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Imagining the future of lesbian community: The case of online lesbian communities and the issue of trans

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How lesbian communities and identities are currently envisioned and imagined affects the future constitution of these communities. The queer utopian project may not have succeeded in completely queering the mainstream or dissolving the need for separate identity groups based on sexual identity, but it has made the question of how those identity groups are constituted, and how they are negotiating and imagining their futures, more imperative. The legacy of the queer project can be seen in the coalitions of non-mainstream sexual identity groups. It can also be seen in challenges to the legacies of other utopian moments and discourses, such as lesbian separatism. Traces of lesbian separatism can be found in some contemporary lesbian events, communities, and forums. Challenges are made to lesbian communities by bisexuals, heterosexuals, and transgenders, which presents challenges for imagined lesbian futures, and poses the question of how diverse these communities will be, and how they will be constituted. In this article, I focus on the deliberations between pro- and anti-transgender activists and supporters in lesbian controlled online spaces, and the implications of these debates for the future of lesbian communities.

Method

This paper concentrates on the debates and fan fiction (fan fic) in four unofficial online lesbian fan communities based on the US television series *The L Word* (Showtime 2003–present). I named these groups Fan Groups A, B, C and D to preserve the anonymity of the posters to the groups which required membership to read the posts or the fan fic, Fan Groups C and D. The two groups which could be searched on the Internet without membership could be considered to be public, and can be named. Fan Group A was The L Word Fan Site, and Fan Group B was The L Word Online. The main focus of my research was the period 2003–2006, but I also conducted a keyword search over ‘trans’ and ‘Max’ in the forums that still existed in June 2009. Those that still existed in 2009, Fan Groups A, B and C, had their discussion forums and fan fic still available in groups, although many of the discussion threads had been moved or closed. Many of the online groups that formed around *The L Word* series have lasted for several years, and several have attracted tens of thousands of members. Some members were active in these groups for years, and some have made many thousands of postings in these forums. The various threads in each group have attracted large numbers of posts. Some of the fan fic groups attracted large numbers of fan fic as well as debate. The homepages of all the groups addressed the assumed readership as lesbian.

Fan Group A could be searched without joining, except for fan fic rated NC17 or R, which required membership to read. The site was owned by an out lesbian who identified

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as the 'publisher'. The site was run as a lesbian business, and was supported by advertising. I had permission from the owner of the site to study the group. I offered to keep the forum name anonymous, but this offer was not needed. The owner gave me permission to quote from the fan fic, but suggested I ask each fan fic author if they wanted their nickname to be used. I sought and was granted permission from each fan fic author that I quoted from to quote from their work. One of the fan fic authors had left the group and could not be traced, so I did not quote from this work. Anyone could join this group. Membership was required to post to the group. By the end of June 2006, Fan Group A claimed 45,464 members and 93,559 posts. By the end of June 2009, membership numbers were no longer posted on the site. The latest membership numbers given at this time was for March 2007, which claimed that a sample of numbers of unique visitors to the site that month was 110,032.

Fan Group B was owned by two lesbians who had met at a fan convention. The site was established in 2003 and was hosted on a large commercial portal that hosted many other global fan sites. Anyone could join this group. The forums could be searched without joining, but membership was required to post to this group. Fan Group B claimed 34,215 members at the end of June 2006. In March 2009, the site claimed 23,000 global visitors, but in June 2009, only 3000 visitors were counted.

Fan Group C was owned by a woman. In 2006, the forums could not be searched without joining. Only lesbians or bisexual women could join this group. The membership restrictions had changed by 2009, and anyone could join the group, but in 2006, members had to identify as lesbian or bisexual in order to join the group. The owner of this group gave me permission to study the group on condition of anonymity. Fan Group C claimed 25,809 members at the end of June 2006, and 306,270 posts. By June 2009, the forums on Fan Group C could be searched without joining, but membership was required to post to this forum. The privacy statement dated 14 August 2007 stated that anyone posting to a community section of this site had to be aware that their posts would be made public. Archived posts from before this time were also available to the public without a membership requirement, although many of the threads had been moved or closed by this time. Membership numbers were no longer advertised on the site in June 2009.

Fan Group D was a small group that concentrated on fan fiction. It was hosted by the commercial portal yahoo groups. Fan Group D claimed a few hundred members at the end of June 2006, and several hundred posts. The owner gave me permission to study the group, and each fan fic writer that I quote also gave me permission to quote from their work. Membership to Fan Group D was restricted to lesbians and bisexual women. Each application for membership needed to be approved by the owner or a moderator. Fan Group D is no longer in operation and cannot be found through an Internet search.

Lesbian deliberative democracy?

The nature of discussion in online forums, the anonymity, the long length of time possible to respond to posts, and semi-global reach of some forums allows a degree of interactivity and reflection that is more ongoing and diverse than many offline interactions in lesbian or queer groups. The potential for general new media groups to allow participatory democracy has been put forward by seminal theorists such as Howard Rheingold (1993, 2000) as well as Henry Weger and Mark Aakhus (2003). These scholars argue that Internet communities offer spaces for participation in debate and representations unmediated by traditional media owners. Fan fiction has also been linked to democracy (although not deliberative democracy) because of the potential for publication on the Internet of ordinary

people and ideas. According to Sheenagh Pugh (2005) and Henry Jenkins (1992) the publication of fan fic and fan desires has the potential to subvert the messages and ideologies of powerful media owners.

Deliberative democracy is defined by John Dryzek (2000, 1–2) as a process of deliberation which is not coerced, and includes '[A]rgument, rhetoric, humour, emotion, testimony or storytelling, and gossip'. Dryzek (75) argues that both deliberation within public spheres and contestations between competing public spheres, including public spheres that encompass non-mainstream 'difference', can lead to change. Seyla Benhabib (2002) proposes a model of deliberation through civic associations and civic life. This can be contrasted to the restricted, constitutionally focused polis of John Rawls' deliberative democracy (Charney 1998). Benhabib's model has drawbacks that include the difficulty of deliberating across communities. However, her suggestion of the potential for ordinary civic associations and communities to provide spaces for deliberation within those communities provides a key to the analysis of online lesbian groups in this paper. Benhabib's theory allows for communities to develop ethics, norms, and identities in their membership but it also allows for deliberation within these communities. The application of Benhabib's theory of deliberative democracy through civic associations to online lesbian communities is a new direction and application of deliberative democratic theory.

John Dryzek's (2000, 8) injunction that deliberation must not be 'coerced', and not a product of attempts to impose ideological conformity, is problematic in that activist rhetorics are necessarily not neutral and not a product of the assumed non-position of a 'rational' man. Dryzek (65) himself acknowledges that inequalities of power mean that what is considered to be neutral and rational is actually heavily invested with power and has led to what Iris Marion Young terms 'politics of difference'. Young uses the phrase 'communicative' democracy rather than deliberative democracy because rhetorics can be an important form of communication for people in oppressed groups (Dryzek 2000, 53). I would argue that the expression of activist rhetorics in an attempt to persuade others to the view of that activist group could be regarded either as genuine deliberation or, if expressed in a rigid, personally derogatory or inflexible way, as an attempt to impose ideological conformity and therefore not be genuinely democratic. However, the interactions themselves, in whatever form they are expressed, lead to questioning, discussion and potential changes in opinion of some forum members, viewers, and people with whom they engage in discussions.

The debates between people who espouse pro- and anti-transgender activist discourses within lesbian-focused online groups could be said to be a form of deliberation. Differences in numbers of activists from either standpoint, the purposes of the groups as spaces to celebrate lesbian-specific popular culture and communities, and the governance by moderators and owners all constrain the types of outcomes possible in the online debates. The debates and the flame wars over transgender issues and inclusions opened up previously assumed or hidden assumptions and attitudes in the forums regarding transgenders and lesbian identities and community.

The debates in *The L Word* forums themselves were usually lesbian centred or lesbian themed, often in response to issues and representations raised in *The L Word* series. *The L Word* series included many themes and characters that fans in Fan Group A described as 'jumping the shark', a fan term for the inclusion of representations and plots that directly transgress fan wishes and desires for a series. One of these transgressions in *The L Word* series was the transition of one of the first butch characters, Moira, into a man, Max, in the third season of the series. There had been a lot of calls in the fan groups for better representation of a diverse lesbian community to include butch lesbians. The decision of

this character to transition almost immediately polarized the forums in debates over f-t-m transgender and butch identities. Judith Halberstam claims that 'butch and FTM bodies are read against and through each other for better or for worse' (1998, 149). According to Halberstam, butch is understood to be a distinct style/attitude/way of life for some lesbians, while f-t-m could be undertaken by women of any sexual identity, and although some post-op f-t-ms claimed space in lesbian communities, many f-t-ms identified as heterosexual (150). Halberstam also claims that in the 'border wars' over butch and femmes, both groups often accuse the other of 'gender normativity' (143).

The debates in *The L Word* fan forums were, at times, manifested in flame wars, and in a minority of cases in supportive, even celebratory, rhetorics. I argue that these groups were examples of lesbian political communities that engaged in confrontations and debate that would be called deliberations, and that these deliberations are helping to shift normative discourses and beliefs in lesbian communities. This will have an effect on the future shape and constitution of lesbian communities and norms.

Shane Phelan (1995) envisioned a utopian lesbian community future where identities were contingent, and the communities were accepting of diversity. Stephen Whittle (2006, xiii) has gone further in expressing utopian claims for the diversity of contemporary queer communities and claims that transgender activists have won a place at the table in the 'highest levels of government'. The interaction between those who supported or espoused transgender activist rhetorics and those who opposed the presence of transgenders in lesbian communities in *The L Word* forum did not support Whittle's utopian hopes. The presence of transgenders and vocal transgender supporters in the online lesbian-focused communities, however, suggests that a democratizing of access through activist challenges, presence and deliberations is occurring in some lesbian communities.

The deliberations themselves signal a change in attitude of the unofficial but conventional lesbian policy of exclusion of transgender voices. Perhaps Whittle (2006) was not too optimistic in claiming that transgenders are winning a place at the table, although this fight is not without its drawbacks – many of the lesbians who objected to the acceptance of people of all sexual and gender identities into the lesbian-centred groups left the groups. This exit strategy of some lesbians may have been influenced by separatist ideals. This strategy involves leaving groups rather than engaging in debate with transgenders. This raises questions about where and how lesbians holding strong separatist views find and engage in separatist lesbian spaces.

Traditional lesbian feminist communities celebrated the femaleness of same-sex relationships, and called this strategic essentialism when challenged over the validity of bodily-based claims to gender traits (Butler 1997). The woman-born-woman policies of many lesbian events (such as Lesfest, and the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival) have been carried over into some online lesbian communities, but these policies are almost impossible to enforce in anonymous online interactions, unless posters choose to out themselves as transgender, and moderators or owners respond with exclusion of those posters' memberships or silencing of their voices. Informal governance of transgender identities could be carried out in lesbian forums without formal exclusions through flaming of pro-transgender or anti-transgender posters.

The deliberations in the fan discussion forums revealed a minority of vocal transgender supporters who contested the dominant reading positions of the groups and challenged anti-transgender norms. The deliberations in the forums from a geographically diverse number of lesbians, bisexuals, transgenders and others may do more than reflect the offline trends and changes in lesbian community discourses. The deliberations in

themselves may lead to attitudinal changes in those participating in the forums and, possibly, in those they interact with.

The discussions in lesbian-controlled public spaces differ from those of many non-lesbian-controlled and targeted public spaces, because there is no need to defend traditional lesbian cultural views, mores, ideals, discourses, or desires from mainstream homophobic attacks. The dominant rhetorics expressed or enforced in *The L Word* fan groups had traces of many decades of lesbian activisms and community mores. The dominance of this group, however, also meant that there were minority groups within these communities which were struggling for recognition, inclusion, and power within the lesbian communities of the forums. Lesbian communities have been notorious for attempting to enforce community norms, and for the sex wars over 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' lesbians (Whisman 1993).

In terms of numbers, posters to *The L Word* forums who espoused pro-transgender activist discourses can be seen as a minority within the larger lesbian community. Activists and their supporters from different social movements who engage with each other in online communities are moving beyond rhetorical activisms and protests such as demonstrations and sit-ins, and could be said to be engaging in a form of deliberative democracy. The deliberate policy in the large unofficial fan sites, Fan Groups A and B, of welcoming all to the lesbian-targeted forums may have opened up lesbian communities to debates from a greater diversity of identity groups than would be possible in many offline lesbian groups. Challenges to the 'authenticity' of lesbian participants still occurred in the online forums, but there were arguably fewer challenges to transgender participation in these groups than in offline separatist events such as Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (Gamson 1997). The debates over transgender issues and inclusion in *The L Word* forums could be considered to be part of Dryzek's (2000) deliberative democracy.

Citizens in the lesbian polis are not necessarily treated equally, and there are often opposing claims to rights, or understanding of sexual citizenship. Claims to sexual citizenship for transgenders focus on a range of complex and sometimes contradictory activist discourses and rhetorics (Broad 2002). Struggles for state-based sexual citizenship include full protection under the law, and the right to marry under the chosen gender. These rights claims exceed the sexual citizenship rights of some conventional lesbians, such as the right to marry, in many states of the United States and in some other countries such as Australia. Claims to state-based protections for transgenders have extended to challenges to exclusions from lesbian- and women-only community events. Although transgender identities are diverse and at times contentious within transgender communities, formal exclusions from lesbian or women-only events have mobilized transgenders and supporters into activisms and legal action to challenge those exclusions even though many transgenders do not identify as lesbian or as transgender (Broad 2002). Debates in these cases focus on the right of transgenders to be recognized and included in women-only and lesbian-only spaces. The resultant clash of discourses and activisms between community and social movement discourses, and the use of anti-discrimination legislation against lesbians, who are one of the categories designated for protection under that legislation, speaks to the complexity of sexual citizenship and rights based on identity groups. The potential repression of one sexual or gender-based identity group from another sexual or gender-based identity group is not addressed under either a pluralist state model or a rights/protection model of legislation.

One of the successes of transgender community formation and activism is the growing numbers of trans communities on the Internet. There are many transgender activist sites on the net, but many of these organizations operate in isolation from general queer websites.

Some activist queer or gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (glbt) sites include transgenders as an identity and some transgender goals as one of their activisms, but as Kate O’Riordan (2005) points out, the inclusion of transgenders in glbt sites and organizations is often tokenistic, and problematic for those trans who do not identify as queer. O’Riordan (2005, 187) studies online transgender organizations as part of a global transgender social movement, ‘global transactivism’. Stephen Whittle argues that the growth of transgender communities on the Internet has assisted in both promoting transgender rights and reinforcing or creating ‘politicized trans identities’ (2006, xii). Whittle, however, does not address the interaction between marginalized trans people and wider glbt or lesbian communities. The vocal pro-trans supporters, or those who express pro-trans activist rhetorics in *The L Word* fan sites, could be said to be part of the global transactivist movement. The numbers of vocal pro-trans supporters in *The L Word* groups are still too small to enforce a pro-trans position, but the debate that the pro- and anti-trans positions generate, particularly in response to the negatively portrayed trans man in the series, at least challenges the anti-trans position expressed by many of the lesbian fans, and may lead to changes within the norms, discourses and beliefs of those participating in these online communities.

Telling stories, lesbian style

The concept of lesbian communities as safe spaces for the narration of identities and experiences for lesbians has not yet extended to lesbians who also identify as trans. My research found that support and acceptance for trans identities and discourses are not common in *The L Word* online communities. Narration of identity itself is problematic in terms of narratives that are acceptable to communities and reinforce community mores. These can lead to totalizing discourses or expectations of identity narration that are constraining to individuals. Jonathon Alexander argues that the narration of trans identities on trans websites such as Leslie Feinberg’s homepage *Transgender Warriors* offers interesting additions to traditional notions of gender binaries, with trans people narrating a diverse range of ‘counternarratives, [and] alternative modes of identity construction’ (2005, 57).

The narratives in fan fic communities serve a number of purposes in terms of community formation and identity reinforcement. Scholarship on female fan fiction and communities often implies a female-specific communicative style (Baym 1998; Bury 2005; Clerc 1996, 42; Pugh 2005). The concept of a female-specific utterance or form of expression is reproduced by many second-wave feminists such as Mary Daly (1979/1987). I would not go so far as to argue that there are lesbian-specific communicative styles, but I would contend that lesbian communities would not always conform to Iris Marion Young’s (in Dryzek 2000) model of females relating without confrontation with greetings, storytelling and rhetoric. The study of a lesbian online group by Munt, Bassett, and O’Riordan (2002) suggests that there is a degree of argumentativeness in lesbian online groups, but they do not suggest that this argumentativeness is more extreme than heterosexual female groups.

Arguments about gender-specific styles of communication are also problematized by the implication that transgenders have a specific communicative style. Adi Kuntsman (2007) contends that the flaming and shaming in a queer online group was violent, playful, and signified both belonging to the queer community and a transgender identity. Flame wars initiated by a trans member were said to signify a particular trans rhetoric and way of relating using a parodic, trickster style signifying superiority (Kuntsman 2007).

The diversity of gender and sexual identities in trans communities would suggest that the concept of a transgender-specific way of relating using flame wars, parody, and lies might be too generalized. Given this, the individual trans studied by Kuntsman (2007) in that forum could be said to be specific to a subculture within trans, a drag queen culture, which sometimes employs parody, exaggeration, and playful (or otherwise) derogatory comments to establish the superiority of the individual queen and to signal belonging to that subculture (Gonzalez 2005). Many trans, of course, do not employ exaggeration or parody, and many pass or identify as a particular gender. The question of a trans-specific way of relating raises more questions than it answers, since only some trans identify as women, and many of those that do may not identify as queens. F-t-m trans sometimes identify as transmen, or as men. The trans and the lesbian both problematize the issue of a female-specific, non-confrontational way of relating.

On the other hand, Young's (in Dryzek 2000) contention that women utilize storytelling as a way of deliberating and persuading is supported to a degree in *The L Word* fan groups, because there are a large number of stories and narratives of personal experience in debates. So I would argue that there is a combination of styles of deliberation in *The L Word* groups. One is deliberation through argument and confrontation. At times, this confrontation represses particular identities, narrations and stories through the enactment of disciplinary formations. The second is deliberation through storytelling, narration, and support of certain identities and stories.

The findings

Debates regarding transgender issues began on all *The L Word* forums in 2006 when the butch character Moira was represented as transiting into a man. Opinion regarding the transition was divided in the forums. The debate reflected very contemporary debates within wider lesbian communities over the inclusion of f-t-ms in the lesbian identity category. Many f-t-ms had been living as out lesbians for many years before their transitions, and some claimed either a lesbian identity or a space in lesbian communities as a man. In this way the claims to inclusion in lesbian communities by some transmen are reinforced by the pre-existing ties of some f-t-ms to lesbian communities (Nataf 2006, 441), although the identities of trans people are very diverse, and many do not identify as lesbian or queer, or want to be recognized as trans or included in lesbian communities. Some posters related their experiences of transgender people, their lovers, and their friends.

Others expressed explicit or implicit disapproval of transgenders in general or the character in particular. Many of the most explicitly anti-trans statements were prefaced by claims such as 'I'm not trans bashing, but I hate Max/Moira or whatever'. The use of the word 'trans' rather than transgender or many other variations can be attributed to transgender activism:

The word 'trans,' referring to a trans woman or a trans man (of whatever subtype of trans identity) is a very recent take on the umbrella term 'transgender.' Although there had been some previous use in the 1990s (e.g. in the creation of the online group Trans-Academics), 'trans' as a stand alone term did not come into formal usage until it was coined in a parliamentary discussion group in 1998, with the deliberate intention of being as inclusive as possible when negotiating equality legislation. (Whittle 2006, xi)

The use of the term *trans* by a poster who expressed hatred of a transgender character speaks to the partial success of the transgender rights movement in disseminating non-discriminatory language – although in this case the success was ironic, given that the term was being used by someone who was anti-trans.

Fan Group B

Fan Group B claimed to be a global fan site based on *The L Word*. Members could self-identify which country they lived in. There were posts from people from many countries, including China, even though China formally censored and restricted access to lesbian-related sites on the Internet (Farrell 2008).

The responses to Max and trans issues in general in this group did not seem to be divided along country-of-residence lines, although many of the posts were in languages other than English so there may have been variations outside the scope of this paper. In general, the responses to Max were very much divided along pro- and anti-transgender lines in this fan group. A minority of fans formed a small interpretive community that supported and celebrated the trans character. Several posters to Fan Group B suggested that Max had matured in the last few episodes of Season 3, and that they were looking forward to seeing him in Season 4. Several also posted that they felt sorry for him because his girlfriend Jenny was treating him so badly. Many posters on Fan Group B participated in naming the Jenny/Moira shipper (relationship) as JoMo, or variations on the above, and had been enthusiastic about the character Moira. These posters did not appear to be persuaded by the negative posts concerning Max or his negative portrayal in the series as a violent outsider. These posters were fans of Max and very supportive of trans identities in general who called for the forum members to stop expressing anti-trans sentiment. In debates such as these, consciousness-raising tools were often employed in an attempt to educate community members into using concepts and discourses of activists, in this case a small number of pro-trans activists. There was far less debate or vitriol expressed against trans in Fan Group B than there was in Fan Groups A and C.

The majority of posts on Fan Group B concerning the character Max were, however, negative, with many posters wishing that he would leave the series. There was a small amount of debate on Fan Group B over the linking of butch lesbians and f-t-m trans. Some of the posters saw the potential of the character Moira to satisfy some lesbian community calls for more butch representation, while others claimed that an f-t-m could not be considered to be a butch lesbian, since the person actually becomes a man and probably will not identify as butch, and even possibly would no longer identify as lesbian or queer.

Fan Group A

There was more explicit deliberation between pro- and anti-transgender activists in Fan Group A. A pro-transgender poster in Fan Group A pointed out in the thread titled 'Don't hate me but I feel bad for Max' that the difficulty posters appeared to have with pronouns for Max was in fact hateful to transgenders:

I get what you are saying, but I disagree to some extent. I was talking more about the language used in reference to the character. I have seen a lot of she/he, s/he, it, 'boyra,' 'whatever max is' and more language directed at the character based on his gender, perceived or otherwise. It is rampant. This is what I was discussing when I wrote what I wrote I read a lot of hate but never any real back up evidence as to why.

Posters supportive of transgender people in general and Max in particular were a small but vocal minority in all the fan groups. A poster to the thread titled 'transphobic' in Fan Group A suggested:

Hey I just thought I should bring it up. I notice lots of folks in the different forums calling Max a 'freak' or an 'it.' This is so disrespectful of Trans people. It frustrates me when people in the queer community treat Trans people poorly. We are all in this struggle for equality together, and some of the things I have seen on this board sound just like every other bigot out there.

So you don't like the character of Max because he is being a jerk or you don't like the actor because her voice sounds like Tweety Bird, fine. But don't be disrespectful of an entire group of very brave and extremely oppressed people. (*sic*)

One poster from France who claimed never to have met any 'transsexuals' before was prompted by the trans representation in the series, along with the discussions of trans issues in the forums, to discuss the issue with a lawyer,

I had a very interesting conversation with a lawyer yesterday. I don't know about the rest of Europe or rather the world, but it turns out that in France, transsexualism is considered a mental illness.

Follows a very long process of 2 years, during which you have to go through various tests (mostly psychological) to prove that you're 'crazy/sick' enough to be granted the right to go through an operation, to start 'transitioning'. You only get the right to do that if the result of the tests and the doctors deem you 'really sick'.

Once the operation and transition period is over, you can ask for your new identity. The European Court for Human rights ruled against the state of France because it had refused to change the 'Etat civil' (identity) of a guy who had become a woman. So now, in the EU, once the operation is over, the state HAS to grant you your new identity.

The thing is, there are still a lot of problems, for example when the 'once gay now turned straight couple' divorces because the partner can't deal with the sex change of his partner, or also for transsexuals to marry. (*sic*) ('When a woman is a man')

The poster was new to the issues and to the language, and it could be understandable that the poster used such terms as 'transexual', or she/he, because she had not been exposed to the very specific vernacular demanded by trans activists. This post could be seen as an example of the deliberation in the fan forums leading to changes in attitude in forum members.

The imposition of particular terms, the insistence that people unfamiliar with a culture use the jargon of that culture, is one of the features of activist rhetorics and actions. These kinds of criticisms, that people unfamiliar with the jargon, rhetorics and ideologies of particular groups are 'violent' when they do not employ those terms, could be considered to be an attempt to impose what Dryzek (2000) would call ideological conformity.

However, the use of a female pronoun to describe a trans character, especially in conjunction with derogatory terms, was read as bigotry by some trans members of the forum. In this group, there may have been a difference in both terminology and attitudes that was influenced by the different countries that the posters lived in. For instance, a poster from the United Kingdom identified as 'transsexual' rather than 'transgender'. One poster to the thread 'Why do Lesbians Disrespect Transmen?' said:

From reading over the forum messages regarding character Max, the majority of you seem to disrespect his identity and think the L word should only include lesbians. I've read that many still call Max a she/he thing and basically regard him as a woman 'trying to be male' Did any of you stop and think he was a man trying to be a lesbian?

I'm a 20-year-old transsexual male living in the UK and have been on hormones 10 months. Before I transitioned people pretty much saw me as a butch skinny lesbian looking thing and I would get quite a lot of female attention. I was active in the lesbian community and enjoyed the strong female bonding women can have, except I just wasn't female. My body gave me a free pass to join in your exclusive club and it was fun for a while, except I couldn't be a lesbian even if I had the right equipment.

In the end you just feel like one big liar. I've never been one for denying the truth, even if the truth is pretty scary, I had to transition because I felt uncomfortable in almost every single way a person can feel uncomfortable, i.e. physically, emotionally and mentally, being forced to be female was making my mental state worse. Knowing that I would be stuck forever in this dumb *** female body, which I couldn't even use properly. (*sic*)

Posters expressing a call for lesbian communities to be tied exclusively to female bodies did not always do so in reference to the character Max. A poster to the thread titled 'When a woman is a man: transgender prejudice among lesbians' claimed that the issue was political:

This is a very complex issue with multiple factors, but [...] at least one very important part of this is political. When one 'passes' from the ranks of the oppressed to that of the oppressor, there is much anger and betrayal felt by both sides. One need only look to the history of the South when many of the free people of color crossed the color line. (*sic*)

This poster invoked a sexual identity/race analogy in reference to the transition of lesbians into transgenders. Besides the problematic erasure of lesbians of colour in this analogy, there is also an erasure of the differences in forms of oppression experienced by people as a result of sexual identity as compared to that of race. However, the deeply felt accusation of betrayal by transitioning lesbians is not uncommon in the forums. Another poster to this thread claimed that another reason why f-t-ms were not accepted by lesbians is that f-t-ms 'were usually straight ... that's the essential reason that they need to transform their body'. Another poster responded to this comment with a narration of personal experience of dating a transgendered person:

I totally agree. It's the 'straight' part that gets me. Don't get me wrong, I love all people, and have dated an FTM person before, but the reasons why a lot of these people lose their partners after transition is because they are MALE now. They changed their outer appearance to match their inner feelings. Then they expect their LESBIAN partner to just stay with them, even though it is not how the partner feels inside. Seems very selfish to me to want the partner to stay. They force their partner to take on a straight identity, and I don't blame the women who leave because of that. I think many FTM's will have better luck with the ladies if they start dating AFTER transition. Then they don't have to wait to find out if their partner will leave, because the partner will have all the info coming into it, instead of getting blindsided.

Many of the posts regarding transgender issues in Fan Group A continued to reflect polarized positions in 2009, but the narration of personal experience of being trans, or knowing a trans person, appeared to be increasing.

Fan Group C

In 2006, when membership to Fan Group C was restricted to lesbians and bisexual-identified women, anti-transgender utterances were common. Sometimes these utterances could be said to be expressing a conventional lesbian feminist position. For example, many posters lamented the transitioning of a butch character into a transgender. Some posters from Fan Groups C questioned Max's right to be considered a lesbian after the transition. The biology of sex difference was more important to these posters than any ideas of queer supportiveness. The limit of lesbian community for these posters was female biology. Some of these posters said that they knew some transgenders who had been 'dumped' by their girlfriends after transition, because the girlfriends were lesbian and did not want to be sexual with a man. One poster claimed that all trans were unhappy with themselves and looking for something to make them happy, but that invariably the transition made people unhappier, partially because their girlfriends left them, and partially because they became a 'cheap imitation' of whatever sex that they took on. This criticism echoes lesbian feminist rhetoric of the 1970s. Stryker argues that this rhetoric claimed that

[T]ranssexuals ... failed to properly analyse the sources of gender oppression. Rather than working to overthrow equality by analysing the gender system itself, they internalized

outmoded masculine or feminine stereotypes and did harm to their bodies in order to appear as the men or women they considered themselves to be, but that others did not. (2006, 4)

The poster was not challenged for bigotry by other members of the forum. The assumption that the group members would not only not be transgenders themselves but also would agree with this poster's negative assessment of the trans state speaks to the assumptions of lesbian community membership and attitudes by some of the posters in Fan Group C.

Posters to this group in 2006 were derogatory about Max's state of mind, his chin hairs, and Jenny's obsession with him. Posters begged the producers to write about Bette and Tina, and to remove Max from the series. One poster who responded to this thread applauded Max, and suggested that Max could find a much better girlfriend than Jenny, but this suggestion was disparaged by other posters. Pro-transgender activists and academics would dispute the trans phobia that was expressed in this group. Halberstam claims that lesbians have often tried to erase or appropriate transgender lives as if they were 'lesbians who lack access to a liberating lesbian discourse' (1998, 149).

By 2009, Fan Group C was no longer restricting membership to lesbians and bisexual women. There were several posts calling for better trans representation in popular culture. One post also claimed that the fan site was for lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people, even though there was no listing for 'transgender' in the pull-down menu that requested that people applying for membership disclose their gender and sexual identity. There were no posts in Fan Group C dated 2009 that were disparaging to transgenders, but there were also very few posts discussing *The L Word* series at all by this time. It appears that once the site was opened to people of any sexual identity, anti-transgender utterances were not tolerated. It also appears, however, that fans no longer actively participated in this group.

Fan Group D

Fan Group D was no longer functioning in 2009. The fan group had been restricted to women who identified as lesbian or bisexual. In 2006, there were no fan fics posted to this group that included a transgendered character. The discussions in this group generally concerned the fan fic posted to the group rather than the representations in the series itself. There was no discussion of the character Max in this group.

The L Word fan fic

Sally Munt (1998, 54) argues that the idea of the 'Lesbian Imaginary' is a space of collective lesbian community fantasy. The many diverse lesbian communities in existence globally complicates this notion. However, *The L Word* fan groups could be seen as small semi-autonomous, semi-global lesbian-centred communities. The concept of a Lesbian Imaginary can be applied to the collective fantasies of these groups, even though these groups do not represent all the diverse lesbian communities around the globe. Munt (1998) suggests that the figure of the butch was posited as the ideal lesbian in the Lesbian Imaginary. The dominant fantasies in *The L Word* forums were about femme or soft butch lesbians, which suggests that there has been a shift in which figures are imagined as lesbians in these fan communities. The lack of fic which imagined a male body in an erotic way suggests that the female body continues to be exclusively fantasized in a collective way. There was very little fan fic that included a representation of a transgender character as part of a lesbian community. An exception to this was one piece of fan fic submitted to Fan Group A in 2008 that imagined a transitioning f-t-m body in an erotic encounter with a

lesbian, suggesting that there is a slippage at the edge of this female-centred Imaginary. One fan fic posited Max as a romantic hero in a sexual relationship with a lesbian, Jenny. The second chapter of this piece of fic, called L City, opens with the following depiction of transgender/lesbian sex:

It's one of those nights that are hot as hell the sweat causes the bed sheets to stick to every part of your body. We booked into a flee [*sic*] and cockroach ridden motel in a seedy part of town. I stare at this beautiful girl . . . She isn't just beautiful she is a goddess . . . She tells me she needs me and what I am packing in my pants bad. I won't wait one more second trying to work out how a transgender like me got so lucky. Max: I want you. She smells the way angels would smell . . . The most perfect woman . . . Shuster: I need you. Shuster, she tells me her name is Shuster . . . We get our clothes off in no time, the moon light reflects off of sweat on her milky white breasts as they bounce up and down as she rides my strap-on hard and fast. She makes me feel like a man . . . A real man. She is the first girl to make me feel this way.

In this narrative, Max falls asleep, and when he awakens, Shuster has been murdered:

Max: Fuck . . . Shuster . . . Who were you really and who wanted you dead? . . . Who were you besides an angel giving a 3 time loser the time of his life. She sure didn't do it for my looks, my half transformed woman's body to a man's . . . I hear sirens. (*sic*)

This piece of fan fic was the only fic posted to Fan Group A to represent a transgender character as sexy or in a sexualized way. As such, it carried a burden of transgendered representation that was perhaps unfair. The piece both posited Max as engaging in a sexual act with a lesbian, as sexy and masculine, and as a self-hating individual whose transitioning body was not attractive. The ambiguity of this representation speaks to the emerging, ambivalent interactions and engagements between f-t-m transgenders and lesbian communities. One other suggestion of a representation of a transgendered character in a sexual relationship with a lesbian was a post to Fan Group D that called for a fan fic writing competition based on the Max/Jenny shipper, but there did not appear to be any responses to this post.

Several fan fic pieces to Fan Group A included Max as a supportive, possible asexual or gay male minor character to the lesbian protagonists. The numbers of transgender fan fic pieces are still a very small minority compared to the number of pieces of fan fic that reiterated community norms of long-term female-born lesbian coupledness. The very few transgender characters or pieces of fan fic posted to the site suggested that, at least in these small examples of contemporary lesbian communities, the figure of the transgender has not become part of what Sally Munt (1998) would call the Lesbian Imaginary.

The overwhelmingly dominant representations in terms of numbers and popularity of fan fic in Fan Group A were of monogamous lesbian couples who formed families and had children. Fan fic could be rated out of five in this group, and there were votes for the most popular fan fic. These competitions were usually won by pieces of fic which represented the couple Bette and Tina, 'shippers' called 'Tibette'. In the television series, this couple break up over Bette's infidelity in a sexualized, violent encounter in the season finale of Season 1, but are reunited, possibly as a result of fan requests and petitions. Tina gets pregnant with sperm that was chosen with Bette, and bears a child. In Season 2, Tina flirts with a relationship with a man, Henry. Several fan fics posted to Fan Group A at this time killed Henry off, or had Henry arrested, such as a fic called *Weho Days – Part 4 – A Day at the Beach*, so that Bette and Tina could be reunited. Much of the fic on this site could be said to be part of a romance genre, minus the erotics. These were predominantly Bette and Tina romantic fics that spanned generations, including their daughter growing up. The other common form of fic posted to this fan site was shorter 'chapters' of erotic fic, predominantly Bette and Tina: Bette and Tina reunited

after a long absence, Bette and Tina reunited after a day's separation, Bette and Tina's meeting years before, Bette and Tina in the early parts of their relationship before their troubles, Bette and Tina together in the present without separating. The assertion of Tibette as a couple could be read as a norm of the group, against which all other couples and pairings were judged. Many of the fan forum discussions and much of the *The L Word* fan fiction celebrated and imagined lesbian community past, present, and future in what I would describe as conventional and even mainstream lesbian discourses of monogamous, romantic lesbian lives.

Conclusion

The debates in the lesbian-focused fan groups over pro- and anti-transgender rights and exclusions are unlikely to result in change in the utopian sense of equal citizens engaging in informed debate over issues that they have neutral positions on. By definition, activist dissemination of discourses could be said not to be neutral, and, in fact, to reveal strong investments by individuals in either identity category or position.

None of the proponents of either side of pro- or anti-trans would argue that lesbians or trans had achieved full citizenship rights under any country's laws and very few of them expressed a desire for legislative change. However, there were several petitions circulated on all the groups against specific pieces of legislation such as the homophobic Defence of the Marriage Act in the United States. In some groups, such as Fan Groups B and C, debates regarding governmental politics tended to be closed down by moderators as being off-topic, not relevant to all group members around the globe, and not the focus of their communities.

Pro- and anti-trans positions have polarized lesbian communities that identify as separatist. For example, there was a public debate over the Australian lesbian separatist event Lesfest 2004, with applications for exemptions from the Victorian Anti-Discrimination Act so that the lesbian separatist group could insist on all attendees identifying as lesbian, and being born as women. This exemption was successfully challenged by transgender activists. The Festival organizers chose not to hold the Festival rather than allow out transgenders to attend (Carr 2003). This conflict reveals a resistance to external governance or laws from lesbian communities. It also suggests that the strongly held views of both sides of the debate were not likely to result in a change of opinion for anyone involved in the dispute.

The debate in the online lesbian communities over transgenders reflects the contemporary debates occurring in both online and offline lesbian communities. The issues are flashpoints in terms of the types of lesbian community that popular cultural representations of lesbians promote, and the clash between narratives of lived experience of community members and explicitly political queer activist campaigns on the issue.

The L Word fan forums offered the chance of lesbian civic engagement and deliberation. The members in *The L Word* forums engaged in networking, fantasy, debate and arguments. Even minority voices in the lesbian assembly were heard. The deliberations in lesbian-targeted forums that allow wider debates with other gender and identity groups may help shape the future of lesbian communities. The future of lesbian communities has its roots in the deliberations and contestations of the present and the past. The persistence of traces of lesbian separatism in dominant lesbian discourses and norms, as well as the active presence of dissenters in the form of transgender activists and supporters, bisexuals and other identity groups, suggests that, at least in the immediate future, the constitution of lesbian communities will continue to be highly contested.

Notes on contributor

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