characters; through shots composed by the surfaces of her body and eyes, Jenny’s beauty expresses her dismantling. Her dismantling bares her feelings. Media aesthetics harness the artistic intensities of colour, shape, line and form that directly affect bodies (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, Grosz 2008), drawing together sounds, sights, images, and ideas into a ‘dynamic of sensible assemblages’ (Zagala 2002, 36). Characters modify one another by the affections induced by the actors, and audiences are predisposed to emotionally respond. As Berlant observes: ‘Aesthetics is one of the few places we learn to recognize our emotions as trained and not natural’ (2013). In other words, ‘people can control our feelings by controlling our modes of expression’ (Campbell 1997, 12). Affected by images, viewers solicit recognition of what they feel and narrate their experiences of recognition. But it is in the expression of emotion that the scene modifies capacities of feeling. Viewers reciprocate images of feeling through their own (images of) feeling.

The sensation induced by the image is key to melodramatic expression, central to Jenny’s character (becoming lesbian; becoming writer; becoming film director; becoming jobless). Reality TV elicits responses from audiences because the screen is a technology of ‘mediation [that] amplifies the affective basis of reality’ (Kavka 2008, 28). The screen is not an affective replica or copy of what is real, but, like the genre of melodrama, a surface of amplification, an ‘*interactive reality of the virtual and actual*’ (Murphie 2002, 192, italics in original). Viewers’ emotions ‘*feel real*’ precisely ‘because of the affect transmitted to our responsive bodies across a screen’ (Kavka 2008, 28, italics in original). For stories to elicit

feeling they must be ‘producing or constructing particular versions of reality in order to make them “real” and persuasive’ (Gill 2007, 44). Lesbian involvement in production is key to the expressivity of mainstream aesthetics.

In U.S. national culture the autobiographical is a key genre of women’s intimacy (Berlant 2008). The involvement of lesbian cast and crew in the *The L Word*’s production has always been a point of pride for creator and executive producer Ilene Chaiken. The ‘long-standing queer independent’ (Henderson 2013, 44) repeatedly invokes her own life story as a reservoir of material for the show’s portrayal of ‘lots of lesbians, a lesbian community, and explicit lesbian sex’ (2013, 44). Chaiken’s portrayal draws on her own aesthetic training in the accumulated realm of the lesbian cultural archive—her own images. Chaiken makes ongoing reference to the social significance of the show as a vehicle for storytelling.<sup>8</sup> Story telling is a (post)feminist genre that presumes a shared historical experience, particular to viewers and consumers *as women* (Berlant 2008). The autobiographical, Berlant insists, ‘isn’t the personal’ but a primary register of ‘collective experience’ (2008, vii). Viewers’ expect to ‘*already* share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience’ (2008, viii, emphasis in original).

The grounds of such a shared experience are in fact highly abstract, given all the different ways in which those who are interpellated as women will relate to that category. The abstraction of commonality mitigates the relation between the lived circumstances of particular women and their structural subordination. In women’s culture, ‘women identify with each other *as women* despite myriad economic, social, and political forces that create difference and antagonisms among them’ (Berlant 2008, 170). The lesbian intimate is expressed in our expression of feeling, indistinguishable from our common ground (*as women*). The virtual unfolding of identification among women publically plays the privacy of feeling; until recently feelings about private life would have been reserved for the private domain. Already tested in straight culture, the lesbian love story is a reterritorialisation of straight intimacy that expresses lesbian affection.<sup>9</sup> Love’s ‘beauty and utopian power’ (Berlant 2008, 171) affects a lesbian mode; conjugal heterosexuality is drifting into lesbian forms.<sup>10</sup> The love story becomes a lesbian mode, a way of modifying viewers as lesbian, opening bodies to the expression of the lesbian intimate. The promise of love drifts into defiance.

### **Personal touch in *A Photographic Journal* by Jennifer Beals**

Following the conclusion of the TV series, Beals (2010) produced a book of photographs she took on and off-set. The book is formatted like an autobiographical photo journal, although the black and pink cover and front matter echo the show’s branding. Inside the cover, ‘A photographic journal by Jennifer Beals’ is printed in personalised (presumably Beals’) handwriting. In the opening pages, Beals introduces herself as an author, welcoming the reader to her project—although copyright is shared jointly by Beals, *The L Word*, and Showtime ([www.thelwordbook.com](http://www.thelwordbook.com)). The book is organised chronologically by season. Each season is comprised of ‘the ephemera that composed our daily lives on the show’ (2010, 2):

photos, transcribed dialogues between Beals' and her colleagues, excerpts from scripts, call sheets, notes, and production memos.

For Beals, the story begins when 'nine actors arrived in Vancouver' (2010, 2). Although 'we arrived as separate individuals', she recalls, 'we realized very quickly we were joined together by our experience as actors, and as women' (2). What connected Beals and her colleagues were 'things we could not see—intuition, hope, love, pain, fear, courage' (2). Beals emphasises the forming of community through the collaborative production of the story. Chaiken 'kept her door open' and 'always considered' (2) our thoughts. 'Clearly', Beals writes, 'we were telling Ilene's stories, but we were also telling our own stories ... And in many ways, we were telling the viewers' stories' (2).

Although, like the 'making-of' documentary genre, Beals' book is 'hardly a transparent window into film production' (Hankin 2004, 27), her recollection and interleaving allows us to see where *The L Word* resonates with its viewers: the presumed shared historical experience of women. Beals evokes an exchange between actors, producers, and viewers that centres on reciprocity. The show itself is positioned as a technology of biographical convergence. Chaiken, Beals, cast, crew and viewers are imagined in terms of their capacity to listen to one another's stories and express an underlying empathy. *The L Word's* capacity is one of relating and feeling as an expression of empathetic relationships. Understanding these various positions and their relation to one another as a capacity to relate (including straight actors relating to lesbian experiences) expresses the lesbian intimate.

The virtual proximity that is articulated through converging media is a condition of the expression of the lesbian intimate; the reproduction of images in multiple media generates an impression of connection between spaces, subjects and representational practices. It is *as if* participants in the lesbian intimate do indeed know one another, one another's stories, one another's feeling, and can express this capacity to relate in any media. Beals narrates Chaiken, the actors, employees in production, and the viewers, as merely different points of contact in an assemblage formation that moves—a lesbian intimate that belongs to the whole field of cultural production. *A Photographic Journal* wraps together different dimensions and angles of the production of lesbian intimacy, producing a condensing of the form.

Part photograph album, part scrapbook, *A Photographic Journal* composes a behind-the-scenes effect. Beals' images partake in this effect by allowing the viewer to come into contact with a wider form of expression. The behind-the-scenes effect is made out of the virtual components of the TV series; the sense of the series felt by viewers through the affective trace of its aesthetic content. Beals documents the passing of friendship off-screen into lesbian intimacy on-screen, and her images of off-screen affections resonate with the images in the show. The affective resonance invokes viewers' familiarity with the aesthetic expression of intimacy. The capacity to feel substantiates a connection between the images and to one another as members of an audience—actors tell us that they too watch the

show, members of *The L Word's* media milieu just like us.<sup>11</sup> The show tells the viewers' stories. The show is translucent; our viewing is already in it.

The book is a series of translucent images glossing over the politics of production, and, as a gift from Beals, disavows its necessary consumption. The more intimacy belongs to the audience, to the capacity of the viewer to feel, the less clearly intimacy can be seen as that by which capital transacts (see Dean 2008). The representational paradox here is that for this to work, the images must be authentic. There is no truth to feeling<sup>12</sup> beyond (behind-the-scenes of) the lesbian intimate. The modal lesbian viewer is mediated by the capital her feeling transacts and the virtual she sustains in the real—the connection to the promise of love, to the love story of friendship, as that which is *really* real, behind-the-scenes of love's translucent feelings. The conditions of 'gay friendship as a way of life' (Foucault 1997) are altered by the lesbian intimate. As homosexuality becomes nationalised and corporatized, gay friendship can neither be sought in, nor not sought in, images sustained by an underlying capitalism.

### **Flickering ephemera of feeling**

The task of discerning how images become lesbian through the 'carnal lines of connection' (Probyn 1996, 60) they inspire is complicated by the emergence of the mainstream lesbian image—the lesbian intimate. Heterosexual intimacy (expressed in images of marriage, monogamy, property, egalitarian but (a)symmetrical reciprocity) has drifted into lesbian relationships and identities, and this drift is concomitant with the passing of lesbian images into mainstream aesthetics. As a consequence of the proliferation of lesbian media (lesbian images in mainstream media, and the movement of lesbian images between different media milieux), lesbian intimacy no longer belongs to the subject of lesbian desire.<sup>13</sup>

This essay draws on Deleuze's work on Spinoza as a way to resist constructing the lesbian subject as the referent for the real in the audiencing (Fiske 1992) of lesbian media. This approach draws attention to the flickering of lesbian images within divergent social processes. The lesbian subject is not located in, as if separable from, her media environment. Rather, she is modified as lesbian (whether or not she was lesbian before) in the moment of her viewing that is always conjoined with the viewing of others. This is not an ontological claim but an analytical line of thinking that refuses the subsumption of media images to biographical narratives. A flickering of images directly affects bodies and expresses historically formed ideas that encompass more than discrete viewing practices. *The L Word's* media ecology touches those who do not watch as well as those who do; those who approve of the show or enjoy its visual pleasures, as well as those who do not. In line with a Foucauldian view of ethics as 'an autonomous set of techniques and practices by which individuals continuously problematize their experience and conduct themselves as the subjects of an aesthetic existence' (Hunter 1992, 359), the aesthetic expression of intimacy is an ethical concern. As the figure of the lesbian transmutes into a form of expression within nationalised cultures of intimacy, her political possibility is modified. Scholarly understanding of the ethical techniques and practices through which audiences

respond to their feeling might consider how convergent media practices express, and are changed by their expression of, the lesbian intimate.

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## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> This includes blogs and lesbian media sites such as Autostraddle ([www.autostraddle.com](http://www.autostraddle.com)) and After Ellen ([www.afterellen.com](http://www.afterellen.com)) as well as the use of social networking sites such as Facebook. More

broadly, lesbian publics include new celebrity and consumer exchanges between lesbian and mainstream media—mainstream celebrities with lesbian identities rapidly become celebrities of lesbian media. The example of Myers and Myles' responses to *Blue is the Warmest Color* typify convergence media. Myers (2013), a 'freelance film critic, based in Brooklyn, New York', publishes her review in the online magazine of art and politics, *Guernica*. Whereas Myles, who 'came to New York in 1974 to be a poet' ([www.eileenmyles.com/bio.php](http://www.eileenmyles.com/bio.php)), has her Tweets reposted on the Tumblr blog of Jami Attenberg, another writer living in Brooklyn. I read both views via links posted to Facebook.

<sup>2</sup> For further development of Deleuze's thinking in the context of images, among others see also Gregory Flaxman (2000) and Anne Sauvagnargues (2013).

<sup>3</sup> Through reading the fiction of Nicole Brossard (1991).

<sup>4</sup> For further discussion of Deleuze and queer theory see Chrysanthi Niggiani and Merl Storr (2009). For a development and critique of 'becoming' in particular see Claire Colebrook (2011).

<sup>5</sup> This is particularly distinct in print publications such as *Diva* and *G3* in the UK and *Girlfriends* and *Curve* in the US, whose aesthetic and endorsement of celebrity is largely indistinguishable from heterosexual women's magazines.

<sup>6</sup> Further, the logic of inclusion chimes with the extension of state power into ever more micro aspects of everyday life. Diversity of types (butch, working-class) still manifest the expansion and intensification of the categorisation process of sexual and emotional citizenship (Berlant 1998) without necessarily changing the status of heterosexuality as society-founding (Berlant and Warner 1998), and reproduces a representational understanding of sexual identities.

<sup>7</sup> There is a growing (perhaps defining) body of literature (rapidly evolving into the defining thematic of queer theory) on gay identities, capitalism and neoliberalism. For example see John D'Emilio (1983), Lisa Duggan (2003) and Peter Jackson (2009).

<sup>8</sup> As well as media online, see the book for fans by Showtime and Bolonik (2005).

<sup>9</sup> Also see Virginia Blum (2002). Blum cites HBO's *Sex and the City*, in which the central protagonist Carrie is advised by her 'elite white gay male friend ... that love and romance have fled the lives of the heterosexual couple and relocated in the gay community' (485).

<sup>10</sup> In his reading of expression in *A Thousand Plateaus* (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), Massumi (2002, xix) describes how 'aggregate formations' of 'expression-content articulations', such as delinquency (expression) and prison (content) 'drift'.

<sup>11</sup> Leisha Hailey recently discussed her own viewing of the show in an interview with *Diva* (Hailey 2014).

<sup>12</sup> I mean here to reformulate Foucault's (1976) critique of the truth of the self in sex (see again Berlant 1998).

<sup>13</sup> Whose intimacy was largely privatised by heteronormative and homophobic spaces of citizenship and consumption (see Bell and Valentine 1995).