

## ***The L Word* fan fiction reimagining intimate partner violence**

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### **Abstract**

The fan fiction posted to the official and unofficial fan sites of *The L Word* series (Showtime 2004-2009) reimagined and repositioned the lesbian couple from the series. The couple, Bette and Tina, had been ambiguously represented as being involved in intimate partner violence in the series. The fans generally re-imagined this couple as non-violent. How intimate partner violence in lesbian relations was represented in the fan fiction in general has implications for how intimate partner violence is conceived and represented in a pluralist lesbian imaginary. The fan fiction forums, as spaces which provided collective representations of lesbians that were not directly under the control of powerful media owners, offered spaces for deliberation and sharing of fantasies of lesbian lives.

**Keywords:** Lesbian fan fiction, lesbian imaginary, intimate partner violence

### **Introduction**

In this paper, I explore how the fans re-imagined and repositioned a lesbian couple from *The L Word*. *The L Word* was a soap opera centred on lesbians and produced by the United States cable company Showtime from 2004-2009. The series was exported to most countries that did not formally censor lesbians from their screens by the global distribution company MGM television international. The couple, Bette and Tina, had been represented, albeit in an ambiguous way, as being involved in intimate partner violence in the season finale of Season One, Episode 14 (*Limb from Limb*). In this episode, Tina yelled at Bette for being unfaithful

seven years into their relationship. Tina slapped Bette. Bette restrained Tina and pinned her to the bed. Tina repeatedly yelled “no.” After the slap, Tina, from her position being pinned to the bed, grabbed Bette’s arm and moved her arm towards Tina’s genitals. The violence of this scene was hotly debated in fan and lesbian and feminist non fan forums. How fans imagined and re-imagined these characters and their relationship after this scene was aired may be representative of how lesbians in this semi-global fan community negotiate or understand lesbian relationships and intimate partner violence in lesbian relationships.

Online lesbian fan groups debate issues of concern to lesbians and could be said to be a space which allows deliberation (Walker 2008, 2009). I follow Iris Marion Young (1997) in arguing that the concept of deliberation should be extended from purely rational and non partisan debate to encompass rhetorics, greetings and storytelling. Storytelling can be seen as an extension of deliberative democracy, because stories are sometimes easier to comprehend across difference. I argue that storytelling can also be used to reinforce existing values in a community. For Young (1997), deliberation through storytelling can also lead to understandings of others cultures and values, or lead changes in the values of a culture. I argue that storytelling in the lesbian fan fiction communities that I studied highlight, explain, represent, and possibly change the values in those communities.

The values of a lesbian community are underpinned by a conception of shared cultural codes. I use Sally Munt’s concept of the ‘lesbian imaginary’ in order to analyse the manifestations of these cultural codes (1998 p.54). The concept of a lesbian imaginary is a useful extension of a discussion of deliberative democracy in lesbian communities. The term “lesbian imaginary” is not common. A related term, “gay imaginary”, is employed by Bobbi Benedicto (2008) to analyse the ways that gayness is imagined and constructed in the Phillipines. Benedicto draws on Arjun Appadurai’s (1996) definition of the imaginary in his analysis. Appadurai (1996, p.31) defines the “imaginary” thus:

The world we live in today is characterized by a new role for the imagination in social life. To grasp this new role, we need to bring together the old idea of images, especially mechanically produced images (in the Frankfurt School sense); the idea of the imagined community (in Anderson’s sense); and the French idea of the imaginary (*imaginaire*) as a constructed landscape of collective aspirations, which is no more and no less real than the collective representations of Emile Durkheim, now mediated through the complex prism of the media.

The lesbian imaginary can be conceived of in a far more limited and humble way than Appadurai’s (1996) imaginary. Appadurai (1996) conceives of an imaginary that

encompasses a global culture and collective representations at a global level. However, like the Frankfurt School's idea of mechanically produced images, the lesbian imaginary is produced by images and representations. And like Anderson's (1991) conception of the imagined community, a lesbian community relies heavily on the imagination and fantasy of a community. And like the French idea of the *imaginaire*, a lesbian imaginary does involve collective representations, although this study of a lesbian imaginary is one that is much smaller in scale, and could even be said to be part of a plurality of global lesbian communities. The concept of collective representations can be traced back to Emile Durkheim's collective representations, which referred to shared cultural understandings of symbols, images, rituals, myths and objects (Schmaus 2000). I argue that a lesbian imaginary involves a shared understanding of a lesbian culture, and of the images, myths, values, interactions, and representations of that culture. My use of the term lesbian imaginary relates to the shared lesbian cultural space specifically represented by the lesbian fan fiction communities of *The L Word*, where fantasies of lesbian community, relationships, sex, and identities are shared and debated.

The fan fiction (fan fic) published on the net in *The L Word* fan groups reveals aspects of the lesbian imaginary and desires that are often celebratory representations of lesbian communities and practices. The fan fic, as a representation of the imagination and desires of the predominantly lesbian targeted groups, could be seen to be part of a collective imaginary that may not be representative of all lesbians, but does represent a diverse, semi-global lesbian fan community and reflects some of the currents of thought and desire of this contemporary community. This imaginary is not representative of all lesbian thought globally, and could be considered to be part of a pluralist lesbian imaginary.

## **Method**

I concentrated on three fan fic groups, made up of two unofficial groups, *The L Word Fan Site* and *The\_L-Word\_Fan\_Fiction\_Group*, and an official fan fic group, *The Fanisode*. I searched for specific terms – the names of couples “Tina” and “Bette”, and their shipper name [1], “TiBette”, and the character names “Shane” and “Carmel”, and their shipper name “Sharm,” and variations of couple names, and the character names “Jenny” and “Alice.” I also searched for words associated with the theme violence [2] such “rape,” “assault”, “slap” and “violence.”

*The L Word Fan Site* included a section for fan fic. The fan fic section was expanded in April 2006 to include specific fan fic forum discussions. *The L Word Fan Site's* fan fic section

attracted 15,146 submissions of fan fic by the ninth of May 2006, with seven hundred and sixty fourfan fic authors. Each piece of fan fic submitted could be 'rated' out of five by readers, unless the author had specifically requested that it not be rated, in which case it would show up as nought out of five. There was also a space at the end of every fic for comments and responses to be posted. I concentrated on fan fic in The L Word Fan Site from the inception of the fan group until 2009. I had permission from the owner and publisher of this group to study this group, and sought and was granted permission to quote from the fic of the fan fic writers from The L Word Fan Site.

I also concentrated on all the fan fic produced for The\_L\_Word\_Fan\_Fiction\_Group until mid 2006. This fan group has since closed. I had permission from the owner of this group to study the group, and sought permission from many, but not all, of the fan fic writers before the group closed. The\_L\_Word\_Fan\_Fiction\_Group group claimed 1,371 members at the twelfth of May, 2006, with 1,976 posts. The site was hosted by a large portal, and was free to join. Advertising on the site was restricted to that provided by the internet portal. Both fan fic and discussions were posted to the group. The site could not be searched without joining, and membership was controlled by a moderator or the owner/moderator, who reviewed each application to join individually. The\_L\_Word\_Fan\_Fiction\_Group did not offer any formal competitions. A few informal competitions were suggested but rarely enacted. There was no system for rating the fic. The lack of competitive features on this site was one of the attractions for many of its members, along with the smaller numbers and sense of a supportive community. The responses to the fan fic differed dramatically between the groups. The\_L\_Word\_Fan\_Fiction\_Group were almost universally kind to the fan fic writers in their responses to each piece of fic. A few fic writers in The\_L\_Word\_Fan\_Fiction\_Group requested 'betas' (proof-readers/editors who were more experienced in fan fic and in the particular 'canon' for that show and that group), but beta-ing was only suggested a few times to new fic writers in The\_L\_Word\_Fan\_Fiction\_Group, even when there were many grammatical errors in the fic. These findings contrast with Bertha Chin's (2005) findings on fic writers and readers in The X Files groups, who were intolerant of newbies' attempts at fan fic and intolerant of anything they regarded as deviating from the 'canon.'

The official The L Word fan fic site (The Fanisode site) was not established until 2006, two years after the creation of the series. The official fan fiction site was published, and there was no implication that posts or submissions to this site might be viewed as private by the posters or fan fic writers. As a result, I did not request permission to study the site or the fan fic posted to this site. The Fanisode site was promoted on the official Showtime website, but was hosted on a separate website owned by Fanlib.com. In 2006, The Fanlib site could be accessed from countries outside the United States (unlike the Showtime site prior to 2007). Showtime had been running an official site that did not allow any fan productions such as fan fic up to that

point. Showtime announced a partnership with the company Fanlib.com in 2006. Fanlib.com promoted itself to potential advertisers as offering a way of turning previously chaotically organized fan fic sites into a single, controllable one that could count the number of participants and profile the members.

Many other unofficial fan sites, and a few official fan sites had run fan fic competitions, but before the advent of The Fanisode competition, none had previously publicly offered the possibility of the winning scene being produced, or offered the executive producer as a writing mentor. Showtime promoted the competition as a way for fans to collectively write scenes for The Fanisode which would 'at the least' be published on the web, or, if they were good enough, be produced as an episode. The first Fanisode was eventually published as an e-zine, but not produced as an episode. A writer from the The L Word staff moderated The Fanisode site, and provided four potential storylines for The Fanisode. Fans who had joined Fanlib.com would then vote on their favourite storyline out of the four choices. Approximately 3,000 fans voted for a Fanisode submission that explained what happened between the second and the third season on The L Word. The numbers of participants in The Fanisode increased dramatically over the following two months, and claimed 20,000 members in April 2006.

Numerically, the membership of The Fanisode site was comparable to the membership of the large unofficial The L Word sites such as The L Word Fan Site. However, many more people voted in The Fanisode than in any polls or competitions run on unofficial sites, perhaps because the stakes were so much higher for The Fanisode competition. The winners of each of the seven rounds of The Fanisode had their pictures published in newspapers near their homes; they also had their photos and a short biography posted on The Fanisode site. The Fanisode promised 'fame' to the winners of the rounds, but the fame was limited by either their immediate geographic vicinity (people who read the local paper where news of The Fanisode win was promoted) or limited to the people who read the online fic or promotions. The Fanisode site claimed that this was the first time that fans had been invited to participate in writing for a television show, but in fact several fan fic writers had been recruited to write for television series in the United Kingdom (Brooker 2003).

## Findings

### *The L Word Fan Site*

There were many supporters of the Bette and Tina (Tibette) shipper in The L Word Fan Site. In this group, representing the TiBette relationship as troubled or violent was risky for the fan fic writers, because these kinds of representations tended to be reacted to badly by the fans. At least one fic posted to The L Word Fan Site, however, represented the relationship between Bette and Tina as troubled, and the incident from the Season One Finale as about Bette being “sick” and exerting “control” over Tina. A poster called Portia Only posted fan fic to The L Word Fan Site that named the Season One finale encounter between Bette and Tina as rape. The following is an excerpt from ‘Why, Bette? Part 1,’ posted to The L Word Fan Site. It recounts a day-after the Season One Finale encounter. It is written from Bette’s point of view, recounting a conversation between Bette and Candace. Candace had been the other woman in the Bette and Tina triangle:

[..] I forgot myself, then I lost myself. I fucked you because I wanted to. I let you fuck me because I knew I'd enjoy it. I forced myself on Tina that night to prove to both of us that I still wanted her. The pen fell from Candace's hand as she stared at Bette. You raped her?

Bette nodded at first, then shook her head. We had very confusing sex that night. It was all anger and emotion. It was the best sex I've ever had and the worst. She wanted me just as badly, but when she came, she was sobbing. She was on top of me, my fingers were buried inside of her and I wanted to just climb inside her and stay there forever. I've never felt more connected. I wanted to hold on to her forever, let her know that it was forever. And just as she was going over, our eyes met and I saw all the hurt and how she was trying to make it go away and I saw that she didn't feel protected and safe with me anymore. All of it showed in her eyes.

Oh, Bette. She rolled off of me, changed clothes, and left. That was it. Seven years and that's how it ended. It doesn't have to be the end. I don't want it to be.

Then keep going. What else? I don't know. That's what I did. I lied to her, I cheated on her, and then I tried to make it up to her in a really sick way.

However, Portia Only represents Bette as longing for Tina, and later reunites the couple. This piece of fic was viewed over 10,000 times by October 2009.

Another piece of fic that named Tina as violent to Bette in the Season One Finale was called 'The Gathering 01.40—How Do We Deal?' by Janet Marie. This fic was viewed 1714 times by October 2009. This is told from Tina's point of view. Tina is represented as having forgotten the violent encounter with Bette until this moment:

Tina was leisurely packing her stuff as Bette made a late breakfast. She heard Bette curse and Tina yelled out. "Are you ok babe?" Another term of endearment. She was really falling for Bette; she wondered how it must have been with her before her rapid fall into memory loss alley. She cursed herself sometimes when she pulled away from her without cause, but she was easing into the fact that she was really attracted to this person.

Not woman, Marty had cautioned her, person. This person who was in the kitchen yelling back to her that she was fine was sexy as hell. Perfect skin, lovely kissable lips, she'd kissed her but more than that had freaked Tina out to no ends. A sigh from Tina at the thought.

"I'll be out in a minute." Tina told Bette in a loud voice. She sat on the edge of the bed and thought for a long moment. How could something that they'd all told her was perfect; sometimes feel so wrong at times. She'd asked why they didn't live together. Bette had cheated a long explanation and she'd been told she had forgiven her. This genuinely stunned her she never thought she'd forgive that sort of indiscretion. Tina got up and rummaged through her closet and came up with a black pair of leather pants she opened the suit case and threw it in there along with a dark blue cut off sleeveless affair that she didn't remember buying.

"Oh god!" Tina said, and Sam coaxed her to calm down. Strapping the cuff around Tina's right arm. "I remember seeing them together..." Sam knew that memories often came back during dreams, she was remembering Bette's affair. Sam stopped and just listened to Tina. "And then the sex.. I made her have sex with me, I bit her... Oh god, I was insane..." Tina said, and Sam hushed her, they were, after all on a commercial flight.

Although Tina is represented in this fic as remembering coercing Bette, there is no suggestion that Tina should face legal or psychological consequences for her actions. The memory of 'forcing' Bette is used as a narrative device to explain Tina's discomfort with her relationship. It is used as a prelude to pairing Tina with another character.

The fic by this author was rated two out of five by other members of the fan group. Another section of the same piece of fic, the Gathering 01.12 Consequences that paired Tina and Bette was rated five out of five. Fans in this fan group expressed a reading position that praised all fic that paired Bette and Tina, and discouraged or criticized all fic that did not pair

the two, or that represented Bette or Tina as romantically involved with other characters.

The numbers of fan fic that represented Bette or Tina as violent were very low. The majority of fic regarding Bette and Tina on The L Word Fan Site kept the couple together. Much of the fic on this site could be categorized as romantic, following many of the conventions of the heterosexual romance genre, including happily-ever-after narrative resolutions, child-bearing and raising, and many soft porn passages. These were predominantly Bette-and-Tina romantic fics that sometimes spanned generations, showing their daughter growing up. The other common form of fic on The L Word Fan Site were short chapters of erotic fic, predominantly featuring 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, unseparated. In The L Word Fan Site's fic, there were very fewer instances of Bette's "p.o.v" (point of view) questioning their relationship or Tina's p.o.v. questioning their relationship, or Bette or Tina coupled with someone else (such as Carmen, Helena, Alice, or Shane) than those kinds of fic in the *The\_L\_Word\_Fan\_Fiction\_Group*.

#### *The L Word Fan Fiction Group*

The *L\_Word\_Fan\_Fiction\_Group* appeared to contain the fewest supporters of Bette and Tina's relationship. Although fans appeared to be allowed to express a desire for a variety of shippers, only a few of the posters to this group expressed a belief that the Season One finale incident was violent. One fan fic presented Bette's point of view, and named the incident as rape. Other pieces of fan fic posted to this group named the encounter between Bette and Tina as violent. One, called 'Fallen,' by bookfaerie, narrates the day after the incident from Bette's point of view. Bette is remorseful, and pictures Tina "crying" as well as "coming" the previous night. Tina agrees to reunite with Bette if Bette seeks therapy over the infidelity. This fic reinforces the message of the series itself, that the intimate partner violence was not important.

This fic was not representative of the majority of fic posted regarding Bette and Tina, but it reflects a vocal minority of fan fic writers and posters who understood the interaction between Bette and Tina to have been violent. Several other fics posted to this group split Bette and Tina up after the contested violent incident in the series. One piece of fan fic by faithnangels62 represented Tina as falling into a domestically violent relationship with a Mary-Sue. A Mary-Sue is a fan term for a character introduced by the fan who is not present in the



series itself. This fic was called 'A Different Road Home: A Twist on Bette and Tina's breakup (chapter 3, Tina and Angela):

Angela listened from the foyer to Tina laughing and talking on the phone. Bitch, she thought to herself in her drunken stupor. She and her snobby friends just laughing and carrying on, it made her sick to think about how they all looked at her earlier at the Planet. "They think their better" she half mumbled to herself. Tina heard her, but didn't know what she said. "Babe, is that you"? she called. Angela appeared from around the corner. "Who are you talking to" Angela slurred out hatefully. Tina hesitated, then said into the phone "Um, listen Dana, Angela's home so I'm gonna go". "I'll call you later" she added. "Did you have fun"? Tina asked Angela cautiously. She could tell that Angela was extremely drunk. Angela smiled a sarcastic smile. "Oh yeah" she said. "I had fun". "I had lots of fun earlier at the Planet too with all your friends looking down on me-thinking their better than me". Tina looked confused. "They didn't" she started but was cut off by Angela's shouts. "Don't fucking tell me they didn't, I saw it. I saw it in their eyes, just like I see it in yours right now". Tina looked annoyed. "I'm going to bed" she said "This is just ridiculous". Tina turned to go to the bedroom. "Oh, fuck you, your not" Angela shouted as she grabbed Tina by the arm and spun her around to face her. "Let go of me" Tina said in a low voice. "Fuck you". Angela spat back. Tina tried to jerk her arm away, but Angela's grip was too tight. Suddenly, before Tina even realized what was happening, Angela brought her hand up and hit Tina hard across the face. She flew backwards toward the couch. Before Tina could even move, Angela was on top of her. "You snobby bitch, I know your type" Angela was screaming at the top of her lungs. She raised her fist and brought it down near Tina's eye. "Please stop it" Tina was begging through her tears. To Tina's amazement, Angela stopped. She stopped hitting and she stopped screaming. Angela collapsed in tears on top of Tina. "I'm so sorry, please, please forgive me." Angela begged. "I didn't mean to, please don't leave me" Angela continued to cry pitifully. Tina stared at her in disbelief. She was now sobbing uncontrollably. Tina numbly pushed her off, got up, and went to the bedroom without a word. Angela heard the bedroom door lock from the inside.

A definitively and extremely violent character, Chrystal, who was recognized as violent by the regular The L Word characters, is included in the fic. This character's violence serves as a metonym for the Bette's violence, replacing and masking the previous violence perpetrated by Bette. Bette, in contrast to Crystal's extreme violence, is represented as a mild-mannered saviour for Tina.

Another piece of fic called 'In the Center' by shakennotstirred represented Tina as still in relationship with Bette but unhappy:

She began driving home...home to Bette, home to the chaos of their relationship and home to her insecurities. The light turned red in front of her and as she waited for it to change she remembered what she used to do years ago after night yoga classes. When the light turned green she turned right instead of going straight onto the freeway. It was time for a drive; time to indulge in a favorite guilty pleasure. She drove to her old stomping grounds in Santa Monica and followed the Pacific Coast Highway as it wound around hugging the coastline. She drove for maybe an hour with no destination, just enjoying the journey. Driving relaxed her, especially driving at night.

An hour later she heard the distinct ring of her cell phone and she pulled over. Reaching across to the passenger seat where the phone was sitting, she picked it up and looked at the number. The call was from home. She sighed, pressed a key and said hello. Bette was worried...she was late... 'what do you mean an another hour'... Tina said goodbye and turned off the phone. Reluctantly she turned the car around and headed home. Bette said she'd wait up for her.

She roiled silently for having responsibilities to get back to, even a partner to get back to. Much as she loved Bette, and she did unconditionally, those easy days of her twenties when she could run around as she pleased were sounding better and better lately. Now it was sperm, mortgage, therapy, babies, and every once in a while, sex. [...]

The fan fic in *The\_L\_Word\_Fan\_Fiction\_Group* tended to be short, often erotic or romantic pieces that celebrated a variety of character pairings.

### *The Fanisode*

There was a different fan reading position expressed on the commercially-driven official fan fiction site, *The Fanisode* (2006). This site allowed a wide variety of reading positions, both pro- and anti-feminist, lesbian, queer, or stereotypical heterosexual male fantasies of lesbians. A minority of fan site posters to *The L Word Fan Site* and *The\_L\_Word\_Fan\_Fiction\_Group* had claimed that the relationship between Bette and Tina was an emotionally abusive one for Tina, and a violent one for one or both of the individuals. In contrast to this *The Fanisode*

allowed, even directed, fans to write of the relationship as a troubled one. However, fic submitted to The Fanisode that revealed deeper problems than communication between Bette and Tina was often criticised as not meeting the 'canon' by posters to The Fanisode. The scene mission for the interactions between Bette and Tina in The Fanisode included explaining why they had problems in the third season. This was not a popular choice for many fans, with many posts in reaction to the submitted scenes saying that this is not what they want for Bette and Tina, and asking why there could not be an ongoing lesbian relationship in the series. Many fan fic writers, however, obeyed the injunction to write the prelude to the separation. Many participants voted on this scene. The winner and top ten ranking scenes in the Bette and Tina focused round (round 7 of The Fanisode, 2006) strictly adhered to the scene mission, writing minor problems into Bette and Tina's interactions to do with Bette always speaking for Tina with their friends and family.

A few submissions to The Fanisode varied from the scene mission and either presented more severe problems for the couple than the winning scene, or presented the couple as problem-free and headed for a happy future together. In one of the scenes that revealed deep problems for the couple in The Fanisode, titled 'Slipping Away' by bresita, Bette was reported to Child Services as a danger to their child because of her anger management issues. This representation was an unpopular choice for fans. The scene ranked seventieth, with comments ranging from "ok," "loved the twist at the end," "keep writing," to "adoption piece not realistic [3]."

Another scene submitted to The Fanisode not only named Bette and Tina's relationship as abusive, it accused Bette of holding Tina "captive." The scene was titled 'Losing Latitude' by Sophia Serene. The scene ranked seventy-second, but received predominantly positive comments, with several "great"(s) and "awesome" (s) and only two negative, one "Bette's not that bad," and "I really [sic] liked the beginning but I don't know if I feel as if Tina is 'being held captive.' She and Bette Loved each other." Many internet interactions involve spelling and grammatical errors, but it appears that this poster was attempting to emphasise the "love" between the characters with her use of capitalization. The love between the couple was often explicitly stated in the forum discussions as a reason that there could not be violence in the relationship.

There was one scene submitted to the seventh round that represented Tina as increasingly violent to Bette. The vast majority of The Fanisode submissions did not address domestic violence as an issue for the couple, and made no reference to the violent breakup scene, although several made reference to Bette's infidelity. In the scene "The blame game" by femliona, Tina and Bette verbally abuse each other over infidelity. They then slap each other, Tina pushes Bette into the pool, and Tina holds Bette's head under water. This scene

ranked eighty-third in the round, and received several critical comments, such as “too violent,” “not realistic,” and “doesn’t follow scene mission.” Several of the unpopular The Fanisode scenes suggested the need for couple therapy for Bette and Tina.

## **Conclusion**

Overall in The L Word fan groups, intimate partner violence was not often represented. Several of the fan fic groups did suggest through fan fic that the couple Bette and Tina had issues of control. Many of the pieces of fan fic that valorised Bette and Tina’s relationship did so by erasing the contested scene altogether, through flashbacks to their first meeting, or through elision and flash forwards to a future encounter after a long separation, and possibly therapy, to address their individual issues. The pieces of fic that mentioned or highlighted the contested scene as violent, or portrayed the couple as in violent relationships in the future with each other, or other people, were overall very unpopular in most of the groups.

What can be concluded about the storytelling on the different The L Word fan sites? The largest fan fic group that I studied, The L Word Fan Site, encouraged narratives of lesbian domestic bliss through the generations that denied the possibility of same-sex violence. The representation of successful, stable, long-term lesbian representations was important for many fans who felt that both the series, and popular culture in general, ignored or marginalized their own experiences of relationships, lesbian identity, and lesbian politics or communities. The celebration of lesbian relationships and lesbian sexuality and erotics by this group was important to its members, and potentially important to those people who read the fic without joining the group. As a humble and small contributor to a pluralist lesbian imaginary, this fan fiction community did not necessarily offer a space for deliberation or representation that was completely free of power relationships or fan expectations. The group may have had a dominant reading position that was akin to the reading formations discussed by John Tulloch and Henry Jenkins (1995) or the “interpretive communities” discussed by Stanley Fish (1999). This reading position may have discouraged some representations of lesbians and encouraged others. It could be argued that all communities practice some form of repression of diverse or minority voices. The implications in this case for the lesbian imaginary is that collective representation may not always have been built or encouraged in an ideal deliberative forum. The building of the imaginary by ordinary lesbian fans rather solely in the hands of powerful media owners, however, suggests that even though not ideal, the space

offered for the publication of collective representations of lesbian lives is more democratic in terms of access than that offered by traditional media forms.

The fan fic appeared to be used as a vehicle by a very few fans to raise awareness about the possibility of intimate partner violence in lesbian relationships. The rejection or criticism of these pieces of fan fic by the fans who voted or rated the fic poorly suggests that these attempts were not welcome in the groups. Many of the fans in the unofficial fan groups reasserted their preference for the Bette and Tina shipper. Those that represented Bette and Tina's relationship as having been violent when breaking up over infidelity generally repaired the characters after a break up. The lack of any suggestion that there should be repercussions to this violence is a concern for those holding a position that advocates for the recognition and resolution of intimate partner violence in the lesbian community. The section of the lesbian imaginary represented by the lesbian fan fiction groups appears to be resistant to the concept of intimate partner violence. There were however many positive aspects of the fic for the lesbian imaginary, in shared desires, and a shared understanding and wish for collective representations of erotic, romantic and successful lesbian couples.

Fan fiction posted to the smaller *The\_L\_Word\_Fan\_Fiction\_Group* tended represent a more diverse range of lesbian couples than the larger *The L Word Fan Site*. Comments on the fic in this group also tended to be very kind. There appeared to be a greater range of fiction that included some representations of intimate partner violence in this group. However, many fan fic writers posted their fic in both *The L Word Fan Site* and *The\_L\_Word\_Fan\_Fiction\_Group*, so there may have been more interaction between fans on the different sites, and fewer differences between the sites, than first appeared. The movement of fans between the groups also suggests that the fan groups were more interwoven than first appeared. The implications of the interwoven groups for the lesbian imaginary suggest that fans posting to *The L Word* fan sites could be considered to be a small example of a larger, pluralist lesbian imaginary.

The fic posted to the official fan fic site *The Fanisode* was far more constrained by the plot that was proscribed by *The L Word* producers. The *Fanisode* participants also appeared to be far more diverse in terms of gender and sexual identity than those posting to the unofficial fan fiction groups. The winning scenes posted to this group were published as an e-zine, and were promoted in the press in the United States. There appeared to be far more acts of violence such as slaps and drowning attempts in *The Fanisode* submissions than in the unofficial fan sites. The greater diversity of gender and sexual identities of the authors in this site suggests that the representations of lesbian lives may not be regarded as "authentic" or "realistic" to lesbian members of the group than much of the fic posted to the unofficial sites. The comments on many of the *Fanisode* submissions bore this out, with many comments that used phrases such as "not realistic." However, whether or not the fic was regarded as

authored by lesbians, the fic could be considered to contribute to a collective representation of lesbians, and thus to the lesbian imaginary.

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## Notes

[1] A shipper is a piece of fan fic that supports a particular relationship pairing.

[2] “Violence” in the media is a contested and slippery term. This paper concentrates on fans interpretations of perceived and contested violence. The paper does not argue that the representation in The L Word series was definitively violent, but that the ambiguity of the scene sparked vigorous fan debate.

[3] Fan judgments on the authenticity and realism of particular representations of lesbian lives can be understood in a framework of fan (unreflexive) claims to authority on lesbian representations and lesbian lives. As Ien Ang points out, the realism of any piece of media representation is highly context dependant and subjective.

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