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Josie Rush

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JUST BETWEEN US GIRLS: DISCURSIVE SPACES FROM AMERICA'S FIRST  
GAY MAGAZINE TO THE WORLD'S LAST WEBSITE FOR QUEER WOMEN,  
1947-2019

A Dissertation

Submitted to McAnulty College of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Josie Rush

August 2019

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Josie Rush

2019

JUST BETWEEN US GIRLS: DISCURSIVE SPACES FROM AMERICA'S FIRST  
GAY MAGAZINE TO THE WORLD'S LAST WEBSITE FOR QUEER WOMEN,  
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By

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Approved June 28, 2019

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## ABSTRACT

JUST BETWEEN US GIRLS: DISCURSIVE SPACES FROM AMERICA'S FIRST  
GAY MAGAZINE TO THE WORLD'S LAST WEBSITE FOR QUEER WOMEN,  
1947-2019

By

Josie Rush

August 2019

Dissertation supervised by Dr. James P. Purdy

*Just Between Us Girls* charts the diffusion of queer theory outside of the academy, using convergence theory to examine communication technologies like periodicals and the Web to argue for a conception of queer theory that includes discourse between queer women about queerness. In making this argument, this project creates a lineage of discursive spaces by, for, and about queer women, putting content from these spaces in conversation with canonical queer theorists like Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, and Jack Halberstam. Analyzing and contextualizing discursive spaces like *Vice Versa* (1947-1948), *The Ladder* (1956-1972), *The Furies* (1972-1973), *AfterEllen*, and *Autostraddle* demonstrates not only that queer women have depended on communication technologies for identity and community formation long before the Web but also that queer women

have historically invested in and theorized concepts significant to queer theory, like coming out, the relationship between gender and sexuality, and heteronormativity.

## DEDICATION

For those who did and those who would have. To James and Doris Matthews.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Every idea, every project has a community behind it, and *Just Between Us Girls* is no exception. This project would not have been possible without the support and guidance of my director, Dr. James P. Purdy, whose careful scholarship and intellectual openness have demonstrated the type of scholar and teacher I'd like to be. Thank you as well to Dr. Judy Suh and Dr. Kara Keeling for their time and feedback on this project. My gratitude also goes to the Duquesne English Department for the 2018-2019 Dissertation Fellowship and for the Department's financial support during my visit to the UCLA archives; the opportunity to focus on my scholarship has been invaluable. I am grateful to my students for having the courage to learn and for continuing to remind me of the classroom's potential. And, most of all, to my brilliant wife, Rebekah Lynn, whose insights, joy, and passion have enriched my project and my life beyond words.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract.....	v
Dedication.....	vii
Acknowledgement.....	viii
Introduction.....	x
Chapter 1.....	1
Chapter 2.....	55
Chapter 3.....	97
Chapter 4.....	136
Epilogue.....	169
Works Cited.....	175

Introduction: “Here to Stay”: The Convergence of Lesbian Spaces, Queer Theory,  
and Communication Technologies

*Let me begin by saying that I came to theory because I was hurting – the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend – to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing.*

bell hooks, “Theory as Liberatory Practice”

*I think many adults (and I am among them) are trying, in our work, to keep faith with vividly remembered promises made to ourselves in childhood: promises to make invisible possibilities and desires visible; to make the tacit things explicit; to smuggle queer representation in where it must be smuggled and with the relative freedom of adulthood, to challenge queer-eradicating impulses frontally where they are to be so challenged.*

Eve Sedgwick, “Queer and Now”

Queer theory entered the academic scene preening with promise and shining with salaciousness. When Teresa de Lauretis coined the term as the title of a conference at the University of California, Santa Cruz in 1990, “queer” had just barely scrapped free of its discriminatory contexts and the combination of “queer” and “theory” carried with it an injunction to *queer* theory, that is, to challenge ideas about what constituted theory (Halperin 340). Part of the appeal of the name doubtlessly derives from its oxymoronic nature, the odd-couple pairing of the anti-assimilatory and radicalizing queer with

disciplinarity and systemic, guiding philosophies. The implicit challenge of the term was – and for many continues to be – tantalizing.

As academics took up the call to queer theory, however, some issues with the endeavor soon became apparent. Primarily, as David Halperin points out, queer theory was named before it was invented, and so theorists had no established set of philosophies and perspectives from which to take their cues. The retrospective conceptualization of texts like *Gender Trouble* and *Epistemology of the Closet* as queer theory ironically served to deepen the presumed divide between queer theory, gay and lesbian studies, and feminist theory. Indeed, through its avowed rejection of identity categories, queer theory frequently defines itself against lesbian and gay studies and feminist theory, positioning its predecessors as essentialist (at worst) or as fields too conservative in their theorizing for anyone who *really* believes in the discursive (de)construction of identity. Adding to that divide was the fact that queer theory had gained purchase in the academy with a velocity and ease that not only far out-stripped gay and lesbian studies but also called into question queer theory's anti-assimilationist roots. Could a theory that was queer live and thrive in the academy? And even if queer theory could thrive in the academy, should it?

Despite these conflicts, queer theory has maintained a foothold in academia, so much so that Lauren Berlant's and Michael Warner's observation in 1995 still rings true almost 25 years later: "Queer is hot" (343). It's hot enough that not only have a group of star academic queer theorists emerged, but it's also caught the eye – and sometimes the derision - of academic and non-academic LGBT<sup>1</sup> individuals alike. Whether bristling at the use of the reclaimed slur as an umbrella term that erases the specificities of varying

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<sup>1</sup> LGBT is a popular acronym for Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, and Transgender individuals. I will provide a detailed note on this project's philosophy for the naming of sexual minorities later in the main text.

sexual identities or questioning the usefulness of a school of thought so steeped in constructionism and discursivity that it often seems to neglect the lived experiences of LGBT individuals, people within and outside the academy have varyingly questioned and promoted queer theory's radical potential and intentions. That these conversations continue and have become increasingly visible as LGBT publications move to the Web<sup>2</sup> indicates both that LGBT individuals have a discernable investment in and awareness of theorizations of sexuality and that the discursive spaces of the Web reflect traces of the diffusion of theory outside of the academy.

Thus, *Just Between Us Girls* turns to the Web and twentieth-century lesbian periodicals as a means of tracing the diffusion of queer theory outside of the academy and centering queer women's voices and values in queer theoretical discourse. Specifically, this project examines America's first gay magazine, *Vice Versa* (1947-1948); America's first national lesbian magazine, *The Ladder* (1956-1972); the lesbian-feminist newspaper,<sup>3</sup> *The Furies* (1972-1973); and the two most popular websites for queer women, *AfterEllen* and *Autostraddle*. Attention to these discursive spaces reveals a rich history of investment in and dependence on discursive spaces and mediated communication for identity and community formation. Long before queer women could visit *AfterEllen* to discuss *The L Word (TLW)*<sup>4</sup> (2004) or watch interviews with "celesbians" (celebrities who are also lesbians), they were nonetheless finding one

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<sup>2</sup> While colloquially the Internet and the Web are often used interchangeably, when referring to the Web in this project, I refer particularly to the World Wide Web created in 1989, the information-sharing portion of the Internet viewable via web browsers. I maintain the capitalization of both Web and Internet to indicate that, while both words are frequently used as metaphors (e.g. "a web of information"), my project refers to specific technology when referencing the Web.

<sup>3</sup> Despite the fact that *The Furies* covered very little "news" in their paper, because the Furies collective referred to the publication as a newspaper, this project does as well.

<sup>4</sup> More on *The L Word* in Chapters 3 and 4.

another and information while maintaining a difficult and often dangerous balance between privacy and publicity.<sup>5</sup> Failing to incorporate these histories into understandings of online discursive spaces means surrendering to presentations of the Web as ahistorical and disregarding the voices and lessons preserved by LGBT historians and other activists – voices that this project argues still influence the facilitation of these online spaces today.<sup>6</sup> What’s more, a conception of queer theory only inclusive of institutionally-sanctioned or academically-canonized sources perhaps reveals too much docility for “a discipline that refuses to be disciplined” (Sullivan v). In turning to popular discourse facilitated by queer women and regarding queer women’s lives, this project seeks to offer a queer methodology for reading and constructing theory, particularly theory by, for, and about women who identify as sexual minorities.

While this project reconstructs queer theory’s lineage by rejecting assumptions about the identities of theorists and the locations of theory, *Just Between Us Girls* is not a rescue mission. Despite many rumors of queer theory’s demise,<sup>7</sup> it has continued to inspire essays, books, and conferences, while, with its transdisciplinary flair, enticing individuals from a variety of scholarly fields. Furthermore, queer theory proliferates in spaces that, to borrow bell hooks’ phrase, have been conceived as “locations of healing”

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<sup>5</sup> In *Contacts Desired*, Martin Meeker argues that for organizers of gay and lesbian communication networks, often challenges arise between cultivating enough publicity to find one’s target audience and maintaining enough privacy to protect oneself and the participants in the network. More on this in later chapters.

<sup>6</sup> See Ben Aslinger, “PlanetOut and the Dichotomies of Queer Media Conglomeration,” wherein he points out the Web’s penchant for presenting its spaces as ahistorical and encourages scholars to connect online spaces to other online and offline contexts.

<sup>7</sup> See *After Sex?: On Writing Since Queer Theory* (Eds. Janet Halley, Andrew Parker, and Michele Aina Barale); James Penney’s *After Queer Theory: The Limits of Sexual Politics*; and Halperin’s “The Normalization of Queer Theory.” Teresa de Lauretis also famously rejected queer theory a few years after coining the term, stating the phrase had “very quickly become a conceptually vacuous creature of the publishing industry” (qtd. in Warner “Queer and Then”).

(“Theory as Liberatory Practice” 1), as spaces where individuals with shared stakes in discourse can make sense of the world and the joys and pains of their specific existences. I believe, too, that many academically-neglected spaces (some of which are examined in this project) facilitate the queer work Sedgwick describes as “mak[ing] invisible possibilities and desires visible; [making] the tacit things explicit; [smuggling] queer representation in where it must be smuggled and [...] challeng[ing] queer-eradicating impulses frontally where they are to be so challenged” (“Queer and Now” 5). In short, what if “the” problem with queer theory isn’t that it has failed to deliver on its emancipatory potential but that we (academics and non-academics alike) have failed to recognize queer theory when we see it? If this is indeed the situation, then those of us who identify as queer theorists must perform the (rather queer) task of reacquainting ourselves with queer theory and of interrogating the structures that inform where and to whom we look for queer theory. *Just Between Us Girls* undertakes this task by turning to the discursive spaces named above as some of many forms of queer theory.

Before analyzing these spaces, I want to offer some notes on terms and methodologies employed by this project. The issue of naming figures’ sexual orientations is fraught both due to a proliferation of “new” identity labels and the significance of historical context in naming and meaning. As much as possible, I take my cues from the women who participate in these spaces: readers of the lesbian periodicals from the mid-to-late twentieth century are referred to as “lesbians”; I refer to the target audience on *AfterEllen* as “lesbians and bisexual women,” in keeping with the site’s own mission statement; women who visit *Autostraddle* are referred to as “queer” or “queer women,” as this site often uses “queer” as an umbrella term to cover the spectrum of identities

targeted by their platform. I also use queer as an umbrella term when referring to groups of women sexually attracted to other women but including various identities (like lesbians, bisexual women, and transgender women). When a participant in any space makes a point of explicitly identifying in a way that contradicts the space's parameters, this is acknowledged in the text. In referencing historical work or case studies, I use the term "LGBT" (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender), to acknowledge the scope of the focus of these studies (when studies refer only to gay men or lesbians, for instance, I do not use the LGBT abbreviation). In acknowledgment of the historicity of even this abbreviation, I have dropped the "Q" (queer) which was a popularized addition to LGBT after the publication dates of many of my primary historical sources.

The next section of the introduction outlines a brief history of scholarship on the Web and communication networks, specifically as these histories pertain to LGBT individuals. "Communication networks" are used in historiography as an analytic tool to explore "circuits" of communication (Meeker 14). Consider for example the concept of written information traveling from author to editor to publisher to reader (and eventually back to the author, and so on). As Martin Meeker points out in *Contacts Desired: Gay and Lesbian Communications and Community 1940s-1970s*, this attention to discourse and diffusion allows for a systemic, circular conception of meaning-making (14). As an analytic tool, the concept of communication networks resembles Actor Network Theory (ANT) which "declares that the world is full of hybrid entities containing both human and non-human elements, and was developed to analyze situations where separation of these elements is difficult" (Tatnall and Gilding 957). Through this similarity, both ANT and communication networks enable a versatile heuristic for analyzing the social and the

technical simultaneously, a perspective particularly useful for a demographic that has in many ways relied on technology from the mimeograph machine to Wi-Fi for cultivating queer female sociality.

To illuminate both the possibilities and the limits of the Web for queer women, I offer a brief overview and analysis of the 2016 announcement of *AfterEllen*'s closure. Next, the introduction describes its methodology for connecting the Web to its predecessors, explicating the use of convergence theory both in linking media platforms and protocols as well as in cultivating a view of theory inclusive of popular discourse and marginalized voices. Finally, I analyze content from America's first lesbian magazine, *Vice Versa*, in order to demonstrate the analysis undertaken in the remainder of the project.

### Queer Promises: The Potential and Reality of the Web for the LGBT Community

My examination of the Web builds on Internet and cyberqueer theories as well as work in feminist and queer media scholarship, which have been interrogating the queer promises of the Web since the 90s and the liberating promises of technology for much longer. Cyberqueer theorists like Nancy Wakeford, Kate O'Riordan, and David J. Phillips have pushed against the assumptions of fluidity and freedom that underpin the illusion of the Web as a queer utopia. Like these critics, I foreground the technological and the sexual in my analyses of websites (and periodicals); however, *Just Between Us Girls* diverges from cyberqueer scholarship in my conception of the Web as a form of convergent media. To support this framework, I draw on theories of media convergence, particularly as explored in Henry Jenkins' 2006 *Convergence Culture*, to link periodicals



and websites as well as the various protocols developed around these spaces.

Convergence theory invests attention to ways media-users are encouraged to make connections across media platforms and to blur the lines between producer and consumer, as well as between popular and political culture (Jenkins 12). Drawing from Jay David Bolter's and Richard Grusin's work on "remediation," theories of media convergence disrupt linear conceptions of media progression that claim the newest technology displaces the older. In other words, this paradigm allows me to consider objects of literary studies, like the periodical and the book, as transformed by, rather than casualties of, the so-called "digital revolution."

While I integrate feminist theorists like Eve Sedgwick, Jack Halberstam, and Judith Butler who have interrogated the interplay between technology, gender, and sexuality, I utilize the framework of convergence to position theorists as parts of a larger theoretical lineage that includes lesbian periodicals and websites for queer women. In other words, convergence theory also guides my examination of queer theory, as I adopt Jenkins' lens to examine conversations critical to queer theory (e.g. the deconstruction of identity, the examination of heteronormativity as a system of meaning-making) that occur outside of academic journals and books, and inside discursive spaces often figured as relegated to popular or mass culture and divorced from the possibilities of queer theoretical discourse. Convergence theory provides an opportunity to examine not only how these theorists and theories are transformed within discursive spaces like websites and periodicals, but also ways concepts from queer theory influence discursive spaces themselves (Chapter 3, for instance, considers how *AfterEllen*'s theorizations of gender influence its membership structure). This perspective allows me to investigate the role of

the Web in the transformation of queer theoretical discourse by considering ways the pasts of discourse (like queer theory) and discursive spaces (like periodicals) influence present manifestations of theory and theoretical practices.

Additionally, there are ways in which *queer* (as an identity label) and queer theory both (claim to) do the work of convergence, repackaging instead of replacing identity categories like lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. As Michael Warner argues in *Publics and Counterpublics*, “Queer politics [...] has not just replaced older modes of lesbian and gay politics; it has come to exist alongside those older modes, opening up new possibilities and problems whose relation to more familiar problems is not always clear” (213). While I believe queer and queer theory can do this work, there are also many times queer falls short. *Just Between Us Girls* uses the framework of convergence to interrogate queer theory’s various conceptions of itself, the fields and identities against which it defines itself. Queer theory within and outside of the academy utilizes exclusionary mechanisms to determine not only who counts as a theorist but also who counts as a lesbian or queer. Thus, despite the characterization of subcultural communities within convergence culture (like fandom or lesbian discursive spaces) as “receptive” to marginalized individuals’ “cultural productions” (“*Star Trek: Rerun, Reread, Rewritten*” 473), many have found their attempts to cultivate identity in these spaces met with refusal, rejection, and sometimes rage. Megan Condis highlights exclusionary mechanisms of community formation in gaming communities and fandoms, arguing that what she terms “the politics of privilege” render the identities “gamer” and “fan” more readily available to straight, white men than to members of more marginalized communities (women, people of color, queers, etc.). Similarly, politics of

privilege operate within discursive spaces often posed as inclusive and liberating (like academic journals and websites for queer women), rendering identities and authority more accessible to some than others. To illustrate the material consequences of theory within these spaces, Chapter 3 analyzes content from *AfterEllen*, examining the exclusionary mechanisms employed to render the lesbian identity more readily available to cisgender lesbians on the website, an oppressive and dangerous theoretical stance that disparages and denigrates some of the most marginalized members of the LGBT community – trans women. Relatedly, Chapter 2 analyzes queer theory’s lesbian-feminist roots as evidenced in *The Furies*, putting the discourse produced through the paper in conversation with queer theory’s anti-essentialist rhetoric.

Such theorizations on LGBT or queer identity may be particularly visible online. According to a 2013 study by the Gay, Lesbian, & Straight Education Network (GLSEN), LGBT youth are five times more likely than non-LGBT youth to search online for information on sexuality or sexual attraction, almost twice more likely to search for medical information online than non-LGBT peers and report high levels of online civic engagement. 1 in 4 LGBT youth report being “more out” online than offline, 1 in 10 LGBT youth report first coming out online, and about 52% of LGBT youth who weren’t out offline had used the Web to connect to other LGBT users (GLSEN, CiPHR, and CCRC). The Web may not have obliterated the closet, but it added some windows, and if a closet can contain apparatus that allows one to gaze outside – or allows the outside world to gaze in – is it really a closet anymore? The Web seemed capable of offering countless such opportunities for alternative modes of performance, relationality, and knowledge cultivation and distribution. As more LGBT individuals gathered online,

many felt that the Web would not only enable new expressions of queerness, but change queerness altogether.

The great queer hope of the Web may best be summed up by Nina Wakeford in the 1997 essay where she coins the term “cyberqueer.” As Wakeford alludes to in the following quote, since its inception, but particularly since the beginning years of Web 2.0,<sup>8</sup> many scholars have viewed the Web through rainbow-colored glasses:

Anyone who has not yet encountered the worlds of cyberspace cannot know the wonders which await them: The realization of global community! The remaking of queer identity! The discovery that whichever subculture of a subculture you inhabit, there will be a web page, or a discussion group, or a real-time chat room just for your kind! (404)

However, as Wakeford and other theorists have pointed out, much like the revolutionary potential of queer theory, the utopia of the Web is ultimately undeliverable and theoretically reductive. Too simplistic a mapping of queerness onto the Web and the Web onto queerness leads to elisions between the two fields<sup>9</sup> and may also leave theorists and Web-users baffled when, say, a subcultural website like *AfterEllen* fails to thrive in this digital frontier. As queer cybertheorists and Web scholars have pointed out, “new” online

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<sup>8</sup> Web 2.0 refers to the second generation of the World Wide Web that permitted dynamic interactions with individuals and with the screen (static pages were made interactive with links, for instance), enabled social networking, and facilitated user-generated content. Web 2.0 also refers to the Web’s revitalization after the dotcom bust. The term was popularized by Tim O’Reilly in 2004 at the Web 2.0 Conference. See O’Reilly “What is Web 2.0: Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software.”

See also Virginia Heffernan’s *Magic and Loss: The Internet as Art*, particularly the Preface, for a summary of the early development of the Web.

<sup>9</sup> See O’Riordan’s and Phillips’ introduction and O’Riordan’s “Queer Theories and Cybersubjects” in *Queers Online* for a thorough review of theoretical intersections between cyberspace and queer theory. See also Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes in “Queerness, Multimodality, and the Possibilities of Re/Orientation”: “What is ‘lost’ in blithely celebrating the free play of the cyber and the queer is a critical understanding of what kinds of work – personally, socially, politically – sexual and sexual identity play might actually accomplish” (196).

freedoms always come within limits. Within the seemingly endless opportunities for self-representation and creation online, inside the boxes selected to name, gender, or age oneself, come realities of categorization and the re-production of regulated identity. Are opportunities for self-(re)presentation really infinite if options for gender selection are limited to male or female – or even to the dozens of options offered by Facebook?<sup>10</sup> Frequently, instead of a Web facilitating fluidity, queer users (and everyone else) are stratified into identity categories and hierarchies, not to mention the constraints imposed by the commercial, racist, sexist, and heterosexist technologies regulating the online world. While in certain cases the Web may queer performance (coming out online certainly disrupts assumptions regarding one’s locutionary position, for instance<sup>11</sup>) or enable parody, cyberqueer scholars have established that the Web has its own complicated culture of domination and oppression, and that queer digital spaces and Web users must exist within the limits of what is technically and culturally possible (Heffernan 5 and Wakeford 411).

For websites like *AfterEllen*, and other websites targeting lesbians, bisexual women, and queer women, sustained existence may not be a technical or cultural possibility. The next section of the introduction recounts the 2016 announcement of *AfterEllen*’s closure, the site’s return from the land of the presumed-dead, and

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<sup>10</sup> See “How to Edit Gender Identity Status on Facebook” by Leslie Walker. See also Angela Nagle’s *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars From 4Chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right*, specifically Chapter Five, “From Tumblr to the campus wars: creating scarcity in an online economy of virtue” for Nagle’s mapping of the “online culture of new identity politics” from Facebook to “campus culture wars.” Nagel’s chapter is also notable for its work in dissecting the relationship between online discourse and the 2016 presidential election of Donald Trump.

<sup>11</sup> Coming out online potentially “queers” the performance of coming out partially through the disruption of audience and authority in the speech act. For example, one might approach coming out with more confidence – and, indeed, receive fewer challenges to one’s proclamation – if coming out in an LGBT-focused website than if coming out to one’s family or friends. The closet’s in/out dichotomy is also further complicated by those who are “out” online but not offline or vice versa.

implications of these events for queer women's relationship to the Web and other communication technologies.

### “Eulogy for the Living”: *AfterEllen* and the Significance and (In)Sustainability of Spaces for Queer Women

In September 2016, when Editor in Chief of *AfterEllen*,<sup>12</sup> Trish Bendix, posted news of the site's closure on her *Tumblr* account, queer women took to the Web to commiserate, remember, mourn, and, yes, theoretically frame. Some saw the shutting down of the first lesbian media website as the beginning of the end while others saw the end of the beginning. In an article for *Nylon* by *Autostraddle*'s founder Riese Bernard titled “After *AfterEllen*: On the Future of the Queer Community on the Internet,” for instance, Bernard's analysis of the situation for queer women's websites is grim: “*AfterEllen*'s folding isn't the exception to the rule, it is the rule.” Bernard also references *Vice Versa* and *The Ladder* as *AfterEllen*'s and *Autostraddle*'s predigital predecessors who shared with the websites, among other qualities, a constant state of financial insecurity. Writers entered the conversation online to explore the relationship between the closure of queer women's websites and the disappearance of queer women's material spaces, like bars and bookstores. Many joined Bendix in pointing to the failure of corporations to see queer women as viable consumers, despite the fact that lesbians routinely earn more money than heterosexual women.<sup>13</sup> Others remarked on the generational shifts towards queerness and away from lesbianism – a shift wherein

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<sup>12</sup> The name *AfterEllen* refers to the cultural moment after Ellen Degeneres came out publicly. Chapter 3 offers in-depth analysis of the website and more explanation of its exigence.

<sup>13</sup> See *The Economist* article, “Why Lesbians Tend to Earn More than Heterosexual Women.” More on Bendix's framing of *AfterEllen*'s closure in Chapter 3.

“lesbian bars give way to queer nights at non-queer bars” due to queer’s entrance in the mainstream (Majumdar). Indeed, some suggested, with webpages devoted to LGBT issues on sites like *Buzzfeed*, *Huffington Post*, and the *New York Times*, *AfterEllen* seemed redundant, or, in Arlene Stein’s words, “less crucial” (qtd. in Majumdar).

This project seeks to illuminate the historical significance of these spaces to queer women’s lives, to demonstrate why many feel spaces like *AfterEllen* are as crucial now as they were when *The Ladder* began publication in the late 50s. In some ways, narratives that present lesbian-only spaces as less significant today than before the mainstreaming of “queer” fall prey to the same narrative of progress that befalls many concerning the Web. Just as many feared the Web would render print and aspects of print culture obsolete, so too do many worry that queerness and queer theory will envelope – and then erase – lesbianism and lesbian theory. As I will argue later in this chapter in relation to the Web and the “digital revolution,” this perspective fails to acknowledge theoretical and technical genealogies that make the most current theory/identity/technology possible. To put it another way: Lesbians and queer women do not simply disappear along with their spaces, and, indeed, have a knack for finding one another and creating new spaces in which they gather (sometimes through the very act of gathering to mourn a lost space, as one sees happening when queer women took to *Twitter* to discuss *AfterEllen*’s shutdown). Yet, all of this is not to say that lesbians’ concern for their fate in a queer world is unfounded. When websites like *Buzzfeed*, *The New York Times*, and *The Huffington Post* feature “niche” LGBT content, that content frequently centers on gay men. Similarly, while, as of 2019 there are 1,321 gay bars in the world, there are only 36 lesbian bars (Paul). Much of queer theory mirrors this focus, with many “canonical”

queer theory texts by or about white gay men (think Foucault's *History of Sexuality* or Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*).

The loss of these spaces matters particularly for marginalized individuals, like queer women, who frequently find their identities and needs elided and their voices ignored in mixed-group settings (more on the history of this trend in Chapters 1 and 2). In a society that caters overwhelmingly to straight, white males, marginalized people gathering to discuss their own lives can constitute radical resistance – and radical theorizing. As bell hooks argues when recalling a meeting of black women and women-of-color discussing the application of feminist critiques to the philosophies of black male leaders, such spaces help transform into theorists those traditionally excluded from creating theory:

In the world I live in daily, there are few occasions when black women or women-of-color thinkers come together to debate rigorously issues of race, gender, class, and sexuality. [...] I felt that we were engaged in a process of critical dialogue and theorizing that has long been taboo. Hence, from my perspective we were charting new journeys, claiming for ourselves as black women an intellectual terrain where we could begin the collective construction of feminist theory. (“Theory as Liberatory Practice” 66)

Similarly, many of the queer women within the discursive spaces examined in the project engage in the “taboo” process of gathering to theorize about sexuality, gender, politics, popular culture, and much more. While the spaces discussed in *Just Between Us Girls* are not without hierarchy or oppressive power dynamics, they nonetheless facilitate authority and validation to participants through means different from mainstream spaces (like the



academy). In other words, on a lesbian website or in a lesbian magazine, for instance, a participant's identification as a lesbian often confers certain authority within discussions revolving around lesbianism.<sup>14</sup> *Just Between Us Girls* argues that this redistribution of authority is theoretically generative and frequently helps close the perceived gap between theory and experience.<sup>15</sup> And so, while, as stated above, queer women do not simply disappear with their spaces, certain ways of being, talking, producing, and consuming are only possible within spaces created by and for queer women.

Despite the fact that the ephemerality of spaces – even discursive spaces – for queer women has been a consistent staple of queer culture, there was once a sense among scholars and media enthusiasts that the Web would change *everything*, especially for the LGBT community. And why not? The Web allowed instant connection, the ability to transcend geography, and access to information about sexuality, all of which seemed an answer to LGBT individuals' struggles with cultural alienation and feelings of personal isolation. Before the Web, finding information on lesbianism, for example, might entail a trip to the lesbian bookstore – if one existed nearby – or a request at the library to check out a book in the “Restricted” section.<sup>16</sup> The Web seemed to negate the need for this traversal through public spaces and vulnerability to public scrutiny. More than that, as stated in the 2014 study by the LGBT Technology Partnership that named LGBT individuals “core users of the Internet,” the Web allows connection to a multi-faceted LGBT community that may otherwise have been invisible or unreachable (Daniels and

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<sup>14</sup>Of course, it's not always so simple. Often certain spaces advocate for a very specific type of lesbian (e.g. feminine, white, middle-class). More on this throughout this project but particularly in Chapter 1.

<sup>15</sup> See hooks, “Theory as Liberatory Practice” for more on the theory/experience dichotomy.

<sup>16</sup> Lisa Ben, the creator of America's first gay magazine, remembers her own experience looking for books on lesbianism in the library in the 40s: “...Books on That Subject were very few in those days, or were kept in locked cabinets. Many of us hesitated to march up to the librarian's desk and ask for a book kept in a locked cabinet!” (Brandt 8).

Gray 9). In this way, the Web works as a vehicle through which contemporary queer women carry on the vision of their foremothers: a future where women who love women can freely know themselves and one another.

In many ways, *AfterEllen* seemed to embody these potentials. When *AfterEllen* was founded in 2002 by Wellesley graduate Sarah Warn, nothing quite like it had ever existed before, even in the space of the World Wide Web, which had seemingly already transformed life for LGBT individuals around the world. Warn's site attended exclusively to lesbian content, growing from a personal blog devoted to *Showtime*'s lesbian drama *The L Word (TLW)* to a multi-platform website promoting and reviewing songs, books, films, and other television shows featuring lesbian characters.<sup>17</sup> As Kelsey Cameron, Julie Rak, and Mary Bryson have demonstrated in their scholarship on (queer) women's digital spaces, while some digital spaces for queer women existed prior to *AfterEllen*, queer women's online presence was largely relegated to chatrooms or mailing lists. In the words of Maria San Filippo, *AfterEllen* was unique for queer women insofar as it was "conceived and designed to facilitate global access and user interaction while forging a discursive sphere around a localized identity-based virtual community" (117). The site embodied its original tagline, "Visibility Matters," through showing queer women where and how to find themselves and one another in and around popular culture. Forums devoted to topics like coming out, meeting women, or even breaking up provided users with opportunities to expand their conversations beyond popular culture, and the site soon became the place to go if one wanted to hear "news" from queer women's

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<sup>17</sup> For a detailed case study of *AfterEllen*'s "symbiotic" relationship with other media, specifically *TLW*, see Maria San Filippo's "Before and After *AfterEllen*: Online Queer Cinephile Communities as Critical Counterpublics."

perspective.<sup>18</sup> Yet despite the utopic implications of the Web described above, despite the corporate money *AfterEllen* had gained after its acquisition by LOGO and later EVOLVE Media, and despite the loyal following *AfterEllen* cultivated during its 14-year-long run, the website seemed to have gone the way of many material and discursive spaces for queer women before it. As Chapter 3 demonstrates, *AfterEllen* would eventually reemerge to the land of the living, but the new *AfterEllen* brought with it theorizations of gender and sexuality that would rock the ideological foundations of its website and incite discussions between online discursive spaces about responsible theorizations of queerness.

Though, precarity isn't the only trait *AfterEllen* shares with its predigital foremothers; indeed, the consensus among LGBT historians that communication and network technologies have long served a central role in LGBT identity and community formation suggests that LGBT use of the Web should come as no surprise. Communication networks that preceded the Web complicated producer/consumer categories, overcame geographical distance, facilitated social movement organization, and much more – all of which helped to invigorate gay rights movements and enable developments of LGBT identity. For example, Martin Meeker traces the role of periodicals among other types of “do-it-yourself publishing” in creating a “homosexual identity” through diffusions of a newly developing homosexual discourse (2). Roger Streitmatter similarly credits gay and lesbian magazines and newspapers for connecting

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<sup>18</sup>As *Slate* writer June Thomas stated in an article about the announcement of *AfterEllen*'s closure, “It was like a lesbian bar in that maybe you didn't go there every day, or even every week, but when something happened in the community, you knew where you were going to go [...] Stonewall Inn is a terrible bloody bar, but we still go there because it's our place. *AfterEllen* was unmistakably queer women's space” (Landsbaum).

individuals to personal, political, and public resources that helped shape the modern gay rights movement through “unify[ing] alienated readers while combatting their oppression” (2). Both *AfterEllen* and *Autostraddle* have noted their connection to twentieth-century lesbian periodicals, proudly claiming to continue the work of their pioneering sisters, and acknowledging that, long before the Web’s nascence, LGBT individuals have found ways to share information and connect to one another.<sup>19</sup>

“America’s Gayest Magazine”: A Safe Boast for a Dangerous Project

*Whether the unsympathetic majority approves or not, it looks as though the Third Sex is here to stay. With the advancement of psychiatry and related subjects, the world is becoming more and more aware that there are those in our midst who feel no attraction for the opposite sex. [...]*

*I venture to predict that there will be a time in the future when gay folk will be accepted as part of regular society. Just as certain subjects, once considered unfit for discussion, now are used as themes in many of our motion pictures. I believe that the time will come when, say, Stephen Gordon, will step unrestrained, from the pages of Radclyffe Hall’s admirable novel, *Well of Loneliness*, onto the silver screen. And once precedent has been broken by one such motion picture, others will be sure to follow. Perhaps *VICE VERSA* might be the forerunner of better magazines dedicated to the Third Sex which, in some future time, might take their rightful place on the news stands beside other publications, to be available openly and without restriction to those who wish to read them.*

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<sup>19</sup> See Malinda Lo, “Back in the Day: *The Ladder*, America’s First National Lesbian Magazine” and Riese Bernard, “38 Lesbian Magazines that Burned Brightly, Died Hard, and Left a Mark.”

Lisa Ben, “Here to Stay.”

In 1947, with the publication of her fourth issue of America’s first gay magazine, *Vice Versa*, Lisa Ben knew she was on to something. She had been disillusioned and intimidated by the “bar scene” – while many gay men and lesbians would congregate at bars, the threat of police raids and legal repercussions (like job-loss or jail-time) discouraged individuals from taking advantage of one of the few social networks for gays and lesbians at the time. Moreover, during the decades when sodomy laws were primarily used to target homosexuals,<sup>20</sup> Ben knew the odds of connecting with other lesbians weren’t in her favor. In a 1993 interview with Roger Streitmatter, Ben recalls ways in which her isolation provided fertile ground for the creation of *Vice Versa*: “I was by myself, and I wanted to be able to meet others like me. I couldn’t go down the street saying: ‘I’m looking for lesbian friends’” (2). With a job as an underworked secretary (and her apathetic boss’s instructions to simply “look busy”), a typewriter, and a pseudonym (“Lisa Ben” is an anagram for “lesbian”), *Vice Versa* was born. In many ways, the incentive to begin *Vice Versa* mirrors the beginnings of the other spaces discussed in this project: individuals desiring to connect to others “like them,” but failing to on the terms they envision, create a space structured around the values and interests not catered to in mainstream networks. Furthermore, the creators of the discursive spaces discussed in this project describe a similar experience of creating a network meant to

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<sup>20</sup> Despite the 2003 Supreme Court ruling in *Lawrence v. Texas* wherein the Court struck down the sodomy law of the state (invalidating sodomy laws in the other US states that still uphold them), as of 2016, 12 states keep these laws on their books. For more detailed accounts of sodomy laws in the United States, see ACLU’s “Why Sodomy Laws Matter” and “Getting Rid of Sodomy Laws: History and Strategy that Led to the Lawrence Decision.”

For information on the contemporary effects of sodomy laws on Americans, see *The Advocate*’s “American Men are Still Being Arrested for Sodomy” (Compton).

engender connection and watching the network blossom into something like a community (more on the development of these individual discursive spaces in later chapters). Ben had just recognized her own lesbianism in 1946 after moving to Los Angeles, and already she was sensing a communal desire for connection not only to other lesbians but also to an unnamed and undefined lesbian culture. Thus, Ben filled the nine issues of *Vice Versa* with fiction, poetry, book reviews, film reviews, and a column “wherein readers express their views and opinions” (1.2: 17).<sup>21</sup> She consistently invited readers to send in their own contributions, and while Ben ultimately produced the majority of content for *Vice Versa* herself, several issues include readers’ correspondence or submissions of fiction, poetry, and reviews of media deemed pertinent to lesbian readers. The social and political outcomes of *Vice Versa* are innumerable and nuanced, but, at the end of the day, within almost every extant interview with the pioneering Ben, she acknowledges her age-old motivation behind the endeavor: To meet girls.

To say *Vice Versa* helped her achieve this goal would be a bit of an understatement. Ben recalls in issue 4, being awakened by a tap on her window around midnight and finding “three tykes waiting outside to meet [her].” Ben continues, “It seemed that two [of the women], brought by a friend of mine, had read her copy of *Vice Versa* and wished to pay me a visit” (“Still Camp-aigning for Material” 1). Through events like Gabba-Javas, *L Word* Watch Parties, and A-Camp, other spaces have continued Ben’s tradition of using their communication networks to enable physical interactions amongst interested participants.<sup>22</sup> Ben’s methods of distribution required

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<sup>21</sup> More on Ben’s “The Whatchama-Column” later in the introduction.

<sup>22</sup> Gabba-Java is the name of the meetings between Daughters of Bilitis members, where women would gather for coffee and conversation, sometimes discussing recent *Ladder* issues. Similarly, in *AfterEllen*’s early years, many users who had found each other online would meet to watch *The L Word* together in

intrapersonal contact, required some breach of the mediated space into a material realm. Ben distributed the magazine by hand to friends, recalling, “I would say to the girls as I passed the magazine out, ‘When you get through with this, don’t throw it away, pass it on to another gay gal.’ [...] In that way *Vice Versa* would pass from friend to friend” (Ben qtd. in Marcus 443). While it’s impossible to know just how many women read *Vice Versa*, estimates range from dozens to hundreds of readers throughout its run. Ben remembers the symbiotic expansion of the magazine’s circulation and her own social circle: “When I turned out my first copy, I probably knew about four [lesbians]. And the next month, they introduced me to some more, and I knew, like, ten people. And so on and so on and so on. So it grew” (Brandt 9). In this way, the lesbian economy that fueled *Vice Versa* also garnered social connection and sexual recognition tied to textual material. In other words, *Vice Versa* would be recognized as a lesbian magazine by those “in the know,” and passing off *Vice Versa* to another woman itself stood as a performance of recognition and acknowledgement, as a gesture of sameness.

In another issue of *Vice Versa*, in Ben’s “Watchama-Column,” a reader happily describes scenes of reading initiated by *Vice Versa*: “All of us around here are being seen with *Vice Versa* on our knees, looking very pensive, and suddenly making brief comments like: ‘You don’t even need to read the books or see the plays –it’s all here!’” (12). I’m interested in the scenes of reading generated by these discursive spaces, particularly insofar as these scenes represent a disruption of private/public binary. Might “scenes of reading” be usefully reimagined to include not only the women who

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person. *Autostraddle*’s main fundraising event, A-Camp, is an adult camping trip where *Autostraddle* members meet one another and enjoy entertainment by queer female performers. All proceeds go to the *Autostraddle* website.

physically gathered around media but also the women who participate in forum discussions of media or who write in to respond to book or film reviews? As scholars like Janice Radway in *Reading the Romance* and Stephanie Foote have shown, “all acts of reading [...] have social value,” particularly for marginalized readers (Foote 172). In *Just Between Us Girls*, I would like to investigate the social and sexual value of reading for queer women, particularly the ways in which acts of reading facilitate theorizations and performances of lesbianism or queer female sexuality.

As the above epigraph indicates, by the fourth issue of *Vice Versa*, Ben had not only cultivated a readership but also optimism regarding what the future of lesbianism might hold. When Ben envisions a prosperous future for lesbians in “Here to Stay,” that future emerges with lesbian characters stepping across media platforms and lesbian publications held in equal esteem to their straight counterparts. Ben imagines unfettered access for the lesbian audience she knows awaits these stories with a mixture of hope and desperation. Perhaps most importantly, Ben positions *Vice Versa* as a socially and politically generative endeavor – in Ben’s vision of the future, *Vice Versa* would be the first in a long line of lesbian publications. In short, after only four months of publication, Ben was confident enough to prophesize that, just as lesbians are “here to stay,” so too are their magazines.

And, in some ways, Ben’s words have proven prophetic. In the decades following *Vice Versa*’s run, myriad lesbian magazines appeared,<sup>23</sup> as well as LGBT television channels, film festivals, publishing houses, movies, and record labels. Along with LGBT content and creators, organizations like the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against

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<sup>23</sup> Indeed, Ben herself would write for another lesbian periodical in her lifetime after ceasing *Vice Versa*’s publication, *The Ladder*, to which she contributed two poems.



Defamation (GLAAD) exist to monitor the mainstream media's incorporation of LGBT content and start dialogues with the general public about trends and objectives of this representation. In GLAAD's 2017-2018 report on LGBT representation in television, the GLAAD Media Institute notes several improvements: On broadcast television, 6.4% of regular characters were LGBT, the highest number ever recorded in the history of the report. Scripted cable shows also increased the quantity of LGBT representation in the 2017-2018 seasons, adding 11 more LGBT characters than in the previous year. While Ben produced her magazine under the noses of a straight public that feared the homosexual influence would corrupt the country, today children's books feature gay and lesbian characters, and young adult novels explore issues facing LGBT youth at an increasing rate (Lo).<sup>24</sup>

Publications like *Vice Versa* deserve not only credit for establishing the interest in and significance of these issues but also for introducing methodologies for measuring the success of media from LGBT perspectives. Within "Here to Stay" and similar articles throughout the publication's run, Ben introduces standards lesbian media must reach in order to perform its role of establishing social change, of bringing about an era when "gay folk will be accepted as part of regular society" ("Here to Stay" 4). In the meantime, however, Ben made *Vice Versa* a space for analyzing lesbian representation in films, books, and plays, in which she imagined lesbian readers would have interest or familiarity. Ben's treatment of lesbian media in *Vice Versa* reveals standards of

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<sup>24</sup> From 2013-2014, mainstream publishers increased publication of LGBT books by 59%. For a tracking of LGBT YA novels from 2003 - 2014 see Malinda Lo's "LGBT YA by the Numbers." Lo's system of evaluation for what counts as an LGBT book differs from other similar surveys in that Lo mandates any book included have an LGBT protagonist and a plot that addresses LGBT themes (as opposed to, for example, a book that features a protagonist with a gay best friend).

evaluation utilized to determine not only if texts were lesbian texts, but if texts did the kind of work that would lead to the world Ben describes in “Here to Stay.”

In the following section, I analyze *Vice Versa*'s commentary on lesbian media in order to demonstrate the values and philosophies employed in reading and responding to these texts. Through the analysis performed in *Vice Versa*, Ben and other contributors cultivated a theoretical discourse exploring the intersection of lesbian subjectivity, lesbian representation, and lesbian community. Following chapters will attend to shifts in discursive spaces' methodologies and objectives in interacting with representations of lesbians and queer women in media, with Chapters 3 and 4 specifically invested in ways strategies and goals change as these spaces move from magazine pages to webpages.

#### The Library is Open: Critiquing and Creating Lesbian Representation

Scrolling through the pages of *AfterEllen* or *Autostraddle* may result in a similar conclusion as flipping through the pages of a lesbian periodical like *Vice Versa* in 1947: Lesbians love their books and films.

Or, as was the case with Ben's review of the 1934 film, *The Children of Loneliness* (based on Radcliffe Hall's 1928 novel, *The Well of Loneliness*), sometimes not so much. In playful prose that would become characteristic of Ben's publication, she declares the film, “unsitthroughable,” beginning with a criticism that would be echoed by audiences of book-to-film adaptations for years to come: “The story, unfortunately, in no way resembled the book upon which it was purportedly based” (“Children of Loneliness” 9). As Filippo points out in her analysis of lesbian film criticism on *AfterEllen*, “While displaying the same stubborn fidelity to literary sources that characterizes so much of the

popular response to film adaptation [...], Ben also could be said here to perform, through her retelling, nascent forms of practices that have come to be known collectively as ‘fan production,’ including recaps, fan-sub, and slash fiction” (120). As scholars have argued, *Vice Versa* provides a “template” or “agenda” for gay and lesbian publications that followed (see Filippo 120 and Streitmatter 2 respectively), and, indeed, each discursive space analyzed in *Just Between Us Girls* shares certain generic and ideological traits with its foremothers. For instance, in Filippo’s case study of *AfterEllen* as a cinephile counterpublic, she notes of *Vice Versa*’s film reviews, “Ben reveals a simultaneous desire for and aversion to these Sapphic scintillations, a conflicted take on the cultural eroticization of lesbianism that we will see echoed in *AfterEllen* reviewers’ wariness of pandering to straight (male) audiences as much, if not more than, to gay (female) viewers” (119). Here, along with a continued awareness of lesbian representation facilitated by heteronormative institutions for a heterosexist society, one also sees a communal navigation of meaning-making, as lesbian readers develop a sense of mutuality through a shared lens of analysis. As another example of ways in which theoretical analysis facilitates community by facilitating resistance to mainstream interpretations of marginalization, lesbian pulp novels frequently end in tragedy, with lesbian lovers either apart and unhappy or, in a trend that continues in contemporary media, dead (more on the disproportional death-toll of queer female television characters in Chapter 4).<sup>25</sup> The moral is clear: No happy endings exist for sexual perverts, however many pages the novel may devote to steamy sex scenes. However, in the discursive spaces examined in this project, the morals proffered by such narratives are critiqued (and

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<sup>25</sup> See Vito Russo’s *The Celluloid Closet* and Patricia White’s *Uninvited* for more on the representation of lesbians in film.

sometimes if a reviewer finds the novel too exploitative, she will warn readers away from the text) and new frameworks offered to lesbian readers. For example, Chapter 2 notes parallels between *The Furies*' critiques of filmic representations of women and contemporary feminist and lesbian modes of filmic critique, like "The Bechdel Test." The theory produced within these discursive spaces around cultural artifacts like film, television, and books provides more opportunities for queer theory to "take female audiences and their contradictory experiences of texts as its subject" (White). *Just Between Us Girls* argues that this theorizing works to combat the cultural alienation many queer women feel when interacting with mainstream media, as participants work to develop theorizations of media, sexuality, and the role of representation in the construction of identity (more on this in Chapter 4).

While this type of discourse may be dismissed by theorists for its connection to popular culture, media scholars have long argued fan work involves the negotiation of social and corporate hierarchies and positions viewers as agents in the meaning-making processes of the stories that reflect (or fail to reflect) their subjectivities. In other words, in the case of lesbian discursive spaces that serve as sites for fan production, texts like *The Children of Loneliness*, and even *The Well of Loneliness*, (which was met with much more praise than its film version in both *Vice Versa* and, later, *The Ladder*) become lesbian texts through their circulation from writers to readers back to writers, through the way they – and the discursive spaces that house them – transform everyday readers into gatekeepers of a constantly changing literary "canon." Before lesbian anthologies like Lillian Faderman's 1995 *Chloe Plus Olivia* or even Jeannette H. Foster's 1956 *Sex Variant Women in Literature*, and before Dorothy Allison famously declared that "Every

book is a lesbian book,”<sup>26</sup> *Vice Versa* created the very categories of lesbian texts and lesbian readers. This project argues that while these discursive spaces may reveal what texts lesbians loved or hated (or loved to hate), more importantly these spaces reveal the mechanisms by which lesbian readers and writers make a text *theirs* in the first place. Moreover, in framing these interactions around texts as a type of proto queer theory in which participants decode and contest heteronormative systems of meaning-making, this analysis also investigates the relationship between popular culture and conceptualizations and performances of queer female sexuality. In short, this project contends for a consideration of quotidian queer discourse as a historically established object and example of queer theory.

Through analysis of literature reviews, recaps, and recommendations within these periodicals and websites, this project considers what these columns and readers’ interactions around these columns suggest about the performance of lesbianism around texts and the values of the lesbian canon – particularly the way these values may have transformed across digital platforms. Critics like Elaine Showalter have argued that exclusion from mainstream canon has more to do with writers’ relationship to the literary marketplace than with any inherent remarkability of their work (xv). If, as Showalter convincingly demonstrates in *A Jury of Her Peers*, literary canon reflects the predominant values of those with social, cultural, and political power, then what standards for inclusion in lesbian canon do these discursive spaces reveal? What would, for example, make a film like *The Children of Loneliness* “sitthroughable” for a lesbian in 1947? In 2019? How do these standards change as more lesbian media (and media

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<sup>26</sup> See “Every Book Is a Lesbian Book.” *Salon*. Specifically here, Allison refers to her cultivated habit of reinterpreting texts in a way that allows her to cultivate space for her own lesbian subjectivity.

criticism) become available and reading and participating in these conversations become the purview of web-users?

To answer these questions, it's necessary to put early discursive spaces that tackled these issues in conversation with more contemporary literary theory. For instance, in her examination of the role of pulp novels in lesbian print culture, Stephanie Foote comments on the existence of texts that "are perceived to have lesbian content even though they are understood first and foremost as part of another literary tradition" (173). Here she mentions Gertrude Stein and Sarah Orne Jewett as prime examples of authors whose works straddle the spheres of "lesbian canon" and other (more critically acknowledged) literary spheres like modernism and regionalism. Foote reassures her readers that "introducing sexuality as an element of analysis complicates without displacing aesthetic or historical modes of interpreting these authors and assigning them value" (173). I appreciate Foote's awareness of the versatility of lesbian texts and authors, of the ways these texts and writers find room within the fractures of regulatory critical constructions, and of the need to be wary of allowing readers' anxieties and uncertainties regarding sexuality to eclipse other considerations of these texts and their (sometimes simultaneous) place in mainstream and marginalized cultures. Although, in terms of the participants in the spaces this project analyzes, often sexuality *does* displace other elements of analysis. From Lisa Ben declaring *The Children of Loneliness* nearly unendurable but nonetheless staying for two viewings "because of the unusual nature of the film" (1.1: 9) to *Autostraddle*'s column where a writer reviews classic lesbian movies and frequently expresses humorous incredulity or frustration at the lackluster narrative or poor characterizations in the films, these discursive spaces frequently analyze a cultural

artifact simply because it features or includes a queer woman. Thus, perhaps moments of analytical slippage that allow considerations of lesbian literary canon to displace modes of interpretation valued by culturally sanctioned literary traditions will yield significant insights into texts, readers, cultures, and the paradigms that produce all of the above. In undertaking this type of criticism, this project also attends to the silences within this kind of discourse, to that which is displaced by the centering of sexuality (see particularly Chapters 2 and 3). This kind of analysis may be particularly useful in that it attends to the socio-cultural process texts (and readers) undergo in becoming “lesbian.” In other words, *Just Between Us Girls* is invested in ways readers accept, reject, and negotiate the categorization of texts as lesbian. Moreover, as can be seen throughout *Vice Versa* and other discursive spaces explored by this project, since lesbian print culture became recognizable as such, queer women have introduced their own modes of aesthetic and historical interpretation that must be considered, not simply for the sake of queer women readers but for the sake of the writers who have been enmeshed in and influenced by these cultures. Future chapters explore the contributions of canonical lesbian writers like Rita Mae Brown and Lorraine Hansberry to these discursive spaces and suggest a link between their participation in these spaces and their “canonical” production.

Turning briefly again to Ben’s criticism of *The Children of Loneliness* demonstrates one unique aesthetic value lesbian readers impose on lesbian texts. In her review of the film, Ben bemoans,

Those in the audience who hoped to view scenes of lesbian love were sorely disappointed. There was not the slightest demonstration of affection between two women displayed upon the screen, aside from a brief flash of one girl with her

hand upon the shoulder of another, a casual gesture indeed (“Children of Loneliness” 9)

This desire to see oneself reflected in media may seem like a rudimentary place to start exploring aesthetic standards of lesbian representation, but such an aesthetic standard introduces its own barrage of historical considerations. Within the chapters of *Just Between Us Girls*, I consider ways that the acceptance or rejection of representations of lesbian sexuality reveal the ways participants in these spaces thought about their own sexuality and communally cultivated an “authentic” identity for the discursive space. It is not only that queer women have cultivated theories of identity and relationality around media but also that queer women have considered and established their own critical positionality in relation to their sexuality and representations of that sexuality. Such a positionality yields rich theoretical possibilities in the discursive spaces of *Just Between Us Girls*. In “What Has Never Been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Literary Criticism,” Bonnie Zimmerman traces the lack of lesbian literary criticism published in academic journals, asserting that even when articles in “women’s studies” journals mention lesbianism, they do not consider lesbianism a critical position from which one writes or a potential theme for analysis. Moreover, Zimmerman continues, articles failed to “familiarize the reader with ‘underground’ sources of lesbian criticism” (453). *Just Between Us Girls* utilizes these “underground sources of lesbian criticism,” demonstrating not only their connection to queer theory but also their own unique type of theorizing.

In composing a lineage of queer women’s discursive spaces that perform theory, my project emphasizes queer women’s individual and collective historical investment in



communication networks, thus developing and demonstrating a framework for investigating the role of the discursive spaces like the Web in creating and reflecting LGBT identities and subcultures. After all, the Web *did* revolutionize life for LGBT people, troubling normative narratives like coming out; enabling new, seemingly instantaneous possibilities for the mobilization of political ideologies; and creating means of self-expression and circulation that provided LGBT users with an instant audience of their own. Indeed, today's reader may find that a sense of relief chases feelings of admiration for Ben's venture, because what person with access to the Web can imagine a world where such a publication would be limited to 10 copies an issue and passed furtively between potential readers? Lisa Ben filled a void, creating a lesbian audience in a world where one had yet to be imagined, and the Web seemed to provide grander, more expansive tools for creating and finding this audience. However, I'd suggest this enthusiasm for expanding one's audience jumps the gun – who is this lesbian audience in the first place? How many lesbian audiences might one space have – and what might be the differences between them? *Just Between Us Girls* tracks the conceptions of this audience through the rise and fall (and rise) of decades of queer women's discursive spaces.

Consideration of who Ben's readers were – and were allowed to be – within the pages of *Vice Versa* was necessarily influenced by consideration of who (and what) her readers were not. In other words, because of the illegality of her publication, Ben had to be sure if the magazine would fall into the wrong hands it would present a positive image of lesbians to the outsider. Ben recalls to Eric Marcus that, "There was never anything in the magazine that was sexy or suggestive. I purposely kept it that way in case I got

caught. They couldn't say that *Vice Versa* was dirty or naughty or against the law" (443). In her first issue, Ben directed potential contributors that "material must stay within the bounds of good taste" ("In Explanation" 2), and eventually made it her policy to avoid publishing names of contributors or the names of businesses that lesbians frequented (Streitmatter 5).<sup>27</sup> While Ben begs readers to keep the magazine "just between us girls," she knows discursive spaces do not have walls – and thus these spaces must always be ready for uninvited visitors. Consequentially, part of the cultivation of a lesbian audience involves navigating "the glance of unsympathetic eyes" ("In Explanation" 2). The other discursive spaces taken up by this project also combat this issue, perhaps most notably *The Ladder*, which explicitly desires to help the lesbian "understand herself and make her adjustment to society."<sup>28</sup> Yet, of course, the websites *AfterEllen* and *Autostraddle* are not exempt from this reality. If Ben realized in 1947 that her discursive space could not stand as a fortress, how much more permeable are the walls online? What are the consequences of some of the discursive choices made within these spaces for the material lives of queer women? I believe answering these questions, particularly questions about how contemporary queer women's websites subvert, reimagine, or reinforce systems of hierarchical oppression requires drawing from sources like *Vice Versa* as well as from memoirs and biographies of the women behind these spaces.

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<sup>27</sup> While not once in *Vice Versa*'s run did Ben publish a contributor's name, this was apparently not the editor's policy from the beginning of her venture. In issue 2, Ben replies to a letter-writer's "erroneous" claim that it is her policy to bar readers' from publishing their real names in the magazine. However, in the next issue, she responds to yet another reader who wishes to publish her real name with her letter, explaining she has since been advised by friends that including real names would be "unwise" at this time ("The Watchama-Column" 17).

<sup>28</sup> See "Purpose of the Daughters of Bilitis" which appears on the inner cover of most issues of *The Ladder* and will be analyzed more fully in Chapter 1.

Studies of the gay and lesbian press as well as memoirs and biographies of those involved establish the press's role in not only the gay rights movement but also in the development of a modern homosexual identity. Unfortunately, few of these studies focus exclusively on queer women, while others fail to account for the vastly different philosophies, resources, and practices of the lesbian press and ways these differences form and reflect lesbian identity.<sup>29</sup> For instance, lesbian periodicals often emerge from a sense of paucity, reflecting a point of view neglected in the straight press and gay male press. In Ben's first issue of *Vice Versa*, she frames her publication as stepping into a void left among newsstands carrying "publications for a variety of races and creeds [... even] the crudest kinds of magazines or pictorial pamphlets appealing to the vulgar" but not "this other type of publication" ("In Explanation" 1). Despite Ben's optimistic vision for the future of lesbian publications in "Here to Stay," the subsequent publications discussed in this project all arise echoing Ben's mission statement in the first ever lesbian magazine: carving space where little or none seems to exist. This common exigence for lesbian publications inspired high-stakes investment in the conversations these spaces facilitate, which I argue still exists online today.

The struggles that inspire these spaces also influence the values of the communities that form within these spaces. For instance, women's lack of economic resources made necessary the socialized performances of reading (such as reading parties where various *Ladder* readers gathered at the house of one *Ladder* subscriber to read the issue aloud together), editorialized requests that readers pass magazines on to other lesbians when finished reading, and, as I will examine throughout my project,

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<sup>29</sup> John D'Emilio's *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities* and Martin Meeker's *Contacts Desired* are two important exceptions to this trend.

establishments of alternative lesbian economies that blurred lines between producer and consumer long before Web 2.0. Throughout *Vice Versa*, Ben encourages readers to make the magazine their own through sharing creative work, or “express[ing] thoughts, feelings, and opinions” (1.1: 1). Ben’s contributors would be limited, but Ben’s thoughtful responses to letters and her commitment to including anything submitted provided readers with venues to shape their own discursive space. Moreover, because Ben viewed *Vice Versa* as “a labor of love,” she never sold the magazine, instead prompting readers to pass on the magazine to other interested women. Such practices demonstrate *Vice Versa*’s prioritization of its editorial philosophies over economic gain, while also doubtlessly helping to seal the magazine’s fate as a short-lived endeavor.

These alternative practices of participants in the lesbian press heralded similar practices and philosophies of queer women online. While *Autostraddle* and *AfterEllen* have both claimed lesbian periodicals as their predecessors, consideration of these spaces’ pre-digital lineage - as well as these types of websites themselves - have yet to be taken seriously in academia. Queer theory, particularly, may take up popular media or discourse as objects of theoretical analysis, but rarely considers the participants in these spaces theorists, or their discourse itself theory. Studying the print lineage of *Autostraddle* and *AfterEllen* highlights enduring objectives and practices of queer women writers and readers, as well as complex theoretical negotiations necessary to combat social and cultural alienation experienced by many queer women. Lesbian periodicals’ investment in, for example, the cultivation and circulation of lesbian news (a category these periodicals created), should turn scholars’ attention to contemporary websites’ and web users’ performances of politics through moves like “sharing” articles or professing

beliefs in comment sections. Often critics dismiss or ridicule the possibility of political discourse on the Web, but in tracing lesbian discourse from mid-twentieth century periodicals to online spaces, one sees not only a tradition of mediated political discourse for queer women, but also vastly different and historically-dependent definitions of concepts like “politics,” “visibility,” and “representation.” Indeed, as my project suggests, if one cannot take seriously the possibility of mediated political action, popular culture’s significance to marginalized identities and theoretical discourse, or the social and cultural productivity of discursive spaces that exist on the margins, then one cannot take queer women seriously either.

When Men Were Men and Theorists Were Men: Theorizing Lesbian Subjectivity and Authority (Now with Lesbians!)

*And what’s worse, I do not understand the notion of “theory,” and am hardly interested in being cast as its defender, much less in being signified as part of an elite gay/lesbian theory crowd that seeks to establish the legitimacy and domestication of gay/lesbian studies within the academy. Is there a pre-given distinction between theory, politics, culture, media? How do those divisions operate to quell a certain intertextual writing that might well generate wholly different epistemic maps? But I am writing here now: is it too late?*

Judith Butler, “Gender Insubordination”

Through rhetorical and queer theoretical analysis of selections from three lesbian periodicals, *Vice Versa*, *The Ladder* and *The Furies*, and the websites *AfterEllen* and *Autostraddle*, this project re-imagines the role of periodicals and websites within queer theory and queer theory within periodicals and websites, revealing the development and

proliferation of queer theory outside of the academy. In doing so, *Just Between Us Girls* examines the discourses these periodicals and websites produce. *Just Between Us Girls* additionally explores the intersections and tensions between both the subject of the lesbian and the subject of the theorist as well as between spheres of lesbian discourse/theory and queer discourse/theory. Indeed, just as the histories of discursive spaces like websites are rendered invisible, so too has queer theory too often been divorced from its history in activism, media, and popular culture. I am not as interested in clearly marking the point when a participant in a discursive space “evolves” into a theorist as I am in examining how these spaces create the possibilities within which theory occurs. This trajectory will lead back to and re-value other pertinent questions, such as “What does queer theory *do*?” and “What conditions are necessary to produce queer theory?” Instead of viewing queer theory as a discipline that has broken from its activist roots to become insulated in the academy, *Just Between Us Girls* maintains that queer theory often happens when queer people talk to other queer people about queerness. As has been suggested above, valuable – and academically overlooked – opportunities for theorizing occur when marginalized voices gather and discuss their experiences. Bell hooks’ reflection on the rarity of joining with women of color to discuss experiences of sexism and racism would shock no one aware of the pervasive racism and sexism in and outside of the academy. Similarly, the opportunities for queer women to gather and dissect homophobia, sexism, and heterosexism in academia are few. It is not hooks’ (or my) contention that theory only (or even always) happens in these spaces, but that theory also happens in these spaces. Attention to queer women’s

discursive spaces as venues for (queer) theorizing acknowledges the authority of sexual minorities over their own sexuality.

But authority over one's own identity is not easily won. When Lisa Ben began writing about lesbianism in *Vice Versa*, her voice joined a cacophony of other voices, mostly belonging to straight male sexologists and psychologists. Lillian Faderman documents what was in Ben's time an increasingly popular medical response to homosexuality, advertised by Edmund Bergler in "Legal and Moral Aspects of Homosexuality":

Homosexuals: We are normal and deserve recognition!

Heterosexuals: You are perverts and belong in jail!

Psychiatrists: Homosexuals are sick people and belong in treatment. (*Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* 137)

The most compassionate view of the homosexual in the 40s framed the individual as sick and in need of rehabilitation. Of course, Michel Foucault would eventually chart the medicalized creation of the deviant in *Discipline and Punish*, but long before Foucault's name appeared on every "Introduction to Queer Theory" syllabus, Lisa Ben was combatting "scientific" proclamations against homosexuality: "Ah self-styled judges, who smugly carve the standards for society! If only you would not condemn them as freaks, as weaklings, tragedies of nature, or worse, despise, scorn, or laugh at them. If only the third sex could be recognized and accepted as equally as 'honorable' as their smug and uncomprehending fellows who dare to pass judgment upon them" ("Children of Loneliness" 10). Ben's encouragements to her readers further supported this goal of "speaking back" to "experts" and creating a new kind of lesbian authority/authorship. In

issue six, for example, the Thanksgiving issue, Ben expresses gratitude for the ability of “the third sex” to appreciate feminine beauty. The nonnormative desires lesbians had been taught to suppress and bemoan, Ben continued, were not “a misfortune,” but a “blessing” (“Thanksgiving” 1). Whatever doctors may have been saying about the “third sex” and their need for treatment, Ben presented a picture where the thing society often deemed most dangerous about the lesbian – her desire – was her strength.

This essay and the others like it in *Vice Versa* wherein Ben offers readers an alternative view of the lesbian in society demonstrate what might at first seem like common sense: If one wants to know about lesbianism, ask a lesbian. In 1947, this was easier said than done, not only because of the anonymity necessitated by a homophobic society but also because medical discourse had already painted the lesbian as a deviant. Early periodicals helped to establish the lesbian as an authority on her own sexuality – an idea that fuels the pathos and ethos behind contemporary websites’ queer female take on the news, the government, celebrities, consumerism, and more as queer women continually work to establish not just the importance but the very existence of their perspectives. Additionally, these discussions help highlight ways that popular topics in queer theory, like the medicalization of sexuality, have been at the forefront of queer individuals’ minds and in the centers of their conversations for decades.

In another example of lesbians cultivating authority over their own identities, a rhetorical and ideological move necessary for theorizing, in the sixth issue of *Vice Versa*, Ben responds in the “Whatchama-Column” to a reader who had called attention to the relationship between naming and experienced social reality, asking, “Has it ever occurred to you, my sisters, that the names by which we call ourselves lack dignity?” (9). The



letter-writer (who goes by “Ermayne”) suggests “butch” be replaced with “Lescourt,” a combination of “lesbian” and “escort,” or “Clyffe,” calling Radclyffe Hall the lesbian “Matron Saint” (9). Ben is enthusiastic and thorough in her response to Ermayne: “Some may argue that in objecting to the ‘slanginess’ [of terms like butch], we may be placing a semantic barrier in our path. If the terms express the meaning intended, why shudder at the seeming crudity of the words? Remember, much of what is today considered good English was the ‘slang’ of yesteryear” (10). While, obviously, “Clyffes” and “Lescourts” never quite caught on (and part of Ben’s point seems to be that they perhaps shouldn’t), this conversation does demonstrate an awareness of the consequences of naming and of the desire to reject or reclaim identity categories for oneself. The readers of *Vice Versa* were wrestling with ways that language impacted reality. Turning to these examples throughout early lesbian periodicals and taking the theoretical possibilities of these conversations seriously can remind us in our own theorizing to prioritize “the role queer theory has played in calling attention to the integral role of sexuality within public life” (Cvetkovich *Public Feeling* 461).

Though, for quite some time, particularly for readers of *Vice Versa* and *The Ladder*, no one seemed willing to discuss the role of sexuality in public life, especially not if that sexuality was “abnormal.” Hence, a reason for the importance of these discursive spaces. Scholars like Martin Meeker, John D’Emilio, and Roger Streitmatter agree that because for much of the twentieth-century lesbians and gay men had nowhere to express themselves in print and few ways to track down information that might relate to their erotic preferences, periodicals took on a significant role in the development of queer identity (a role not completely dissimilar to the Web’s today). The conversations

that take place between subscribers within these pages reflect what would become major concerns of queer theory in the academy: The complicated relationship between nodes of identity like sexuality, gender, class, and race; early conceptions of the function and performance of speech acts like “coming out”; and refutations of “experts”’ pathologizing theories of female sexuality. These issues fill lesbian periodicals of the twentieth-century and continue to invigorate discussion on contemporary websites for queer women.

Through examination of the content and writing, reading, and circulation practices of these websites and periodicals, I argue queer theorists must look not only to past periodicals but also to their digital descendants as relevant and necessary contributors to queer theory. Queer theory has often been accused of elitism, teeming with jargon and philosophical lineages mostly only accessible to academics. But queer individuals have been participating in theorizations of their identities and communities before queer theory found itself in the academy. Queer theory happens in bars, bedrooms, and bookstores. Lesbian periodicals as well as contemporary websites for queer women provide us with textual traces of quotidian queer discourse that challenge the dominance of a purist, reified version of queer theory. By imagining an alternative history of queer theory through tracing queer theory outside of the academy and challenging common assumptions regarding who contributes to and what constitutes theoretical discourse, my project contests conceptions of queer theory that divorce the theoretical from the practical, and instead emphasizes the ways theory impacts material lives.

*Just Between Us Girls* investigates what these textual and digital spaces and queer women’s historical participation in them suggest about the role of media production and

consumption in the performance of queer female sexuality. For queer women, who have historically lacked embodied sexual spaces (like gay bars) which widely influence gay male identity, the significance of these print and digital communication networks cannot be overstated. From the first ever American lesbian periodical in 1947 to contemporary websites, these spaces tackle what queer women should (or shouldn't) read or watch in a mass culture that often fails to imagine them in its art and entertainment, and additionally offers queer women methods for finding themselves reflected in unlikely spaces, often through reading and elevating subtext. These communication networks introduced participants to the possibility that they could consume their media together and that their interactions with media (and other lesbian or queer consumers) related to their sexuality. The fact that for decades queer women have been connecting to each other through a shared investment in media like books, films, and plays, suggests a queer linkage between texts and the erotic, as well as a long-standing tradition of connecting mainstream media representation and the engendering of social connections to politics. The range of media that either facilitated conversation or served as the subject for conversation between queer women further emphasizes the role of intertextuality in the production of discourse and the importance of a critical approach that considers how these media and media-users interact with one another.

#### Chapter Descriptions:

The beginning chapters reframe questions regarding the Web in the context of lesbian periodicals, while the last two chapters use the developed framework to reapproach and re-vision the websites *AfterEllen* and *Autostraddle*. In this way, the

organization demonstrates the role of communication networks in queer female sexuality (and vice versa) and applies convergence theory considering the influences of “old” technology on “new” technology.

In Chapter 1, I analyze selections from America’s first national lesbian periodical, *The Ladder*, which ran from 1956-1972. This chapter takes up *The Ladder*’s role in the evolving authority of the lesbian on conceptions of lesbian identity and community, examining how *The Ladder* dealt with these issues both through their publication and circulation practices and through the content they produced. In particular, this chapter considers how the “Purposes” of the Daughters of Bilitis (the lesbian group that founded *The Ladder*, abbreviated DOB) manifest in and influence the discursive space of the magazine. The language of the four objectives shifted through the decades of the DOB and *Ladder*’s existences, and at one point in the magazine’s run disappeared from the publication altogether, but for the early years of the magazine they included “1) educating [the lesbian] to understand and accept herself; 2) educating the public to understand and accept [the lesbian]; 3) encouraging and participating in responsible research; 4) studying law as it applies to [the lesbian] and promoting change where desirable.”<sup>30</sup> These objectives were listed at the beginning of each issue of *The Ladder*, and greatly influenced editorial philosophies of the magazine and other lesbian magazines and discursive spaces to follow. Through the contextualization and analysis of articles like “Ann Ferguson is Dead” where co-founder Phyllis Lyon “killed” her pseudonym and established a new kind of authorship and authority for lesbian writers, and the popular

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<sup>30</sup> While these aims were published on the front cover of each issue of *The Ladder*, as Meeker points out in *Contacts Desired*, the first time many Americans heard of the DOB was likely in Marvin Cutler’s book *Homosexuals Today* (82).

“Lesbiana” book review column by Barbara Grier which further developed the “recapping” genre and cultivated a lesbian literary canon, this chapter argues that lesbian periodicals like *The Ladder* not only established themselves as spaces for lesbians to gather but set forth particular values and rules directing discourse that continue to shape queer women’s identities and communities today. While *Vice Versa* strove to create a space for lesbians to exchange ideas and beliefs, most of *Vice Versa*’s content (with the exception of a few readers’ letters and poems) was created by Lisa Ben. *The Ladder*’s reach encapsulated lesbians from all across the country, inviting myriad discussions on the position of the lesbian in American society. Thus, this chapter continues the work of tracing “queer theory” outside of the academy through consideration of content like readers’ letters and lesbian writers’ perspectives on “experts” on homosexuality as well as the circulation and production practices of the periodical.

In Chapter 2, my project turns its attention to *The Furies: Lesbian/Feminist Monthly*, a periodical published by a collective of separatist lesbians from 1972-1973 during the so-called “Golden Age of the Lesbian Press” (Streitmatter 179). The collective and publication were born of political dissatisfaction with a Gay Liberation and a Women’s Liberation movement that consistently ignored or dismissed the concerns of their queer sisters. *The Furies* aimed to create and spread a lesbian-feminist ideology, embracing explicitly political objectives while including content analyzing the overlap of the personal and political. This chapter connects contemporary concerns with online activism to political practices of lesbians relying on mediated communication to connect to one another and ideologies. Of all the spaces examined in this project, *The Furies* most explicitly embraced the categorization of its discourse as theory, believing that the

formation of a rigorous ideology was necessary to organize a successful political movement. Thus, Chapter 2 considers the implications of the lesbian-feminist identity and ideology formed in *The Furies* and ways lesbian/feminist theory converges with queer theory.

Turning to the Web, Chapter 3 considers *AfterEllen*, utilizing the framework developed in the previous chapters to explore the transformation of the discursive spaces created by lesbian periodicals when taken online. Founded in 2002 as a personal blog by Sarah Warn, *AfterEllen* eventually became the most popular lesbian media site online (though, in 2002, as with *Vice Versa* in 1947, claiming to be the Web's "gayest" or most lesbian-inclusive site was less of boast and more of a statement of fact). This chapter examines *AfterEllen*'s journey from a personal blog to "the largest and most comprehensive website dedicated to the representation of lesbian/bi women in popular culture" (About) in order to trace the development of lesbian economies from print publications to online platforms – a subject particularly significant for *AfterEllen*, due to its acquisition by Evolve Media in 2014. Through rhetorical and structural analysis of the site's forums, columns, and other content, this chapter continues the work of the previous chapters, questioning how issues of authorship, representation, education, politics, and editorial objectives transform when taken online. Like its foremothers, *AfterEllen* provides a space for users to think through their subjectivities as queer women, contradict "expert" opinion on queer female sexuality, and create queer women's virtual and material geography by connecting users to places the site positions as "lesbian friendly." This chapter's examination of *AfterEllen* extends the implications of convergence theory to demonstrate how a website so steeped in popular culture may produce theoretical (and

even political) discourse. Significantly, the framework of convergence is used to interrogate *AfterEllen*'s interpretation and rejection of queer and queer theory, as manifested in Trans-Exclusionary-Radical-Feminist (TERF) discourse circulating throughout the site and frequent anti-theory statements made by participants. This chapter thus examines the darker side of theory, particularly when that theory is used to support exclusionary models of membership.

Chapter 4 begins with a case study of *Autostraddle*, another site that currently claims the title of “the world’s most popular lesbian website” (“What is Autostraddle?”). Through examining discourse that analyzes narrative and ideological trends in popular culture, such as *Autostraddle*'s on-going list of lesbian and bisexual characters killed on television, this chapter connects *Autostraddle*'s investment in popular culture to past lesbian periodicals. The theory produced around these popular cultural artifacts not only demonstrates insightful, systemic analysis, but also articulates queer women's various experiences of community and alienation when encountering (and remaking) popular culture. The chapter ends by considering *Autostraddle*'s conception of queer identity in contrast to *AfterEllen*'s, specifically examining the dialogue around the “Not in Our Name” statement, a joint statement signed by leading lesbian publications (including *Autostraddle*) condemning the conflation of trans-inclusivity with lesbian-erasure. The statement as well as *Autostraddle*'s editorial policies and commentary regarding *AfterEllen* (and *AfterEllen*'s commentary regarding *Autostraddle*) puts the two websites – both of which claim to be the last web-first lesbian website in existence - in diametrically opposed ideological positions. Chapter 4 concludes by exploring the implications of such

vastly different theorizations of sexuality and community for the possibilities and limitations of “queer” and queer theory.

As the culmination of *Just Between Us Girls*, the Epilogue considers the implications of the inclusive definition of queer theory promoted throughout the preceding chapters. What, given the role of theory in day-to-day lives of marginalized individuals, is our duty as theorists and teachers? How might we embrace the dynamic, integrated view of theory demonstrated by queer women’s discursive spaces? The Epilogue offers some thoughts on important next steps for those working with theory.



Chapter 1 The Climb to Community: Lesbian Representation, Performance, and  
Theorizing Against Heteronormativity in *The Ladder: A Lesbian Review*

*A radical theory of sex must identify, describe, explain, and denounce erotic injustice and sexual oppression. Such a theory needs refined conceptual tools which can grasp the subject and hold it in view. It must build rich descriptions of sexuality as it exists in society and history. It requires a convincing critical language that can convey the barbarity of sexual persecution.*

Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality"

*Axiom 2: The study of sexuality is not coextensive with the study of gender; correspondingly, antihomophobic inquiry is not coextensive with feminist inquiry. But we can't know in advance how they will differ.*

Eve Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*

In reading about America's first national organization for lesbians and its magazine, one could be forgiven for wondering what lesbianism has to do with "Bilitis" or ladders. After all, if Bilitis was an important lesbian literary figure, seven of the eight founding members of the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) didn't know until one member explained her suggestion. According to founding DOB members and lesbian and gay rights activists Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, another founding member, Nancy, had read Pierre Louys' 1894 "translation" *The Songs of Bilitis*, a text that casts Bilitis as a

contemporary of Sappho,<sup>1</sup> and the women agreed the name could pass for “any other women’s lodge [...] like the Daughters of the Nile or the [Daughters of the American Revolution]” (Martin and Lyon 219). In short, the obscurity of the reference made it niche enough to be perfect as the name for a lesbian club in 1955. The group hoped to form an organization where lesbians could safely meet and socialize with one another. The possibility of police raids had diminished the appeal of gay bars, and, regardless, as Martin and Lyon reason, “Women needed privacy – privacy not only from the watchful eye of the police, but from gaping tourists in the bars and from inquisitive parents and families” (219). In the Cold War paranoia of the 50s, any activity that could mark one as homosexual demanded carefully structured privacy; after all, if “gaping tourists” or parents and friends became *too* inquisitive, lesbians and gay men could find themselves without a job or tossed in jail. By the time the DOB was forming, the military had already developed guidelines to help recruiters recognize and exclude gay men from service, and President Truman’s National Security Loyalty Program (which initiated the firing of suspected homosexuals from the federal government) had been followed by President Eisenhower’s Executive Order banning homosexuals from federal government employment (GSAFE). The political and cultural atmosphere left the newly-formed DOB in a paradoxical situation if they wanted their group to grow: They needed to advertise their organization in a way that would incite enthusiasm from lesbians but not ire (and censorship) from the government.

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<sup>1</sup> While Louy initially claimed the book of poetry was a translation, it was quickly proven the work was created, not translated, by Louy.

The DOB's magazine, *The Ladder*, was the answer to their problem. *The Ladder* would be a way for the DOB to market its organization while also combatting the negative images of lesbians so popular in mainstream society (more on this later). The name of the publication was meant to evoke the image of a lesbian climbing a ladder out of "the well of loneliness" and into the bright world of community and equality. With objectives like education for lesbians and straight society as well as the creation of a library of lesbian literature, *The Ladder* theorized types of lesbianism and lesbians that were relatively new to a society that considered homosexuals enemies of the state. Following in the footsteps of *Vice Versa* (though during the beginning years of *The Ladder*, Martin and Lyon had never heard of the 1947 publication), *The Ladder* provided lesbians with a forum in which they could connect with other lesbians and, together, theorize their identities and experiences as sexual minorities and women. Theorizations of lesbianism shifted throughout *The Ladder*'s 16-year-run, with content focusing on topics like coming out, the medicalization of the lesbian, and strategies for politically organizing, conversations that would not only plant the seeds for *The Furies*' theorizations of lesbian-feminism but also for topics that continue to compel queer theorists and contemporary websites for queer women like *AfterEllen* and *Autostraddle*. Historians have recognized the significance of *The Ladder* as a lesbian publication, crediting it with creating a lesbian discursive community (Streitmatter and Valentine), establishing the lesbian as the authority on lesbianism (Esterberg, Streitmatter, and Meeker), and helping to propel lesbianism into the realm of political practice (Gallo and Streitmatter). This chapter of *Just Between Us Girls* considers how these achievements cultivated fruitful ground for theorizing, while also attending to the exclusions within *The*

*Ladder*'s elevation of the white, middle-class lesbian. Specifically, I am invested in considering the ruptures in this image produced through discourse in and around *The Ladder* – in other words, this chapter considers how *The Ladder* queers theorizations of lesbianism within its own discursive space.

By demonstrating *The Ladder*'s eventual utilization of its space as a location for developing political organizing strategies centered around lesbians, this chapter also interjects in scholarly and mainstream conversations that dismiss the political potential of communication technologies and mediated political action (such as characterizations of online activism as “slacktivism”), particularly for individuals in marginalized communities. Conceptions of politics that prioritize unmediated action or embodied participation neglect the very real dangers of visibility or uncontrolled publicity for particular marginalized groups. Expecting lesbians from the 50s or even from 2019 to perform politics in the same way as, say, straight feminists, overlooks the different affordances and challenges faced by each group, and also ignores the differing histories of political participation from which each group draws. The participants in *The Ladder* used the discursive space to debate the usefulness of organizing with gay men or straight women, for instance, discussions that, despite *The Ladder*'s objective of integrating the lesbian into mainstream society, lay the groundwork for the theorizations of lesbian-separatism that develop in *The Furies* and *AfterEllen* (though as Chapters 2 and 3 will further demonstrate, these theorizations of lesbian-separatism would be put to different uses in each specific space).

Additionally, through close readings of *Ladder* content, letters between readers and editors, as well as DOB and *Ladder* records, this chapter specifically attends to ways

that *The Ladder* facilitated a local/global lesbian identity – an aspect of identity construction often credited to the Web. The affordances and protocols that developed around *The Ladder*, such as the ability to reach a local and global population of lesbians and the socialized performances of reading, not only predate the Web but also continue to influence queer women’s utilization of their contemporary discursive spaces. While the Web certainly revolutionized the ways that individuals connect and conceptualize locally and globally, it’s important to consider the histories on which the Web’s facilitation of these identities and perceptions of place build. For groups of people like LGBT individuals who are frequently not born into a family or community with others who share their sexual identity, communication technologies have been fundamental in building community and identity, long before the Web. Furthermore, by analyzing archived letters from readers to *Ladder* editors, this chapter considers *The Ladder*’s role as a discursive space that also helped transform places, like San Francisco, into the “gay meccas” they are figured as today. These analyses of *The Ladder*’s theorizations of place and place-based identity support the chapter’s argument for the slipperiness between the physical and virtual, the mediated and unmediated, particularly for queer women who frequently use mediated communication as a means of developing and connecting to physical spaces.

Finally, in constructing and disseminating conceptions of lesbianism through articles, book reviews, and fiction, this chapter argues that *The Ladder* theorized a type of lesbianism and lesbian politics indelibly connected to popular culture, a trend that manifests in each of the spaces discussed in this project. While *The Ladder* aimed to combat negative images of the lesbian in society through positive representation, the

publication also demonstrates the historicity of concepts like “visibility” and “representation.” Thus, although, for instance, *AfterEllen*’s tagline proclaims “visibility matters” and also circulates much theory around popular culture, the contemporary website theorizes and practices a very different type of visibility politics than *The Ladder*. By integrating queer theorists’ analyses and criticisms of visibility and representation with *The Ladder*’s own articulations and demonstrations of these concepts, this chapter reveals queer theory’s debt to these spaces’ careful utilization of visibility and representation as vehicles used to cultivate lesbians’ authority over images and conceptions of lesbianism.

Before analyzing content from *The Ladder*, I offer a brief history of the DOB and their publication’s beginning years, building on the historical work done by scholars like Martin Meeker, Kristin Gay Esterberg, Roger Streitmatter, Marcia Gallo, and Jody Valentine. In historically contextualizing the DOB and *The Ladder*, this chapter also explains the role the organization and publication played in the homophile movement. “Homophile” was a popular term for homosexual in the 50s, used by organizations like the DOB and the male homosexual organization the Mattachine Society that aimed to desexualize the public’s image of the homosexual (“The Homophile Movement”). Indeed, scholars and activists have considered the use of this term as evidence of the homophile movement’s conservative and assimilatory nature (“The Homophile Movement”). While Martin Meeker’s *Contacts Desired* does important work in combatting reductive conceptions of the homophile movement, building on his insights, I focus specifically on the role the theory produced through *The Ladder* played in positioning the DOB as a major actor of the political movement. Through this framing,

this section asserts that the retrospective divorce of the homophile movement from conceptions of queer politics fuels queer theory's dissociation from lesbian theory.

### Hide Your Daughters (In Plain Sight): *The Ladder*, the DOB, and Rejecting the Private/Public Dichotomy to Reach the Nation

Despite desires to reach “all” lesbians, the DOB soon discovered a truth that would continue to variably nourish and disrupt discursive spaces into the present day: Lesbians are different from one another, which means there exists no “one size fits all” template for spaces created by and for lesbians. Many DOB policies and much early *Ladder* content focused on theorizing for and about the type of lesbian that the organization felt could combat society's perceptions of lesbians as immoral and dangerous. Hence, many historians feel the DOB along with the other major organizations of the homophile movement “endeavored to advance the cause of equal rights through conformance with the heterosexual norms prevalent at the time” (Pettis). For instance, in advocating “a mode of dress and behavior acceptable to society” (“Purposes”), the DOB developed a dress-code that discouraged members from cross-dressing, a policy that denigrated butch lesbians, many of whom identified as working-class. Scholars often use policies such as this as evidence that the DOB “advised conformity to the straight mainstream” (Theophano), though as Marcia Gallo notes in *Different Daughters*, many DOB members recall a general neglect of the dress-code, with women attending meetings in blue jeans (24). Meeker similarly remarks on the difference between policy and practice for many homophile organizations, who would strategically enforce and abandon policies according to the organization's needs. The illegality of

cross-dressing in the 50s and the DOB's need to avoid police scrutiny likely also contributed to the existence of the dress-code. Such contextualization need not diminish the importance of inclusive organizing or the prevalence of gender-policing in queer women's culture; rather, this framework reveals the legal, social, and political constraints under which the DOB and *The Ladder* participants theorized lesbianism. Additionally, while the DOB published *The Ladder*, the organization's ideology was not always reflected in its publication, where "the debate over outward conformity would continue for years" (Gallo 24), a debate that still carries on in queer theory.<sup>2</sup>

Characterizations of the homophile movement and the DOB and their publications as conservative and assimilatory frequently support a conception of gay and lesbian theorizing during this time as ideologically incompatible with queer theory. When discussing the homophile movement in *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, Nikki Sullivan mentions the DOB and Mattachine Society, asserting, "we could say that groups such as these took, for the most part, what we would now refer to as an assimilationist approach to politics and to social change. The aim of assimilationist groups was (and still is) to be accepted into, and to become one with, mainstream culture" (23). As the following sections' analyses of theory in *The Ladder* will demonstrate, however, the lesbian's ideal relation to dominant culture incited much debate with women in the homophile movement, with many participants articulating a desire for a sexual identity apart from mainstream culture; indeed, Chapter 2 details manifestations of this desire in the lesbian-separatist collective, *The Furies*. Despite referencing Martin Meeker's argument against monolithic readings of the homophile movement and providing

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<sup>2</sup> Following sections of this chapter close read content from *The Ladder* to demonstrate its various theorizations of gender, sexuality, and the lesbian's "ideal" relation to dominant culture.



additional (albeit brief) information on male homophile organizations, Sullivan treats the DOB as identical to – or less important than – the Mattachine Society. Sullivan also provides a reductive description of the DOB’s approach to identity and intersectionality, suggesting that “the assumption [of homophile organizations] was/is that tolerance can be achieved by making differences invisible, or at least secondary, in and through an essentializing, normalizing emphasis on sameness” (23). Labeling lesbian and gay theories “essentialist” serves to conceptually sever the fields from queer theory, a field that eschews essentialism through an investment in the discursive deconstruction of “identity.”

Analysis of *The Ladder*’s discourse on difference and identity suggests a much more nuanced approach to positioning the lesbian both within society and among other lesbians. Indeed, *Ladder* writers frequently theorize around the imperfection of representation as a political strategy, rupturing the illusion any representation of lesbianism might speak to and for all lesbians. The danger of readings like Sullivan’s when composing a history of queer theory is not that they’re simplistic (Sullivan’s text generally does a wonderful job of succinctly summarizing myriad movements and philosophies connected to queer theory), but rather that such readings position queer theory as fundamentally ideologically incompatible with its forebearers, when, in fact, queer theory repackages and repurposes many theories of lesbianism emerging during the homophile movement.

Similar to queer theory, however, there were times when the DOB failed to integrate without subsuming differences among their members. For instance, not long after the DOB was founded, many historians note that it split along class lines, with the

working-class women desiring a more social, secretive group, and the middle-class women envisioning a group more public and explicitly political (Martin and Lyon 221-222). Martin and Lyon recall that within a few meetings, the group had “a long series of arguments about rules and regulations, about the degree of secrecy we had to maintain, about mode of dress and behavior, about dealing with straights as well as gay men, [and] about the possibility of publishing pamphlets explaining our cause” (221). Kristin Esterberg suggests an incompatibility of DOB objectives with the goals of working-class lesbians, who “may have had fewer illusions about the attainability sought by the women of DOB” (78). This initial severing marked the first of many conflicts around both DOB’s negotiation of the public/private tightrope lesbians walked in the 50’s and the manner in which DOB policies, publications, and practices often promoted the white, middle-class lesbian to the detriment of others, particularly in the early years of the organization. Simultaneously, this fragmentation also indicated the DOB’s firm position as a political organization for lesbians rather than a social group (Barnes); though, of course, the DOB frequently acted as both. By the 60s, the DOB would relax many of its views on the ideal lesbian, eager to reach a wider population and unwilling to turn away potential members looking for community.

As the DOB grew in size, with new chapters of the organization forming across America, and a few even popping up in Australia (Barnes), they continued to perform respectability in a way that allowed them to traverse the public/private bounds with gusto. The DOB organized public forums on homosexuality, transforming the “gaping tourist” referenced by Martin and Lyon from a threat to a potential boon as the organization invited the curious to view a carefully cultivated scene of well-dressed lesbians engaged

in respectful, intellectual discussions. The public settings of many DOB events were more than an effort to present a respectable face to society and win over detractors, according to Meeker, “public places provided space for ‘guilt-free’ association” (84). As Meeker points out in *Contacts Desired*, when interrogating where *The Ladder* and the Daughters of Bilitis fall within the private/public dichotomy, one must not conflate privacy with safety – indeed, an act shrouded in privacy, like meeting at a lesbian friend’s home for drinks and dancing, may have been perceived as particularly dangerous insofar as privacy teases potential illicitness to onlookers (e.g. “What are those two women doing behind closed doors?”) (84). The DOB often used *The Ladder* to advertise such public gatherings, encouraging readers to abandon their physical isolation and join their sisters. Indeed, as will be examined in following sections, partially due to the DOB’s headquarters’ location in San Francisco and partially due to *The Ladder*’s exchanges between readers and promotion of DOB events, discourse produced through these spaces helped cultivate a lesbian geography, framing places like San Francisco as ideal locations to be a lesbian (and meet other lesbians).

As a nationally-distributed periodical, *The Ladder* helped change the way lesbians learned, talked, and thought about themselves, paving the way for the affordances available to queer women’s publications on the Web. For those that couldn’t make the journey to a city that housed a DOB chapter, *The Ladder* provided a forum for connecting to other lesbians, sometimes right under the noses of straight family members (here one might imagine a young lesbian browsing a lesbian website on her laptop in her bedroom as connected to a lesbian from the 50s furtively reading *The Ladder* while her family sleeps). As a vehicle for facilitating information about lesbianism directed to lesbians,

*The Ladder* also frequently “links” readers to additional sources, like trustworthy professionals and other lesbian magazines or novels and films about lesbianism. I consider the variety of discourses encapsulated by *The Ladder* as a form of collective intelligence, a term Jenkins borrows from French cybertheorist Pierre Levy, used to denote the mass of knowledge and expertise cultivated by a virtual community (4). Yet, in Jenkins’ summation of collective intelligence within convergence culture, he downplays the concept’s presence regarding all topics but popular culture, stating, “Right now, we are mostly using this collective power through our recreational life, but soon we will be deploying those skills for more ‘serious’ purposes” (4). *Just Between Us Girls* demonstrates ways collective intelligence, which this project frames as theory, thrived in a pre-Web world, and also argues that, for queer women, popular culture and its representation of queer women can indeed be quite serious.

The following sections of this chapter analyze content from *The Ladder*, letters from *Ladder* readers, and memoirs of the women behind the publication, examining how the magazine’s ideological and economic practices fueled the production of lesbian theory and a lesbian subculture.

### Rung by Rung: Climbing *The Ladder* towards Lesbian Theory

Funds for *The Ladder* came from subscriptions, an allotted line in the DOB budget, generous donations, and to a lesser extent, advertisements.<sup>3</sup> With the exception of some San Francisco friends’ advertisements in the late 1950s, no ads appeared in *The Ladder* that weren’t related to DOB activities or other products the organization sold

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<sup>3</sup> Most donated funds came from an anonymous donor only known as “Pennsylvania,” who donated approximately \$3,000 annually to the organization (see Gallo and Meeker).

(Gallo 164). As Heather Murray describes in “Free to All Lesbians,” by the 70s, this practice of only running ads targeting lesbians or marketing products sold by lesbians had become a common feature of lesbian periodicals. Indeed, as Chapter 3 explores, this subcultural practice helps explain *AfterEllen* users’ dismay when the website began running ads that targeted neither lesbians nor women. The economic practices around lesbian discursive spaces do more than facilitate the space’s survival, they promote the idea of and perform a self-sustaining lesbian culture. *The Ladder* writers and readers constructed and employed lesbian economic practices while confronting the challenges of surviving in a heteropatriarchal capitalist economy, often promoting values alternative to those promoted in a capitalist market. Some of the economic practices of *Ladder* readers render the figures for readership impossible to determine. Readership was larger than circulation, partially because reading *The Ladder* resulted in its own kind of performed lesbian sociality, with subscribers all over the country hosting “*Ladder* Parties,” reading the magazine aloud to a gathered group of friends (Streitmatter 28). The DOB eventually gained official status as a non-profit organization and at that point generally subsisted through donations and membership fees, though readers of *The Ladder* exceeded members of the DOB in number. Unlike *Vice Versa*, the magazine’s circulation was not originally intended to be “just between us girls.” The names on *The Ladder*’s first mailing list included heterosexuals like lawyers and doctors who had influence on (and, they hoped sympathy for) the lesbian’s life. *The Ladder*’s target audience changed throughout its run, however, and by the end of its publication, *The Ladder* proclaimed itself to be for all women. The DOB sent the first issue of *The Ladder* for free, asking for a one-dollar donation for a yearly subscription. By 1972, the last year of the publication,

the amount raised to \$7.50 for subscriptions within the United States, a price shift indicative of both a changing economy and a magazine that had increased in length and, with its glossy covers and photographs of real lesbians, arguably also increased in quality.

As the first national lesbian magazine produced by, for, and about lesbians, *The Ladder* demonstrates the economy's role not only in maintaining spaces for lesbians but also in performances of lesbianism. Economic values and practices in and around *The Ladder* act as reiterations of the space's identity and the identity of individuals within that space. At the time of this writing, more and more LGBT discursive spaces reside online, inciting anxieties around capitalism's impact on marginalized identities (more on this in Chapter 3). Discursive spaces like lesbian websites seem to be following the same pattern as lesbian bars as they fold due to a lack of profit, and onlookers often use these closures to assert the incompatibility of the lesbian with a capitalist economy. In *Sexual Politics*, *Sexual Communities*, John D'Emilio elaborates on reasons lesbian bars never took a parallel place in lesbian culture as gay bars have in gay culture:

Whereas married men could engage in casual sexual encounters with relative ease, marriage virtually excluded women from lesbian life. Like all businesses, the tavern depended on customers with money to spend; women of the working class had extremely limited resources. [...] The questionable legality of establishments that catered to "sexual perverts" encouraged underworld investment, a management that contributed to seedy atmosphere, and the opening of lesbian bars in run-down parts of town. (98)

Even considering the economic constraints on lesbians, D'Emilio's argument also suggests not only the difficulty but the consequences of the incompatibility of the image of the lesbian and the image of the consumer. Discursive spaces for lesbians and queer women offer a means of working around such constraints, and, despite often depending on participants for income, find ways to build community through their economic practices.<sup>4</sup>

Not only did lesbians lack a male counterpart to provide financial support, but also marketing to a group whose identities and communications had been shaped by secrecy proved difficult. Indeed, while circulation and distribution statistics are impossible to determine exactly, in reflecting on the results of placing *The Ladder* on newsstands Martin and Lyon state, "Lesbians do not go to newsstands and buy anything that says Lesbian on it. Reports that came back to us indicated that with few exceptions the magazine was bought by men – either for their Lesbian friends or because, as heterosexuals, they thought it might be sexy. It wasn't" (252). Instead of painting the lesbian as a lousy consumer, Lyon's and Martin's reflections suggest a danger for lesbians in linking themselves to lesbian identity through material or personal association that doesn't exist for demographics less likely to be (mis)recognized as a lesbian, like straight men. If a lesbian purchased a lesbian magazine, the action could imply or even confirm a deviant sexuality, while interest and arousal in lesbians was/is considered normative within the wide purview of male heterosexuality. This problem reflects issues of access that had constrained lesbian reading experiences before (see Introduction). Lesbians seeking to read about homosexuality in the library, for example, often felt

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<sup>4</sup> See John D'Emilio's "Capitalism and Gay Identity," in which D'Emilio traces the emergence of gay and lesbian identity to the beginnings of capitalism.

exposed and vulnerable when asking for the texts that, through their content and frequent placement in restricted sections, seemed to scream indecency. Such challenges prohibited lesbians' access to discourse about their own identities.

Martin's and Lyon's experience also reflects the differing effects of economic practices when performed by different individuals. In other words, *The Ladder* shows how the affective value of purchasing lesbian goods has changed through the decades along with lesbian subjectivity's connection to lesbian economic practices. In "The Anxiety of Affluence: Movements, Markets, and Lesbian Feminist Generations," Dana Heller traces the "generational shift" from lesbian-feminist to queer, paying particular attention to queer cultural production and the connection between consumption and lesbian/queer identity. Heller argues that the radical promises of queerness have dimmed, citing critics' concerns that queerness is too easily co-opted into normative and normalizing frameworks, like global capitalism. This coupling of queerness and capitalism encourages the equation of consumption with political action, suggesting, for instance, that buying a rainbow flag or purchasing a season of *RuPaul's Drag Race* constitutes politics. Heller empathizes with the desires of queer individuals for "a solidarity that can be purchased" and seems to allow that the affective value of queer consumption, even under capitalism, may be high, though not systemic (313). Yet, Heller states, the problem lies not in the act of consumption itself, but in viewing consumption as the beginning and end of queer politics (313). By considering Heller's vision of camp commodity in relation to *The Ladder*, one sees how practices like *Ladder* parties or purchasing a subscription as a gift for a lesbian lacking extra income demonstrate a critique of capitalist structures and also a performance of communal lesbian identity.



## Girl Talk (with the Boys): Figuring the Lesbian (and the Heterosexual) in a Lesbian Discursive Space

By the time the DOB began publishing *The Ladder* in 1956, the group had established four core objectives, which would appear on the inside cover of most every issue of the magazine, establishing the publication's connection to the DOB and also setting standards for the kind of lesbian theorizing possible in the discursive space.<sup>5</sup> I treat the DOB's objectives in a similar manner to the "About" pages of the websites in this project, insofar as they establish particular parameters of discourse acceptable for *Ladder* participants, promote the space's values, and endow participants with authority. Because of the interconnectedness of the DOB and *The Ladder* (even though the two bodies would eventually separate and often promoted contrasting ideologies), I quote the objectives in their entirety:

1) Education of the variant, with particular emphasis on the psychological, physiological, and sociological aspects, to enable her to understand herself and make her adjustment to society in all its social, civic, and economic implications – this to be accomplished by establishing and maintaining as complete a library as possible of both fiction and non-fiction literature on the sex deviant theme; by sponsoring public discussions on pertinent subjects to be conducted by leading members of the legal, psychiatric, religious and other professions; by advocating a mode of behavior and dress acceptable to society.

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<sup>5</sup> In the December/January 1969/1970 issue, Editor Gene Damon removed "A Lesbian Review" (an addition during Barbara Gittings' tenure as editor) from *The Ladder's* front page and also stopped publishing the DOB's objectives. More on this at the end of the chapter.

- 2) Education of the public at large through acceptance first of the individual, leading to an eventual breakdown of erroneous taboos and prejudices; through public discussion meetings aforementioned; through dissemination of educational literature on the homosexual theme.
- 3) Participation in research projects by duly authorized and responsible psychologists, sociologists and other such experts directed towards further knowledge of the homosexual.
- 4) Investigation of the penal code as it pertains to the homosexual, proposal of changes to provide an equitable handling of the cases involving this minority group, and promotion of these changes through due process of law in the state legislatures. (Purposes)

The terms “variant” and “sex deviant” likely strike contemporary readers as alarming or regressive, and, eventually *The Ladder* would cease use of them. However, in the beginning of its publication, *The Ladder* used the terminology favored by the medical community, likely so *Ladder* participants and “medical experts” could have a lexicon in common for the sake of their discourse. When Barbara Gittings became editor of *The Ladder* in 1963, “Lesbian” became the preferred term of the publication, with the “L” always capitalized, indicating the centrality of the identity within *The Ladder*’s discursive space. Along with the addition of “A Lesbian Review” subtitle to *The Ladder*’s covers, by the 60s it is clear that the discursive aims of the publication had shifted, though this section will argue that shift was partially enabled by the careful cultivation of lesbian expertise that occurred in *The Ladder*’s early years. It seemed, with “Lesbian” proudly

displayed on a national magazine available on newsstands, that Lisa Ben's dreams were already becoming a reality.

The DOB's objectives aligned *The Ladder* with a certain type of lesbian, excluding others who would have found their goals unattainable or undesirable. For instance, in "advocating a mode of behavior and dress acceptable to society," the DOB and *The Ladder* often advanced a very specific version of white, upper-middle-class femininity, though discourse in and practices around the magazine frequently produce ruptures in this image. *The Ladder's* facilitation of images of lesbians contrasting those found in pulp novels (which often featured alcoholic lesbians congregating in gay bars), occasionally deepened the divide between DOB lesbians and working-class lesbians. Both frightened by the commonality of alcoholism amongst their lesbian peers and adamant that associating too closely with the bar scene would limit the organization's effectiveness with a skittish heterosexual society, *The Ladder* was, nonetheless, inextricably connected to gay bars, with the magazine reporting on police raids of the bars and offering readers legal advice should they ever find themselves involved in a police raid. These subversions of discursive parameters demonstrate ways participants may theorize around particular stipulations of their discursive space. While *The Ladder* forefronts the DOB objective of helping the lesbian make "her adjustment to society," the methods for doing so revealed through *Ladder* content seem to contradict the assimilatory tone of the aforementioned goal. This objective can only be read as assimilatory if one assumes *The Ladder* did not aim to transform the society in which the lesbian was to make her adjustment. In fact, I would suggest that, along with providing (functionally)

flexible participatory parameters, *The Ladder's* "Purposes" statement acts as another instance of a performance of respectability obscuring more radical intentions.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, *The Ladder's* educational objectives, positioned to be accomplished through the production of a library of lesbian literature and outreach to lesbians and straight society, embarks on a rather queer mission of creating new frameworks in which lesbians could define themselves outside of the meaning-making systems prevalent in a patriarchal, heteronormative society. *The Ladder's* methods of education often involved directing readers to books like *The Second Sex* or connecting individuals to other resources, like counselors, vetted by the DOB. This prioritization of the lesbian (and her intellectual and emotional development) within a discursive space undoubtedly helped set the stage not only for websites devoted to lesbians and queer women but also for academic journals featuring lesbian and/or queer theory. As Marcia Gallo argues in *Different Daughters: A History of the Daughters of Bilitis and the Rise of the Lesbian Rights Movement*, "Where DOB differed from the mostly male homophile groups was in their emphasis on reaching the individual lesbian – 'the variant'- first and foremost" (16). Consider the order of the DOB objectives listed on *The Ladder's* inside cover: the first priority of the organization and publication revolves around the lesbian, the education of the public stays second – and secondary – on *The Ladder's* agenda. While, as historians like Streitmatter argue, *The Ladder* did not aim to "transform [readers] into militant activists" as its main objective was education (22), my chapter views *The Ladder* as a site contributing to the creation of lesbian politics and stays wary of the education/politics binary. After all, education breeds its fair share of militant activists, and women who

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<sup>6</sup> See also Meeker's "Behind the Mask of Respectability: Reconsidering the Mattachine Society and Male Homophile Practice, 1950s and 1960s."

participated in *The Ladder*'s discursive space, like Rita Mae Brown, would later apply theory developed in the publication to support lesbian-separatist politics. Even without this theoretical lineage, however, *The Ladder* put education to radical use by creating a space where lesbians could theorize with and learn from other lesbians.

Much like *Vice Versa*,<sup>7</sup> though on a national scale, *The Ladder* showed lesbians they weren't alone and connected individuals to new ideas about their identity and the possibility of lesbian community. Part of the power of *The Ladder* as a generator of discourse and theory lies in its reach to readers in a range of places and circumstances, which allowed various voices and opinions to reach *The Ladder* and build an ongoing dialogue. While, from 1956-1972, even with the popularity of *The Ladder*, lesbian community may not have been "a click away," *The Ladder* nonetheless prefigures the traversal of geographical distance afforded by the Web. In "Lesbians are from Lesbos: Sappho and Identity Construction in *The Ladder*," Jody Valentine states, "*The Ladder* [...] creat[ed] a social discourse in which identity could be constructed diachronically through ongoing dialogue as, each month, the current issue arrived in the mail and readers in diverse and often lonely places sat down to read it and respond with submissions for the next issue" (145). As the only lesbian magazine at that time, for some women, the monthly issue would be the only "proof" that other lesbians existed, particularly lesbians living happy, successful lives. *The Ladder*'s "Living Propaganda" column featured stories by lesbians who had discovered community, love, and self-

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<sup>7</sup> See the Introduction for more information on *Vice Versa*. None of the founding DOB members had ever heard of Lisa Ben or *Vice Versa* when beginning to publish *The Ladder*. The foremothers of lesbian journalism would eventually connect, however, with Ben contributing some content to *The Ladder* and eventually becoming secretary of her local chapter of DOB. Once learning of Ben's musical talents, the DOB advertised sales of a record of two of Ben's cover songs (Ben frequently changed the lyrics to popular music in order to create gay themes).

understanding, and frequently gave readers encouragement that they could do the same. As *Ladder* reader “Margery” wrote to the editors in 1963, “I have subscribed to the *Ladder* since August and have loved every issue; it has been like a lighted candle in the dark forest here in Oregon where no one, nothing, no publication or organization of any kind exists to help the homophile” (Margery 1).<sup>8</sup> Yet a lighted candle can also attract attention, and many lesbians wondered at the risk DOB members and *Ladder* readers were taking in order to educate society, particularly because education demanded lesbian visibility, which risked danger. A *Ladder* reader signing as A.C. remarked on the DOB convention an event that brought together homophiles from across the country.<sup>9</sup> While in many ways the convention might be viewed as a success, A.C. argued, “it would seem the convention only made the public more aware that there are more lesbians now than ever and perhaps something should be done to prevent this” (A.C. 6). This reader’s anxiety emphasizes the radical consequences of the DOB’s efforts to create a stable discursive space for lesbians. Martin Meeker argues that in creating “stable, authoritative, candid, and public” sexual communication networks, the homophile movement asked homosexual participants to “change their way of being queer, a change that would entail both loss and gain” (35). The double-edged sword of secrecy had fostered feelings of isolation, but also guaranteed straight society had little *real* idea about lesbian and gay life, a dynamic that had its advantages for individuals whose safety often required passing as straight. In many ways, *The Ladder* was yanking open the closet door, and, with great care and control, exposing lesbianism to straight society. While not quite “We’re here,

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<sup>8</sup> Archived items cited by container information are from the Daughters of Bilitis Records (Collection 1946), Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.

<sup>9</sup> The DOB almost always published conference proceedings in *The Ladder* both in order to advertise their events and also for the sake of women unable to join the event in person.

we're queer, get used to it," *The Ladder* does demonstrate an early understanding that the lesbian (or any sexual minority) exists in relation to (indeed, helps create) the straight majority. If one thing sets *The Ladder* apart from the other discursive spaces considered in *Just Between Us Girls*, it is the invitation to straight society to participate in a discursive space modeled by and for lesbians, an invitation to peer within the closet.

Elevating the lesbian to a position of authority involved establishing and developing a kind of lesbian authorship similar to that in *Vice Versa*. When Phyllis Lyon began editing *The Ladder*, she did so using a pseudonym, much like Edythe Eyde when she invented Lisa Ben. Not long after the first issue of *The Ladder* had circulated, Lyon and Martin began receiving letters from *Ladder* readers, ranging from terrified to furious, questioning the danger involved in being discovered with a lesbian magazine in one's mailbox. What if the government intercepted the mailing list? Would subscribers be out of a job? Were *Ladder* readers risking jail-time? Lyon attempted to ease the fears of *Ladder* readers, publishing an article titled "Your Name is Safe," but doing so under her pseudonym, Ann Ferguson. In the article, Lyon cited the 1953 Supreme Court case *United States v. Rumely* that declared the United States government could not constitutionally force a citizen to reveal the names of purchasers of texts (First Amendment Encyclopedia). She also assured readers that simply possessing a lesbian magazine in no way marked one *as* a lesbian – the magazine was directed towards anyone interested in the sexual variant's position in society, so heterosexual individuals received and contributed to the magazine as well as lesbians. However, Lyon seems to have realized the irony of publishing such an article under a pseudonym, and soon published an article titled "Ann Ferguson is Dead," in which Lyon "kills" her pseudonym

by signing her real name. Martin Meeker has credited this obituary to giving birth to a new kind of lesbian authorship and authority, “making a claim to individual rather than collective authority on the subject of homosexuality. She was not any lesbian, she was a particular woman, who lived in a specific place, who had a unique history” (93). By signing her real name, Lyon had also insisted on the importance of specific experiences of individual lesbians – not only did these experiences warrant publishing but in being published they presented opportunities for connection to a community of lesbians, and an opportunity to examine differences between individuals within the community.

While, like *Vice Versa*, *The Ladder* certainly helped lesbians establish themselves as authorities on their own sexuality, the national magazine took a slightly different route to the pursuit of this objective by seeking outside professionals with which *Ladder* readers could dialogue. The participation of “outsiders” in the discursive space of *The Ladder* certainly caused controversy among readers and DOB members (more on this later), but even past detractors of this strategy have come to view it as an essential first step in transforming the representations of lesbianism in medical, legal, and popular culture. For instance, while Barbara Gittings’ time as editor would launch *The Ladder* into a more outspokenly political phase than Martin’s or Lyon’s editorships, Gittings nonetheless feels that *The Ladder*’s early strategy of engaging with outside experts (like doctors or psychologists) for information on lesbianism helped combat the internalized homophobia felt by many lesbians at the time (Esterberg 68). In order to alter perceptions of the lesbian, *The Ladder* reached out to the founts feeding the tides of negative information that were overwhelming many homosexuals at the time: medical professionals, researchers, and lawyers. Before claiming the term “lesbian” as their own,



*The Ladder* writers and readers would first have to *make* the term their own, partially by wresting “lesbian” away from those society had deemed experts.

While part of this reclamation occurred through forging their own rhetorical situations that allowed lesbians to keep control of their message and audience in ways that mainstream avenues could not, making lesbian identity the terrain of lesbians also involved many discussions around what sort of lesbian performances constituted lesbian subjectivity. Readers might take experts to task for their articles in the “Readers Respond” column or send in their own articles to further discussion on an expert’s opinion, no longer treating doctors and researchers as those who had the final word on lesbianism. In the October 1961 issue, F.B. responds to a letter in the “Masculine Viewpoint” column<sup>10</sup> that had praised lesbians for their courage and “depth of human understanding” (19). F.B. argues that while the author had good intentions, he also clearly had unchecked biases that shone through in his letter: “[The writer] refers to homosexuality as a ‘quirk’ and says there are many [male heterosexuals] who dare not be anything more interesting than normal. The unintentional implication is that heterosexuality is dull but normal while homosexuality is interesting but not normal” (25). F.B. rejects the writer’s essentialist statement that lesbians are naturally more empathetic or understanding than heterosexuals, stating, “the prevalent concept of ‘normal’ is faulty and is often used as a tool to strengthen already exaggerated drives towards conformity and in-groupness with the majority” (24). *Ladder* readers often make these theoretical moves in their responses to content, analyzing and deconstructing society’s construction of sexual minorities. Thus, through *The Ladder*, lesbians and

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<sup>10</sup> The “Masculine Viewpoint” column featured letters written by lesbian-friendly men. This column ceased appearing in *The Ladder* after Martin’s editorship.

“experts” on lesbians dialogued with one another in a forum that destabilized normative notions of power and authority so that lesbians might have a say in the construction of their identities.

For *The Ladder*'s early years, there was little about the magazine's appearance that marked it as “lesbian” to the naked eye, a fact that may have ultimately hurt newsstands sales since in an era of exploitative lesbian fiction “the popular lesbian paperback fiction of the day wore covers and carried copy that shouted lesbianism [...] and consequentially sold quite well” (Meeker 96). *The Ladder*, on the other hand, featured drawings (and eventually photographs) of women who were, through their dress or location, coded as lesbian, which, in addition to *The Ladder*'s unrevealing title, resulted in only those “in the know” recognizing *The Ladder* as a lesbian magazine. Yet, the innocuous title and coded pictures of women helped *The Ladder* escape notice from the censors and also helped dissipate anxieties about being seen purchasing or reading the magazine. Thus, for the DOB, straight participants were not a grab at legitimacy through assimilation, but rather a way to make the space safer. The concept of “safe spaces” in this case shifts so that safety is more of a process than a state of being. At the time of this writing, often safe spaces for LGBT individuals are characterized through their exclusivity – that is, part of what makes a lesbian bar a “safe space” is the lack of straight people and men. However, the historical and cultural context of the 50's made it so, for the DOB, creating a safe space for lesbians involved creating a space that had nothing to hide, a space that would not cause anxiety or bewilderment to straight society.

From educating the public and individual lesbians to participating in scientific research and lobbying for legal change, many of the DOB and *Ladder*'s goals depended

on contending with the image of the lesbian as a “psychopath” or “sicko,” and so Ladder writers frequently rejected certain conflation of gender and sexuality while embracing others. With the post-WWII conservative turn and the popularity of psychoanalysts like Sigmund Freud, Lillian Faderman writes, lesbians “were affected particularly by the growing interest in mandating conformity through what was promoted as ‘mental health.’ It was at this time [1950s] that the lesbian ‘sicko’ became the dominant image of the woman who loved other women and curing lesbians on the couch became a big business in America” (*Odd Girls* 130). Often medicalized objections to lesbianism redounded to dominant beliefs about a woman’s role in society, which meant a woman could be “diagnosed” as a lesbian for showing too much interest in business or education, for example. Faderman considers Freud’s only study on lesbianism, “The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman,” and argues that “feminism is seen as a chief manifestation of his subject’s sexual ‘abnormality’” (*Odd Girls* 130). This association of lesbians with feminists has served various social and political motivations, perhaps most notably for this project the development of lesbian-feminist politics, which *The Ladder* helped generate.

Furthermore, here, Freud’s concern with lesbians’ (in)ability to adjust to society mirrors the DOB’s objective of helping the lesbian “make her adjustment to society” (“Purposes”). In “From Illness to Action,” Esterberg uses content from *The Ladder* to chart changes in lesbians’ acceptance of negative medicalized discourse about homosexuality. Unsurprisingly, this discourse often led to debates on the pages of *The Ladder* about the causes of lesbianism, with the DOB initially favoring the stance that homosexuality is not a choice, but rather a trait with which one is born. This position – in

a debate that continues to incite fervent opinions from homosexuals and heterosexuals today – brought benefits and challenges and was certainly a strategic stance taken by an organization that had its sights set on ridding America of stigmas attached to lesbianism. Arguing for an understanding of lesbian sexuality as innate problematizes tendencies to view homosexuality as a moral failing or sin. In this vein, as Esterberg argues, “Lesbians may not choose to be [lesbians], according to this position, but must make the best of what they have been given with no blame attached. The danger of this strategy is that homosexuality may not be seen as simply a natural variation [...] but as a variation that is inferior or pathological” (72). In fact, some strains of discourse produced in *The Ladder* reinforce a framing of lesbian readers as inferior to heteronormative society, or at least ill-adjusted and in need of guidance from other lesbians.

While the “born this way” narrative may have been largely embraced by the DOB during Lyon and Martin’s periods as editors (1956-1959 and 1960-1963 respectively), and, as suggested above, this theorizing of lesbian subjectivity risks presenting lesbians as inferior to heterosexuals, *The Ladder* never presented a homogenous view on this (or, really, any) topic. In a letter from Martha Shelley, published in the April-May 1969 issue of *The Ladder*, Shelley closes her defense of “lesbian pride” by asserting, “I do not believe that people are born homosexuals and that they ‘can’t help it.’ Most of us cannot change [...] because of an inner pride which refuses to submit to the male. We need not apologize for this pride” (42). Indeed, by the end of Martin’s tenure as editor, her opinions on the nature vs. nurture debate also changed, and she used her last editorial to encourage readers to understand their sexuality as a choice -- and then to take responsibility for that choice. In the January 1963 editorial, “It’s Time for Change,”

Martin expresses hope that as a new editor takes over *The Ladder*, the publication will focus more on the education of homosexuals and less on engaging with heterosexuals, because only through education can the homosexual come to understand “he is homosexual because he ‘chose’ to be. [...] This choice may not have been a conscious one, but the homosexual’s pattern of behavior and the course of his life is directed by his own reactions toward himself and others, by his own deeds” (22). Martin toes the line here between claiming homosexuality is a choice and claiming homosexual actions are a choice, seemingly reluctant to pin the identity to an innate trait or a set of behaviors. Instead, Martin’s focus lies in compelling readers to take responsibility for the image they present to society, though in context her request has a less assimilatory and more subversive rationale. Martin implies that her stance frees homosexuals to cultivate agency in their lives, instead of viewing themselves as enslaved to their circumstances: “I and I alone am responsible for who I am” (23).

However, *The Ladder* did attract readers who happily identified with the negative stereotypes discouraged in such pieces. Readers like L.P. from Texas respond to the idea that performances of lesbianism deviating from white, middle-class performances harm the community, stating, “The so-called fringe society (that is, ballfield and bar oriented) is really an honest way of life [...] We definitely do not think we are a ‘fringe’ group. We all have to live in a heterosexual society, and although we hold our own and you won’t find us hanging our heads in shame, we mind our own business and live quite peaceably” (23). L.P. counters narratives that present lesbians involved in bar-culture as antithetical to the DOB and *The Ladder*’s purposes, arguing that she and others like her have been able to make their adjustments to society and have done so without suppressing that

which may set them apart from white, middle-class lesbians. Asserting the existence of communities existing within communities, L.P. aligns herself with a collective “we” that thrives simultaneously alongside and apart from the type of lesbianism promoted by some *Ladder* participants.

As *The Ladder* marched further into the 60s, erstwhile foci on reconciling mainstream society to the lesbian (and vice versa) faded, likely due to many factors. The Civil Rights Movement had captured lesbians’ attention, many involving themselves in struggles for racial equality and learning strategies, risks, and potential gains involved in fighting systemic oppression. With America further divided over the Vietnam War, the kind of public, in-your-face- activism that seemed impossible to lesbians during the 50s became popular, and *The Ladder* began publishing pieces on the benefits of picketing, for instance, and the prerogative of the lesbian to join other political causes. Additionally, similarly to other discursive spaces discussed in this project (particularly *AfterEllen*, analyzed in Chapter 3), the shifting leadership of *The Ladder* greatly influenced the possibilities and limits of the theory produced in its discursive space. Throughout its run, *The Ladder* had five editors: Phyllis Lyon (1956-1960), Del Martin (1960-1963), Barbara Gittings (1963-1966), Helen Sandoz (1966-1968), and Barbara Grier, also known as Gene Damon (1968-1972). Each of these editors would advance slightly different political goals through *The Ladder*, though those in charge of the magazine were beholden to both the DOB’s national governing board of officers (who were DOB members elected by the organization) and to the national general assembly (a bi-annual meeting of DOB members to discuss and vote on policy and practice). Conflicts between *The Ladder* editor and the DOB governing board were not infrequent, particularly after

Martin's tenure as editor, and these conflicts often help make apparent the fissures in a newly formed lesbian community still attempting to iron out its values and political tactics.

And so, with *The Ladder* reaching more lesbians than ever, and theorizations of lesbianism developing along with the lesbian's growing authority to analyze and articulate her own experiences, lesbians around the world gained a community informed (but not limited by) space and place. Lesbians who previously thought they were all alone suddenly became aware that others existed across the country (and even in other countries), and with this new knowledge and the inclusion of "new" perspectives, *The Ladder's* theorizations of lesbianism grew more diverse. In the next section, I explore ways *The Ladder* enabled the development of a local/global lesbian identity as well as the ways in which *The Ladder* established its own "placeness," an establishment that made possible the performances and theorizations of sexuality within its pages.

"Where My Girls At?"<sup>11</sup>: Using *The Ladder* to Bridge the Local and Global

Whether struggling to find spaces to meet in safety or navigating the heteronormative streets as a homosexual, the concept of "place" holds an important position in theorizing sexuality. Research on gay (and to a lesser extent, lesbian) neighborhoods, queer migration, and sexual citizenship has heavily incorporated queer theory into its modes of analyses. For instance, the conflation of queer bodies with urban spaces has been problematized by theorists like Mary Gray in *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America* and Jack Halberstam in *In a Queer Time*

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<sup>11</sup> "Where My Girls At?" is a popular 1999 song produced by Missy Elliot, a lesbian hip-hop artist and producer frequently covered on *Autostraddle*.

*and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner's "Sex in Public" describes the institutions and values that privilege the married straight couple as "national heterosexuality," arguing that the morals and values giving primacy to heterosexual couples transform the national culture in the imaginations of its citizens into "a sanitized space of sentimental feeling and immaculate behavior, a space of pure citizenship" (549). Meeker provides a thoughtful and thorough analysis of the role of print in helping both to create gay and lesbian geographies and mediated community (*Contacts Desired*). Building on these theories, this section claims that, when theorizing place in *The Ladder*, individuals constructed a version of lesbianism affected but not confined by location – a radical notion for many individuals who lived in geographical isolation from a lesbian community.

As detailed above, while often individuals did develop a local lesbian identity through participation in the bar scene, many felt the risks associated with the bars were too high or felt like outsiders in what could often be a cliquish environment. Surreptitiously visiting a lesbian friend also left many unsatisfied, since the surreptitiousness around these meetings implied illicitness and often could rouse suspicion, especially in neighbors on the lookout for homosexuals. If, for some, desire for a local lesbian identity couldn't be satisfied through face-to-face interactions, then lesbians would be left with representations of lesbians, often turning to the publications that *did* mention them: newspapers that reported on the arrests of "perverts"<sup>12</sup> at gay bars

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<sup>12</sup> "Sex offender" was another common term for homosexual. As Gayle Rubin states in "Thinking Sex," "The term 'sex offender' sometimes applied to rapists, sometimes to 'child molesters,' and eventually functioned as a code for homosexuals. In its bureaucratic, medical, and popular versions, the sex offender discourse tended to blur distinctions between violent sexual assault and illegal but consensual acts such as sodomy" (145).



and pulp novels that, in order to comply with censorship laws, frequently featured lesbian characters who met grisly ends or “turned straight” as a resolution to the plot.<sup>13</sup>

Cultivating a global lesbian identity would have proven even more challenging, as women unable to connect to other lesbians or information about lesbianism in their town or city may have struggled to even find inspiration to imagine the forms lesbianism could take in other countries.<sup>14</sup>

Despite these challenges, a sort of “gay geography” would emerge with the help of communication networks like *The Ladder*. When Meeker considers the geography-making enabled by gay and lesbian communication networks, he charts “changing experiences of place and the imaginations of place,” paying particular attention to the ways that communication networks enabled gay men and lesbians to imagine a “homosexual network” that stretched beyond their own immediate experiences (*Contacts Desired* 12). For example, *The Ladder* inspired many readers to move to San Francisco, the location of DOB headquarters, and, as Meeker notes, relocating to a city that boasted a chapter of the DOB like New York or Los Angeles was one of the few sure ways to guarantee frequent face-to-face contact with groups of lesbians. However, partially due to theorizations of cities and countries that do not consider the two categories dialectically, theories of lesbian and gay culture frequently prioritize the urban while neglecting the rural (*In a Queer Time* 35).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>See *Queer Pulps: Perverted Passions from the Golden Age of the Paperback* by Susan Stryker for a detailed overview of queer paperbacks in the 60s.

<sup>14</sup> An example of this struggle to imagine, let alone develop a global lesbian identity comes from Ger van Braam’s letters to *The Ladder*, which will be discussed later.

<sup>15</sup> See George Chauncey’s *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940*.

Recent queer theorists have battled the assumption that queer culture emerges predominately from cities, arguing for conceiving an symbiotic relationship between the urban and the rural, where the metropolitan model of queerness interacts with local and rural models (*In a Queer Time* 38). In *Out in the Country*, Mary Gray argues that exploding the urban/rural binary reveals casualties of visibility politics in LGBT discourse, and the consequential neglect of rural LGBT individuals in scholarship (Gray 4). This spatialized conception of the coming out narrative wherein a queer goes from repressed to liberated after moving from a small town to a city has been termed the metronarrative by Judith Halberstam. In describing metronarrativized migration, Halberstam states, “the story of migration from ‘country’ to ‘town’ is a spatial narrative within which the subject moves to a place of tolerance after enduring life in a place of suspicion, persecution, and secrecy” (*In a Queer Time* 37). Of course, as with all normative frameworks, the problem with the metronarrative lies in the other histories it renders invisible, in the rich queer subcultures of rural towns, for instance, or in the ways that epistemologies other than the closet may guide queer individuals (*In a Queer Time* 37). Moreover, Halberstam argues, the metronarrative obfuscates the role of rural in the creation of metropolitan spaces for queers. Complicating narratives of the rural/urban and local/global binaries by demonstrating the mutually dependent nature of these categories illuminates movements and identities that have been overlooked in developments of physical and discursive queer space.

The theories of place and sexuality that occupy *The Ladder* reveal lesbians’ awareness of the dialectical relationship between the local/global and rural/urban. *The Ladder*’s efforts to promote “positive” images of the lesbian to society and other lesbians

represents an early instantiation of visibility politics and also demonstrates a symbiotic relationship between urban/rural, global/local, and in/out binaries that structure dominant histories of lesbian and gay identity. Establishing the lesbian as an individual connected to others locally and globally eventually became a consistent, explicit feature of *The Ladder* through columns like “Cross Currents” which published local news items sent in by readers and “Letters from Abroad.” Perhaps most famously in *The Ladder’s* history, Barbara Gittings corresponded with Ger van Braam, a *Ladder* reader from Indonesia who had written to Gittings, describing her isolation and thanking *The Ladder* editor-in-chief for the sense of connection fostered by the magazine. In “Isolation in Indonesia,” van Braam expresses her regret that she cannot fulfill Gitting’s request for information on lesbian life in Indonesia, for she only recently discovered her own lesbianism and has been unable to meet anyone else who identified as she did (9). The combination of a lack of resources on lesbianism and an inability to find other lesbians in Djakarta, “a city of millions,” makes her view stories of Western lesbianism she’s been able to read in the few textbooks and pulp novels available to her as “fairytale[s]” (9).

In her response Gittings articulates the necessity of a global lesbian perspective to develop one’s local perspective:

You say apologetically that you have nothing to offer us here. Not so! I sent your letter to [the fiction and poetry editor] who lives near San Francisco, and she in turn shared it with officers of the San Francisco chapter of DOB. They, too, were appalled at how difficult things are for you (and probably other lesbians in your country). Really your letter struck us hard, made us complacent American girls think about our Lesbian sisters in a way we hadn’t had to for a long time. The

“richness of feeling and understanding” which you so generously credit to us, can only come from being aware of and sympathetic with courageous women like you. (“Letter to Ger van Braam” 6)

This correspondence helped establish for *Ladder* readers from all over America an awareness of lesbian life in other countries as well as an idea that life for lesbians in the West, whatever its shortcomings, was better, allowing individuals to grow “complacent.” Gittings goes on to ask van Braam for permission to feature her letter in the upcoming *Ladder* issue in the new “Letters from Abroad” column, an addition that would not only demonstrate *The Ladder*’s far reach but also the fact that lesbianism was a global issue and identity. Here and in Gittings’ letter, one sees a problematic framing of America vis-à-vis Indonesia as Gittings marvels at the difficulty of Indonesian lesbian life compared to American lesbian life and positions knowledge about Indonesia as the fuel for affective energy and perception.<sup>16</sup> The lesbian community imagined by Gittings and van Braam also extends a promise of undiscovered “sisters” in faraway places, which helps establish lesbianism as a transcultural identity. Through content like this, *The Ladder* was able to facilitate the theorization of a global lesbian identity, greatly informed by individuals’ descriptions of their local experiences.

Despite her self-described isolation, van Braam, like many other *Ladder* readers, not only forged a discursive community through *The Ladder* but also an awareness of a diverse and widespread lesbian community throughout the world. Van Braam references “all the others” behind *The Ladder* and closes her letter by thanking *The Ladder* writers, emphasizing “[*The Ladder*] is so very much in our isolation” (11). The use of the plural

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<sup>16</sup> See Carly Simpson’s “Imperial Queerness: The Homophile Press and Constructions of Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific, 1953-1964.”

possessive suggests that while van Braam hasn't made contact with other lesbians, she nonetheless believes in their existence, partially thanks to *The Ladder's* production and circulation. And van Braam's supposition proved correct. In her next letter to Gittings, she describes a break in her solitude:

If I had any inclination to leave this country and to try my luck somewhere else, I'm sure I don't feel so any longer. I am sure there are more of our kind here, hundreds, thousands, and I want to detect them and give them at least our friendship and understanding and the enlightenment they so badly need.

("Thanksgiving from Indonesia" 10)

Here, again, van Braam connects herself to *Ladder* readers and writers along with other lesbians in Indonesia, desiring to offer "our kind [...] our friendship and understanding [...]" (10, my emphasis). Van Braam takes shared ownership of the understanding and enlightenment diffused by *The Ladder*, articulating her own role in developing a lesbian identity that renders global and local lesbian identity visible. Further, van Braam's decision to remain in Indonesia also problematizes the rural/urban (and East/West) dichotomy, with van Braam expressing confidence that she can create the sort of community she desires without migrating to San Francisco. This use of communication technologies prefigures one of the affordances of the Web described in the Introduction: the ability to reach a far-away, previously unimagined community of LGBT individuals.

Van Braam's reference to her lack of reading material inspired *The Ladder* to create a "Books for Ger" initiative that would provide van Braam and her friends with lesbian-themed books from DOB members in the States. Books like *The Second Sex* and *The Feminine Mystique* made their way to Djakarta, as the communication network of

*The Ladder* cultivated the idea that certain texts may be particularly important for a lesbian, regardless of that lesbian's location ("Thanksgiving from Indonesia"). Van Braam's correspondence became a prime example of the realization of the DOB's goals to connect to lesbians, and she eventually became the first woman photographed on the cover of *The Ladder*, providing yet another picture of the transcultural nature of lesbianism. Clearly, part of the "in-groupness" enabled by *The Ladder* occurs through a sense of communal knowledge and interests developed by "sharing" texts, and these circulated representations of the lesbian and lesbianism help develop subcultural canon that enforces the notion that a lesbian community has specific values and interests in common.<sup>17</sup>

Values and interests cultivated in *The Ladder* are also evidenced in columns such as "Here and There," which gathered news-clippings from readers around the country, effectively creating a category of lesbian news that contemporary readers can see emulated both through queer-focused websites and mainstream websites that feature columns with LGBT content. In 1961, the September issue of *The Ladder* called on readers to facilitate a broader awareness of the experiences of their scattered sisters:

We could also use clippings from our readers wherever they may be in order to keep up with the trends of public opinion regarding the homosexual. We would like to be apprised of court cases, gay bar raids, speeches, research studies, and anything else of interest to a homophile publication. And while we are about it,

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<sup>17</sup> While an in-depth review of the texts promoted and analyzed by *The Ladder* is outside the scope of this chapter, interested readers should reference Gene Damon's popular book review column in *The Ladder*, "Lesbiana." Also significant: Marian Zimmer Bradley's 1960 *Checklist: A Complete, Cumulative Checklist of Lesbian, Variant, and Homosexual Fiction*, for which Gene Damon acted as associate editor and *Sex Variant Women in Literature* by Jeanette Foster, who also contributed to *The Ladder*.

could we ask our out of towners to send us lists of professional persons whom we might sample – attorneys, psychiatrists, psychologists, psychiatric clinics, libraries, university or college psychology departments, etc. (“Readers Respond” 26)

Columns like “Here and There” and “Readers Respond” simultaneously show the ubiquity and uniqueness of lesbians – while lesbians may indeed be “here and there,” their experiences as lesbians develop in relation to the particular places they traverse and imagine.

Van Braam wasn’t the only woman far away from San Francisco, and for many *Ladder* readers, the experience of connection through a mediated network led to the desire for locational proximity where they wouldn’t need to wait for their monthly issue of *The Ladder* in order to feel connected to other lesbians. Women who felt disconnected from other lesbians and from information about lesbianism frequently wrote to DOB and *Ladder* staff, expressing their desire to move to San Francisco where, it seemed, everything was happening. Meeker argues that “such a letter signaled an important, generally new kind of longing” wherein “*The Ladder* stimulated in [the lesbian] an imaginative leap of wishing to be elsewhere, to move” (*Contacts Desired* 90-91). San Francisco and Greenwich Village were two popular destinations for which letter-writers would express longing. While the DOB headquarters and many DOB events were held in San Francisco, *The Ladder* helped concretize Greenwich Village as a lesbian location in many imaginations through its short stories, book reviews, and covers depicting that area.

Additionally, *The Ladder* facilitated connection between rural communities, serving as an example of a network that enabled “translocal” identity. Through *In a*

*Queer Time and Place*, Halberstam uses the term translocal to describe “a confluence of distance and similarity,” wherein one may find oneself more similar to someone geographically distant than to one’s own neighbors (38). After defining metronormativity and dissecting the power of the translocal particularly regarding understanding the murder of Brandon Teena, Halberstam calls for activists to create archives that provide records of “the complex interactions of race, class, gender, and sexuality” that “stretch far beyond the usual tales of love and hate and the various narratives of accommodation” (46). I argue that *The Ladder* offers records of translocal desire as well as an answer to Halberstam’s (rhetorical) question in *In a Queer Time*: “could there be some level of correspondence between a nonmetropolitan sexual system in rural Indonesia and one in rural Nebraska? And could both regions be considered other in relation to the dominant metropolitan model of gay male sexual exchange?” (38). Through *The Ladder*, critics see a development of global and metropolitan lesbian identity that depended on dialogue with local and rural lesbians, both to buttress the notion of a widespread lesbian community and to formulate one category’s role in conceptualizing another.

While *The Ladder* helped develop local/global and rural/urban lesbian identities, it also established *itself* as a place, one with possibilities, parameters, problems, and promises for lesbians. Web scholars like Brian King have argued that the symbiotic performances of identity and place continue in mediated, online discursive spaces, though, King implies traditional informational media like newspapers lack the “territorial hues” of the Web (2). However, *Just Between Us Girls* invests in the ways periodicals like *The Ladder* and websites like *AfterEllen* or *Autostraddle* converge, and the performance of lesbian discursive space develops from one medium to another. With this



in mind, the next section explores how politics of lesbian visibility invigorated *The Ladder* throughout its run, and the consequences of that visibility on the space's theorizations of lesbianism.

#### “Stand Up and Be Counted”: Theorizing the Lesbian and the Closet in *The Ladder*

When LGBT individuals took to the Web, scholars rushed after them. Suddenly the questions of visibility that have preoccupied gay and lesbian communities (and those who write about them) since their formation seemed reinvigorated by the affordances of the online world. In “A YouTube of One’s Own?” for instance, Jonathan Alexander and Elizabeth Losh analyze coming out videos, insightfully tracing the metadiscourse produced by online performances of outness, as well as the negotiation of sex, sexuality, and sexual identity (38). Similarly, in Bruce Drushel’s study of coming out and finding support through social networking sites, Drushel remarks on the Web’s transformation into “a space for exploring and re-configuring issues of sexuality and identity” (66). As discussed in the Introduction, much about the closet seemed to change or become more visible when taken online – suddenly visibility was just a click (or confessional video) away.

Of course, as this chapter has demonstrated, there was also a time when visibility was just a *Ladder* issue away. The magazine provided lesbians with affordances similar to that which the Web offers users, and also acted as “a space for exploring and re-configuring issues of sexuality and identity” (Drushel 66). *The Ladder*, with its emphasis on visibility politics, traced the discourse around visibility that would serve as foundational in later theoretical understandings of “coming out.” *Ladder* writers

thoroughly examined issues of authority and witness that underpinned goals of visibility, thoughtfully critiquing and complicating the visibility imperative still popular in LGBT activism. Here, it's useful to recall Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, wherein she challenges one of the closet's truisms that "If every homosexual came out, the closet would vanish" (71-72) Sedgwick argues that this kind of visibility politics ignores the reiterative nature of the closet and the dichotomy of visibility, wherein coming out of the closet reaffirms the existence of a closet and the presence of other, hidden, queers within it. Yet, even as *The Ladder* encouraged lesbians to "stand up and be counted" (the phrase often used in *The Ladder* as opposed to "coming out," which would gain popularity later), it also featured letters from lesbians who could not afford to come out, who had children or jobs – entire livelihoods that depended on the illusion of heterosexuality. These letters help disrupt the dichotomy of visibility, both because readers are reminded of closeted lesbians and because the letter-writer inevitably performs a type of "coming out" by writing to *The Ladder* and identifying herself as a lesbian while at the same time asserting the limits of her visibility. In other words, such content positions the letter-writer as simultaneously connected to and distanced from the lesbian community, because through her correspondence she has managed to "be counted," just not by those outside the discursive space of *The Ladder*.

As a publication largely focused on gaining visibility for lesbians, *The Ladder* often engaged with questions of what it meant to be "out" and with the power dynamics shaping the type of visibility desired. It has already been established in earlier sections of this chapter that when *The Ladder* promoted visibility, these promotions were often directed to lesbians who fit the DOB's version of the ideal lesbian – white, educated, and

middle class. However, as *The Ladder* continued its run and more voices began to join in lesbian-produced and lesbian-centered discourse, *Ladder* readers and writers debated fundamental questions concerning lesbian visibility: To whom should the lesbian be visible? What does lesbian visibility look like in a heteronormative society? If a lesbian feels she has gained visibility, how does she keep it? How might she “turn off” that visibility if she needs to pass? For the DOB and *The Ladder*, as well as other female homophile organizations, “visibility” remained on the agenda throughout the 60s and 70s as lesbians found themselves barely a footnote in the male homophile movements and unwanted allies in a women’s liberation movements that feared the stigma of lesbianism. Thus, “coming out” (though *The Ladder* rarely referred to announcing one’s lesbianism as “coming out”) became part of a political strategy for centralizing lesbian needs and finding and demonstrating affinities with other marginalized groups. Realizing these goals, however, meant developing strategies for negotiating the power dynamics of the closet.

Much of queer theory’s understanding of “the closet” begins with Eve Sedgwick’s text, *Epistemologies of the Closet*, though content in *The Ladder* suggests lesbians had developed a nuanced, complicated discourse on lesbian visibility and “outness” before Sedgwick wrote what would come to be considered one of the first examples of queer theory. According to Sedgwick (who builds from J.L. Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words*), as a speech act, coming out can be complicated by “how far authority over [homosexuality’s] definition has been distanced from the gay subject her – or himself” (52). Unlike the marriage ceremony, the performance of coming out isn’t sanctioned by state and social authority. Someone who comes out as gay may face questions such as

“How do you know?” or “Why are you telling me this now?” In order for a performative utterance to succeed, listeners/witnesses must somehow “consent” to this performance, that is, listeners must consent to the speaker’s authority to perform the speech act.

*The Ladder* radicalizes the closet’s dynamics by providing individuals with a pre-constituted audience of lesbians who act as consenting witnesses and provide the writer with mediated connection to community and visibility. For instance, a writer from Canada thanks *Ladder* staff for facilitating an otherwise unimaginable link to self-knowledge and community, bemoaning her dependence on a family from whom she must hide her sexuality, stating, “For me, for now and the near future till I can get out on my own, *The Ladder* and DOB are all I have or can allow myself to have” (Gabrielle S.). Even as she expresses regret that her disclosure must remain limited to *The Ladder*, this letter-writer has performed the act of disclosing her sexuality, and in the pages of *The Ladder*, she has the authority to do so. This sort of provisional outness demonstrated in the letter refuses a clear out/in, visible/invisible dichotomy, as the writer uses *The Ladder* to have her own lesbianism recognized. Similarly, one reader who identifies herself simply as a subscriber from the West Coast reveals the fissures in the dichotomies conceived around “visibility,” explaining that while she would love to “stand up and be counted,” her circumstances as a married mother of four limit her ability to do so. In asking for advice on how to balance her duties as a mother with her duties as a lesbian, she shows an awareness of the reiterative quality of the closet, writing, “How can I, a mother with so much responsibility to my children, still come out of hiding, so to speak, and be of some good to someone? There must be others such as I, who feel guilty in our damned security, who feel that they are being untrue to themselves in the way we have to

live” (A Subscriber 26). This letter-writer reveals the revolving door of the closet, a paradoxical situation wherein coming out constructs one’s own visibility partially through constructing the invisibility of others still “hiding” in the closet. In other words, in observing all of those who have stood up to be counted, the letter-writer logically wonders how many more have not made that choice.

Questions of authority and the imperative of visibility filtered through many features of *The Ladder*. In the September 1969 issue of *The Ladder*, a reader wrote into the “advice column” (titled “The Counsellor’s Corner”) which would eventually become a common feature of magazines and websites for queer women, to Dr. Ruth M. McGuire. In the letter, the writer asks if she and her partner should tell her parents they are lesbians, “assuming our parents are relatively stable” (29). McGuire does not sound the rallying cry “Stand up and be counted” but instead offers a nuanced reflection on the actors involved in the performance of coming out and on the caveats to the visibility directive that had been an underlying goal of *The Ladder* since its inception. McGuire cautions the writer to evaluate what she means when she attributes “relative stability” to her parents, suggesting this trait “could indicate a defensive system, a protective shell, if you will, that has not permitted pain and confusion to get through to them. What are their moral and ethical systems?” (29). Here McGuire wants the writer to consider the possibility that her parents, the potential witnesses of her speech act, may be unwilling to witness, unable to confer to their daughter the authority to disrupt a life rooted in the myths of heteronormativity. McGuire goes on to implore the writer to think of her own motivations for coming out to her parents as well – does she want to share her joy with them or is she nursing a repressed desire to punish herself by engineering separation through her

admission? McGuire's response cautions of the difficulty in unveiling ignorance as ignorance, particularly when willful ignorance can masquerade as "relative stability." In many ways, McGuire's warnings to the letter writer about the cultivated unknowing of her parents and the writer herself mirror Sedgwick's own dismantling of the dynamics of the closet decades later: "[coming out] can bring about the unknowing *as* unknowing, not as a vacuum or as the blank it can pretend to be but as a weighty and occupied and consequential epistemological space" (*Epistemology* 77). McGuire's letter implies that the relative stability the letter-writer associates with her parents may vanish if she breaks through the "defensive system" suppressing any new knowledge that could cause confusion and potential pain. Her parents' "unknowing" works as an epistemological cornerstone, supporting a "protective shell." Refusing to know upsetting things can produce a sense of security, so long as one doesn't recognize the depths of one's own unknowing. Though the letter-writer's concerns lie in coming out to her parents, she expresses no such hesitation in discussing her life with her partner and their shared love for her son within the discursive space of *The Ladder*. McGuire in particular and *Ladder* readers in general offer the writer a radicalized audience for self-disclosure, as this audience is unlikely to find the writer's lesbianism upsetting, dangerous, or unbelievable.

While, as a discursive space, *The Ladder* unsettles power dynamics of the closet through its implicit and explicit values and the authority it endows to lesbian individuals, *The Ladder* also disrupts the closet by lampooning its own idealizations of gaining equality through visibility. "Stand Up and Be Counted" by Jocelyn Hayward tells the story of a lesbian protagonist who makes the decision to come out after having "read (probably in *The Ladder*) that homosexuals, until they were willing to stand up and be

counted, were perpetuating their status as a misunderstood and maligned minority” (69). Comical miscommunications and variously failing attempts by Grizelda, the protagonist, to announce her homosexuality comprise the short story. Grizelda takes *The Ladder*’s advice to heart and nurses (what turns out to be) a naively passionate martyrdom regarding her announcements; she can find no one to give her speech act the consensus it needs to be “successful.” For Grizelda, standing up to be counted will not be a one-day affair. Hayward’s story instead presents visibility as a process, as the protagonist spends the day trying to “tell the world she was homosexual” (69), going so far as to ask a policeman if he wants to arrest her because she’s a lesbian, to which the officer apathetically responds, “Run along [...] You’re obstructing traffic” (74). The policeman challenges her assumption that her lesbianism would be the most disruptive occurrence to his shift – he simply wants her to stand on the sidewalk. The subtext here seems to be, “You can be a lesbian, but do it over there,” not exactly a reaction Grizelda had anticipated to her earth-shattering revelation. In another instance, after telling her boss that she is a lesbian and bracing herself for termination, her boss instead invites her to a dinner party at his house, barely stopping himself from saying her presence would be “a catch,” as it would add to an assortment of nonnormative party guests who apparently bring with them some social clout: “Why, to date we have had two negros, an abortionist, an alcoholic, and a white slave trader at our little soirees this season. I think it can fairly be said that we host the most successful parties in Rosedale Heights” (71). The situating of the lesbian among other subcultural identities – identities that add a shimmer of socially-commodifiable subservience to the party – exposes another issue with visibility politics: Those who do stand up to be counted are counted *as* the entirety of the

community. In this case, Grizelda's boss doesn't particularly care that the lesbian at his party is Grizelda, he's merely happy to have a lesbian there; any lesbian would do. Here, similar to the policeman, Grizelda's boss disturbs her assumption that her announcement necessitates her exit from the workforce. On the contrary, lesbians now have cultural capital that can help keep Grizelda's boss's parties successful, even if her coming out is not.

This story presents a deep awareness of the power dynamics of the closet as well as the ways these power dynamics shift depending on the time, place, and manner in which one comes out. Hayward depicts Grizelda as sincere but clueless, expecting reactions none of the other characters are interested in giving, as though she's reading a script from the 50s and the other characters remain firmly at the end of the 60s. The story also emphasizes the significance of one's audience for speech acts, as Grizelda tries her announcement on everyone from strangers, to co-workers, to her parents, all yielding different responses. Context, in the closet and in this story, is everything. For instance, perhaps the most unique coming out moment for Grizelda occurs when she decides to protest a movie that negatively depicts lesbians by standing outside of the theatre wearing a placard that says "Unfair to Homosexuals – We Aren't Like This." She is asked to move to the front of the theatre with her sign to attract more business. Again, in her quest for visibility, Grizelda becomes a commodity, or at least, in the example of the protest at the theater, a vehicle of a capitalist system uninterested in her lesbian values. Part of the conflict of the story derives from Grizelda, who has conflated her understanding of lesbianism with deviancy. It's not, necessarily, that Grizelda herself finds her lesbianism deviant but that she expects society to do so, and this expectation has painted for her a



picture of a successful coming out colored in tragedy. Hayward's story depicts this outlook as outdated and self-defeating, a depiction that continues *The Ladder's* habit of undercutting negative, tragic images of lesbianism.<sup>18</sup> More than an opportunity to laugh at an over-earnest protagonist, this story also examines the authority given to straight society in the quest for visibility – the characters to whom Grizelda confesses can (and do) make the closet as inescapable or inconsequential as they desire. Grizelda declares her lesbianism several times throughout the text, but the story leaves no doubt that, without an audience, Grizelda has failed to stand up to be counted.

By the late sixties, *The Ladder's* questions of lesbian visibility coalesced with questions of political alliances and intersectionality. Lesbians' position as women and homosexuals led to fervent debates about where lesbians' allegiance should lie – with the male homophile groups or with the women's liberationists. DOB leaders like Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon expressed their exasperation with male-dominated groups and conferences like the North American Conference of Homophile Organizations (NACHO, pronounced Nay-Ko), angry that the lesbian remained largely neglected by the homophile movement. In the August-September 1969 issue of *The Ladder*, Del Martin penned "No to Nacho: Why DOB Cannot Belong Legally" in which she reminded DOB members of the organization's by-laws (which forbid the DOB from formally taking on membership in another organization<sup>19</sup>) and argued that "DOB's first loyalty should be to the Lesbian" (17). In the same issue, an article by Rita Laporte (who would go on to serve as DOB's

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<sup>18</sup> For more on this, see "Lesbian Stereotypes in the Commercial Novel" by Marion Zimmer Bradley in the Sept. 1964 issue of *The Ladder: A Lesbian Review*. See also Chapter 4, which puts *Ladder* content dissecting negative lesbian stereotypes in conversation with *Autostraddle's* list of murdered lesbian and bisexual television characters.

<sup>19</sup> To be clear, individual DOB members were welcome to become members of or donate time and money to other organizations. What the by-laws prohibit is an organizational alliance between DOB and another group. DOB members feared lesbian needs would be subsumed in male homophile agendas.

last president), titled “Of What Use NACHO,” remarks on NACHO’s creation of a homosexual bill of rights that made no mention of lesbians. Laporte argues “It needs to be said over and over that the real gap within humanity is that between men and women, not that between homosexual and heterosexual” (18). Similar conversations continued in *The Ladder* throughout the late sixties, with more and more published pieces asserting the necessity of lesbians limiting their political efforts with men in order to focus on connecting to women, particularly women fighting for gender equality – a new height *The Ladder* might help lesbians reach.<sup>20</sup>

In fact, by 1970, there’s clear evidence in *The Ladder* of a theoretical convergence of lesbianism and feminism. Part of this convergence derives from the political and theoretical strategizing seen in *The Ladder*. In Laporte’s “No to NACHO” article, for instance, Laporte predicts,

When all homosexuals, male and female, have their rights as homosexuals, we Lesbians will have all the rights that women have. To be sure, this is a step in the right direction. We will no longer need to fear being fired from our lowly, boring, and ill-paid jobs by virtue of our Lesbianism. We will be fired, or at least not promoted, simply because we are women. A male homosexual couple will be an economic power indeed. And the Lesbian couple? (18)

Laporte’s misgivings proved founded: as the Introduction discusses, male homosexuals *are* figured as an economic power, while the inability of the capitalist market to imagine a lesbian consumer has contributed to the decrease in lesbian-only spaces. Readers

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<sup>20</sup> See also Del Martin’s “If That’s All There Is” where Martin pens her goodbye to her “alienated brothers” in the male homophile movement, announcing her intention to focus her political energy on women and encouraging DOB members to do the same (4).

echoed Laporte's and Martin's hope and enthusiasm for a coalition among lesbians and all women. In the 1970-71 Dec-Jan. issue of *The Ladder*, Robin Morgan writes that she is "tremendously excited about the new transformation of *The Ladder*. It's a most important development for all of us – Lesbians, 'bisexuals,' and straight women, that the magazine will now relate consciously to ALL women, and to the revolution for women's rights" (46). In theoretically negotiating sexuality and gender, *The Ladder* reminds lesbians of the need to strategically elevate aspects of identity in order to cultivate political agency. In this phase of *The Ladder*, readers were largely in agreement over emphasizing the role of gender in the formation of lesbian subjectivity and decentralizing sexuality.

In its later years, *The Ladder* insisted on affinity politics with straight women with as much vigor as it reprimanded the male homophile movement for failing to envision space for lesbians. Indeed, with Gene Damon's editorship of *The Ladder*, the structure of the discursive space changed to better support lesbians' alliance with the women's liberation movement, completely shifting attention away from men. The inside covers no longer bore the DOB's objectives (which had been condensed during Gitting's editorship though remained conceptually intact). In the Aug/Sept. 1970 issue, the inside cover read:

*The Ladder*, published by Lesbians and directed to ALL women seeking full human dignity, had its beginnings in 1956. It was then the only Lesbian publication in the U.S. It is now the only women's magazine openly supporting Lesbians, a forceful minority within the women's liberation movement.

Initially *The Ladder's* goal was limited to achieving the rights accorded to heterosexual women, that is, full second-class citizenship. In the 1950's women as a whole were as yet unaware of their oppression. The Lesbian knew. And she

wondered silently when her sisters would realize that they too share many of the Lesbian's handicaps, those that pertained to being a woman.

*The Ladder's* purpose today is to raise all women to full human status, with all of the rights and responsibilities this entails; to include ALL women, whether Lesbian or heterosexual.

Occupations have no sex and must be opened to all qualified persons for the benefit of all.

Lifestyles must be numerous as human beings require for their personal happiness and fulfillment. (14.11-12: 2)

These new discursive parameters position the heterosexual woman as the new girl in town, the oppressed who only recently awakened to her oppression. But just because the heterosexual woman is framed as late to the party, that doesn't mean she hadn't been invited all along: While the heterosexual woman had an oxymoronic "full second-class citizenship," the inside cover describes the lesbian as set apart from "women as a whole" in the 1950s in that she knew "many of [...her] handicaps [...] pertained to being a woman" (2). This move opens up the discursive space to all women but instills in the lesbian a particular authority, a developed insight lacked by her heterosexual sisters.

In 1970, *The Ladder* published "Woman-Identified Woman" by Rita Mae Brown,<sup>21</sup> who would go on to become a founding member of the 1970s collective *The Furies* and help theorize lesbian-feminism (See Chapter 2). In "Woman-Identified Woman," Brown urges women to reconceptualize their identification with other women,

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<sup>21</sup> While in *The Ladder*, Brown is listed as the sole author of "Woman-Identified Woman," it's commonly understood the text was written collectively by the group Radicalesbians, who would later pass out the manifesto during the Lavender Menace action at the Second Congress to Unite Women. More on this in the next chapter.

arguing that for the radical potential of lesbianism to flourish, women must “begin disengaging from male-defined response patterns”:

It should also be said that some younger, more radical women have honestly begun to discuss Lesbianism, but so far it has been primarily as a sexual “alternative” to men. This, however, is still giving primacy to men, both because the idea of relating more completely to women occurs as a negative reaction to men and because the Lesbian relationship is being characterized simply by sex, which is divisive and sexist. (7)

Brown insists 1) this trace of straightness derives from the man-made nature of lesbianism as an identity category so that the definition hinges on woman’s sexual availability to men, and, as a consequence, 2) this trace of straightness perpetuates violence. Here Brown does not seem to be painting coming out as a fool’s errand but rather calling for lesbians and straight women to acknowledge the oppressions of their own systems of meaning-making. After all, not unlike Sedgwick, Brown figures homophobia and misogyny as related epidemics, stating: “In a society in which men do not oppress women, and sexual expression is allowed to follow feelings, the categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality would disappear” (6). Brown’s connection of homophobia to sexism highlights women’s role as sex objects in society, since a lesbian, Brown argues, is often viewed as not a woman at all, having refused the prescribed pathway to womanhood – leading a social and sexual life that revolves around men (6).

While *The Ladder* would continue to circulate into 1972, the theory that emerged within its pages would ultimately help lead to the publication folding. Convinced that the magazine should take a more militantly feminist stance than the DOB was willing to

allow, Rita Laporte, then the president of DOB, and Gene Damon, who was *The Ladder's* last editor, stole the mailing list from the DOB's office and began publishing the magazine with no mention of the DOB within its pages. Despite having a mailing list of 3,824 names, Damon and Laporte would only manage to release a few issues of the magazine before it folded due to a lack of income (Gallo 180). Luckily, with the disappearance of what had been to many the most important lesbian publication in existence, a multitude of other lesbian publications appeared to fill the void. Both Roger Streitmatter and Marcia Gallo point to the high number of homosexual publications circulating in the 70s, with popular periodicals like *off our backs* and *The Lesbian Connection*<sup>22</sup> providing lesbians with a plethora of spaces in which to theorize and strategize among their sisters. Despite folding, *The Ladder* would live on in the theory facilitated through its many descendants, and the convergence of lesbianism and feminism would continue in the discursive space of *The Furies: Lesbian/Feminist Monthly*.

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<sup>22</sup> *The Lesbian Connection* remains in circulation at the time of this writing and continues to subsist mostly on donations in order to remain free to all lesbians.

## Chapter 2: The Convergence of Lesbianism and Feminism in *The Furies*:

### *Lesbian/Feminist Monthly*

*Now, many would argue that this indeterminacy – this inability to ascertain a precise definition and framework for the term queer – is precisely what gives it its power: queer is many things to many people, irreducible, undefinable, enigmatic, winking at us as it flouts convention: the perfect postmodern trope, a term for the times, the epitome of knowing ambiguity. Good-bye simulacra, adios panopticon, arrivederci lack, adieu jouissance: hello queer! But what is lost in this fun deconstruction of the cohesion of identity? If queer becomes the new reigning subjectivity for hip activists and intellectuals alike, what kinds of politics and theories then become “transcended,” moved through and over in the construction of the queer hegemony?*

Suzanna Danuta Walters, “From Here to Queer: Radical Feminism, Postmodernism, and the Lesbian Menace (Or, Why Can’t a Woman Be More Like a Fag?)”

In the late 60s and early 70s, the fragmentation between the Women’s Movement and its lesbian constituents was about to incur national attention. Many lesbians had joined the women’s liberation movement in hopes of ending sexism but had grown increasingly frustrated with fellow feminists’ categorization of lesbianism, at best, as a “bedroom issue” divorced from politics, and at worst, an unsavory association the Women’s Movement could ill-afford. Indeed, many straight feminists were concerned that acknowledging the lesbian presence in their movements would provide ammunition to detractors who already labeled feminists “man-haters” and “dykes.” Infamously, Betty Friedan who co-founded and was at the helm of the National Organization for Women

(NOW) from 1966-1970, characterized lesbianism as a “lavender menace” to feminism, a presence that would irreparably taint the movement’s image. In a *New York Times* article titled “Sisterhood is Powerful,” feminist Susan Brownmiller stoked lesbians’ irritation further with her dismissive reply, “A lavender herring, perhaps, but surely no clear and present danger.”<sup>1</sup>

Herring or menace, lesbians found themselves again fighting for a place in a political movement that could not imagine lesbians as political agents.<sup>2</sup> When Rita Mae Brown persisted in criticizing NOW for their mistreatment of lesbians, she was fired from her job as the newspaper editor for NOW’s New York chapter (Orleck). Similarly, Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, founders of the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), were denied NOW’s couple’s membership, which Friedan had intended for women to use to bring their husbands into the organization. Additionally, despite Martin’s correspondence with Friedan regarding the relationship between lesbianism and feminism, at the 1969 First Congress to Unite Women, Friedan took all discussion of lesbianism off the agenda, removing references to lesbian organizations, like the DOB (Lyon and Martin 266). While lesbians like the women theorizing in *The Ladder* had developed an understanding of their lesbianism as inextricably connected to their identities as women, NOW imagined a more socially palatable population (heterosexuals) to take up its feminist agenda.

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<sup>1</sup> *Ladder* writers Barbara Grier (Gene Damon) and Coletta Reid used Brownmiller’s term as the title of an anthology of *Ladder* essays, *The Lavendar Herring*. Coletta Reid would go on to become one of the founding members of the Furies collective (more on the collective’s formation later).

<sup>2</sup> See the end of Chapter 1 for a description of the DOB’s coalitions and disagreements with the male homophile movement.



These attacks provided a group of lesbians with motivation, opportunity, and inspiration for a dramatic rebuttal to the idea that it was preferable – or possible – to divorce lesbianism from feminism. At the Second Congress to Unite Women, an auditorium full of attendees was suddenly plunged into darkness as a small number of women ran up the aisles towards the stage, laughing (“The Lavender Menace Strikes”). When the lights turned back on, women in t-shirts that read “Lavender Menace” had taken the stage and the microphone, and some in the audience had removed their jackets to reveal they too wore the lavender menace shirts. The women still standing in the aisles distributed copies of a manifesto titled “The Woman-Identified-Woman” written by “The Lavender Menace,” though the group also called themselves the Radicalesbians (see also Rita Mae Brown, who was listed as the author of the essay when it was published in *The Ladder*). Lavender Menaces who had been planted in the audience held up signs with slogans like “Women’s Liberation is a Lesbian Plot,” “Superdyke Loves You,” and “Take a Lesbian to Lunch.” Despite the manifesto’s declaration that “A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion,” the action at the Congress to Unite Women was characterized by Radicalesbians as “humorous and non-threatening,” and pictures of the protest show women grinning with their arms slung around each other’s shoulders (“The Lavender Menace Strikes”) – not the angry dykes NOW leaders feared but also not the inconsequential minority some had placated themselves by imagining.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>By the end of the Second Congress to Unite Women, NOW members had attended several lesbian-themed discussion groups and passed a resolution acknowledging lesbians’ rights were women’s rights. Though, Stephanie Gilmore and Elizabeth Kiminski argue that NOW would struggle for years to “determine which ways feminism and lesbian rights activism overlapped and in what ways they were distinct” (100).

The manifesto “Woman-Identified Woman” simultaneously addresses the concerns of heterosexual feminists while flipping those same concerns on their heads, outlining the beginnings of what would come to be known as a lesbian-feminist ideology. The manifesto links the objectives of the women’s liberation movement with the possibilities of lesbian identity, arguing that lesbians are able to orient their energies toward other women instead of back towards their male oppressors as straight women must. In this way, Radicalesbians position lesbians as the ideal potential feminists, already shrugging off the oppression unnoticed by their straight sisters.<sup>4</sup> Significantly, Radicalesbians also argue in “Woman-Identified Woman” that the homophobia within the women’s movement (and in society in general) derives from male supremacy. According to the manifesto, all women share the status of dehumanized sex objects, but straight women receive compensations such as social acceptance and protection which obscure the realities of their sexual objectification. When a woman partners with another woman, however, “there are fewer rationalizations, fewer buffers by which to avoid the stark horror of her dehumanized condition” (2). But, the manifesto argues, it is heterosexuality that actually keeps women trapped in that dehumanized condition and dashes the potential of the women’s movement. “The Woman-Identified Woman” presents lesbianism as a radical political choice that feminists should make, as opposed to a sexual preference, and contends that “Until women see in each other the possibility of a primal commitment which includes sexual love, they will be denying themselves the love and value they readily accord to men, thus affirming their second-class status” (2-3).

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<sup>4</sup> See the end of Chapter 1 for discussion of *The Ladder*’s revisions of the DOB’s Purposes, wherein the audience of *The Ladder* shifts to encompass all women.

This chapter of *Just Between Us Girls* explores the discursive space born from this theoretical convergence of lesbianism and feminism: *The Furies: Lesbian/Feminist Monthly*. By analyzing content from *The Furies*' newsletter and putting contemporary queer theorists in conversation with the theorists of *The Furies*, this chapter traces the development of concepts that would become central to queer theory (such as institutional heterosexuality) to their lesbian-feminist roots, and also considers the ways in which the content, policies, and practices within the discursive space of *The Furies* relates to the online discursive spaces for queer women explored in this project, such as *Autostraddle* and *AfterEllen*. *The Furies* directly challenges the division between academia and activism, insisting on the importance of communally cultivating ideologies and strategies that could guide direct political action. Despite only producing ten issues, *The Furies*' theories captivated many women, as they radicalized the definition of "lesbian," rendering the category accessible in a way the Women's Movement had failed to do with "feminist," while still embodying a separatist politics, which Bonnie Zimmerman calls "one of the most powerful political visions produced by the lesbian (or even feminist) movement" (666). Indeed, as this chapter will argue, the space of *The Furies*' facilitates a theoretical convergence of lesbianism and feminism, a convergence that would eventually be repurposed and re-packaged to help form queer theory.

The relationship between lesbian-feminism and queer theory has been chronicled and hotly debated as some scholars reject the positioning of queer theory as the antidote to lesbian-feminism's unyielding essentialism. Instead, theorists like Linda Garber argue, queer theory is more of an ungrateful child of lesbian-feminism, one that claims to rebel while merely emulating its mother's politics. While an in-depth exploration of lesbian-

feminism's relationship to queer theory is beyond the scope of this chapter and would require rereading ground already covered by others,<sup>5</sup> I do use content from *The Furies* to concretize – and sometimes challenge – claims about the history of queer theory and its debt to – and difference from – lesbian-feminism. In making these interventions, I hope to illustrate the benefits of a broadened understanding of “queer theory” that considers the flow of theoretical concepts across multiple decades and media platforms and the potential of non-academics to produce theoretical discourse. This capacious understanding of queer theory and its history highlights theory's connection to political and material realities, challenging conceptions of queer theory as elitist and divorced from the experiences of sexual minorities.

*The Furies*' theorizations of separatism also shed light on the membership model of the discursive spaces studied in *Just Between Us Girls*. Through its elision of “lesbian” with “woman-identified woman,” *The Furies* developed an inclusive definition of lesbianism and a discursive space by, for, and about lesbians, which, perhaps ironically, managed to exist within and through a separatist ideology. Thus, this chapter also challenges assumptions that lesbian-feminism proffers a stable, essentialized categorization of “woman,” arguing instead that *The Furies* theorized a lesbian identity informed by political rather than sexual orientation. Due to categorizations of lesbian-feminism as essentialist, it's tempting to trace, for instance, *AfterEllen*'s transphobia to *The Furies*' elevation of separatist spaces and politics; however, attention to the analysis of *The Furies*' separatism and the development of the “woman-identified woman”

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<sup>5</sup> See Linda Garber's *Identity Poetics: Race, Class, and the Lesbian-Feminist Roots of Queer Theory*; *Intersections between Feminist and Queer Theory*, edited by Diane Richardson, Janice McLaughlin, and Mark E. Casey; Cressida J. Heyes' “Feminist Solidarity After Queer Theory: The Case of Transgender”; and William B. Turner's *A Genealogy of Queer Theory*.

identity throughout the discursive space suggests a different trajectory and a more nuanced history of *The Furies*' own brand of separatist politics and theories of gender and sexuality.<sup>6</sup>

While *The Furies* struggled with many of the same issues as the other spaces discussed in this project – economic strife, ideological conflicts, limited access to resources (like printers), etc. – the socio-political climate of the 70s seemed to loudly demand networks for lesbians' voices in a way the 50s had not. For example, the Stonewall Riots of 1969 had not only galvanized gays and lesbians around the nation, it had also given the gay and lesbian press an immediate and pressing task: facilitating individuals' awareness of and preparation for “the revolution” (Streitmatter 116). Often figured as the start of the gay liberation movement, the Stonewall Riots (also known as the Stonewall Uprising) occurred outside the Greenwich Village bar, the Stonewall Inn, when police raided the bar and took several people into custody. Enraged by the frequency and violence of gay bar raids, patrons and onlookers responded by rioting, and demonstrations continued in and around the neighborhood for days. While historians like Lillian Faderman and Roger Streitmatter point out that the homophile movement and its media paved the way for Stonewall and a post-Stonewall Revolution, Faderman also concedes, “the riot was soon to be the death knell for mannerly homophile groups” (*The Gay Revolution* 176). Indeed, the rise of *The Furies* coincides with “an explosion in gay movement organization, pride, and political activism” as the formation of national organizations like the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA)

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<sup>6</sup> See Chapter 3 for an analysis of *AfterEllen*.

offered the LGBT community publicly political spaces in which to capitalize on the momentum of the riots (Green).

*The Furies* along with the other discursive spaces analyzed in *Just Between Us Girls* define and set the terms of the “revolutions” in which they participate. For instance, Lisa Ben’s description of the lesbian’s cultural invisibility in the first issue of *Vice Versa* (Why do no lesbian publications exist? “Because Society decrees it thus. Hence, the appearance of *Vice Versa*” [1]), and *The Ladder*’s declarations of lesbians’ (and women’s) second-class citizenship on the inside cover of each issue situate the publications in the struggle to combat those oppressive circumstances. Despite their pre-Stonewall status,<sup>7</sup> *Vice Versa* and *The Ladder* both theoretically position themselves as revolutionary spaces, or, more precisely, spaces that facilitate revolutionary discourse, connections, strategies, and subcultures. Attention to the way, for example, *The Ladder*’s goals changed in accordance with shifts in society (such as the women’s liberation movement), indicates the versatility of these spaces as both tools for theorizing and as historical and cultural records of theory. Therefore, this chapter explores the ways in which *The Furies* frequently questioned and re-visioned political strategies (such as coalitions between groups and effective leadership) in ways that simultaneously demanded much of their constituents and also broadened conceptualizations of lesbianism specifically and sexuality’s relationship to political agency in general.

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<sup>7</sup> In alignment with the framework of convergence applied throughout *Just Between Us Girls*, this project stays wary of pre-and-post-Stonewall conceptualizations of LGBT history. Nonetheless, the increase and visibility of gay rights organizations after Stonewall doubtlessly influenced lesbians’ conceptions of the role of the political in homosexuals’ lives.

## A Queer Inheritance: The Convergence of Media and Theory and the Emergence of Lesbian-Feminism

In order to fully devote themselves to their political ideals, twelve women decided to form a lesbian-separatist collective, calling themselves The Furies, after the goddesses of vengeance who drove Orestes mad for the crime of matricide.<sup>8</sup> The women were all white, came from a variety of class and educational backgrounds (indeed, class dynamics would become a major focus of *The Furies*' theorizing), and ranged in age from 18-30. Setting up headquarters in Washington D.C., the group rented a house, shared chores (including childcare – two women brought three small children to the collective [*The Gay Revolution* 238]), pooled incomes, and devoted the remainder of their time and energy to creating a politics of lesbian-feminism. Because of the radical objectives of the collective – they hoped to dismantle institutions of patriarchy as opposed to gaining equality in a sexist society – it wasn't enough for their politics to stay contained to their small group. They decided to start a monthly newsletter in hopes of reaching, in collective member Ginny Berson's words, "other lesbians and would-be lesbians" ("The Furies" 271).

The circulation of *The Furies* reflects the collective's goals. The first issue of *The Furies: Lesbian/Feminist Monthly* came out in January 1972. The collective mailed 3,000 copies of the first issue, focusing primarily on getting the paper to women's and gay bookstores, with almost half of the issues going to contacts from the mailing list of another radical feminist periodical that had started about a year earlier, *off our backs* ("The Furies" 280).<sup>9</sup> In attempting to send the paper to "lesbians and would-be lesbians," *The Furies* largely directed their paper towards feminists, a target audience that aligns

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<sup>8</sup> I provide a gloss of the myth of the Furies later in the chapter.

<sup>9</sup> Furies' member Coletta Reid was also one of the original members of the *off our backs* collective.

with the arguments in “Woman-Identified Woman,” which paints lesbianism as the greatest threat to male supremacy, and, consequentially, the greatest hope of feminism. This overlap between lesbianism and feminism can be seen in each of the discursive spaces examined in *Just Between Us Girls*, though *The Furies* is the most explicit in its conceptualization of a lesbian identity interdependent with a feminist (and political) identity. Additionally, like the other spaces analyzed in this project, the collective managed all aspects of production and circulation of their publication, reflecting their belief that if discursive and material spaces were ever truly going to be “just between us girls,” lesbians must be in control of their own media and media institutions.<sup>10</sup>

Ginny Berson opens the first article of *The Furies*’ inaugural issue with a description of the story of the Furies as “the story of strong, powerful women, the ‘Angry Ones,’ the avengers of matricide, the protectors of women” (“Untitled” 1), building a woman-identified history/mythology, much like *The Ladder*. However, for *The Furies*, concern over creating an image of the lesbian that would be palpable to society had transformed into rage at being “fucked over all our lives by a system which is based on the domination of men over women” (“Untitled” 1). Like Radicalesbians’ description of the lesbian in “The Woman-Identified Woman,” Berson ties lesbianism to anger at living in a hetero-patriarchal society hostile to women and lesbians. This theoretical move begins *The Furies*’ re-visioning of lesbianism as a matter of political agency rather than sexual preference, for if *The Furies*’ targeted readers largely identified as feminists, who amongst them wouldn’t be angry about male supremacy? And what better use of that

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<sup>10</sup> As Chapter 3 will discuss, the goal of maintaining media spaces run by and for lesbians helps contextualize *AfterEllen* users’ anxiety when the space was purchased by male-run media companies.



anger than directing it towards helping one's oppressed sisters, raising each other up by dismantling an oppressive society?

*The Furies: Lesbian/Feminist Monthly* immediately frames itself as a tool to combat this male supremacy, performing the sort of mediated political discourse often associated with the Web.<sup>11</sup> Berson's article makes clear *The Furies'* intention that the paper be used to form an ideology to provide "a base for political action" ("Untitled 1). According to Berson, male supremacy has infiltrated the women's movement, manifesting in homophobia and adherence to a male-oriented system of meaning that claims logic and strength as the domain of men, leaving the Women's Movement to "build a politics based only on feelings – the area traditionally left to women" ("Untitled" 1). For *The Furies*, as for the other spaces analyzed in *Just Between Us Girls*, the impetus for the paper derives from the void of lesbian representation in dominant society, a void created and maintained by the heteropatriarchy. Indeed, paragraphs of Berson's article could be paraphrased in the prose of Lisa Ben's inaugural piece for *Vice Versa* in 1947: "Why has a space for theorizing a lesbian/feminist ideology not emerged before now? Because Society decrees it thus."<sup>12</sup> *The Furies* joins the other publications discussed in this project in framing its very existence as an act of defiance against dominant society and participation in the space as politically agentive (and participants as political agents). Throughout its run, *The Furies* maintains the role of theory in conceptualizing lesbians' relationship to systems of oppression and systems of liberation. In other words, for *The Furies*, theory provides conceptual foundations for political actions. Berson's article

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<sup>11</sup> See Chapters 3 and 4 for a discussion of online political discourse on *AfterEllen* and *Autostraddle*, respectively.

<sup>12</sup> See "In Explanation," *Vice Versa* "In Explanation" (1). See also Introduction.

articulates the significance of theory to lesbians specifically and women in general, stating, “A political movement cannot advance without systematic thought and practical organization [...] our ideology forms the basis for developing long-range strategies and short-term tactics, projects, and actions” (“Untitled” 1) And, indeed, part of *The Furies*’ long-range strategy was to theorize a reality in which all women could – and should – be lesbians.

This theorizing of lesbian identity has fallen under fire, as critics accuse lesbian-feminism of essentialism, blindness to the differences enveloped under the category of “woman,” and a general theoretical rigidity that implies its divorce from queer theory’s genealogy. Linda Garber argues that the essentialist label has stuck to lesbian-feminism even in the face of evidence of a lesbian-feminist focus on the construction of identity, and, moreover, despite understandings of strategic or provisional essentialism (Garber 17). In Diana Fuss’s important 1989 text, *Essentially Speaking*, for instance, she argues that “in and of itself, essentialism is neither good nor bad, progressive or reactionary, beneficial or dangerous. The question we should be asking is not ‘is this text essentialist (and therefore ‘bad’)?’ but rather, ‘if this text is essentialist, *what motivates its deployment?*’” (xi, parentheses and italics in original). If *The Furies* could be categorized as essentialist (a label I’m unconvinced is either accurate or useful regarding the discursive space), then I would argue that essentialism is deployed with aspirations towards developing a unity that celebrates difference. *The Furies* hoped not only to cultivate a global perspective on lesbian-feminism, but also to consider the intersecting oppressions of racism, classism, sexism, etc., suggesting an awareness of the differences that proliferated under the category “woman.” Thus, *Just Between Us Girls* argues that

just like “queer,” “lesbian-feminist” and “woman” can refer to “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances, and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made to signify monolithically” (“Queer and Now”). In short, I agree with Garber that critics and historians tend to deny lesbian-feminism the lens of strategic essentialism, a guiding theoretical principle that, to me, seems obviously at work in *The Furies*:

*Lesbian/Feminist Monthly*. Part of this problem doubtlessly stems from a tendency to view lesbian-feminism as a monolith rather than as heterogeneous ideology with varying principles and practices depending on its source(s).

Another motivating factor in queer theorists’ disavowal of lesbian-feminism is simply queer theory’s attempt to define and historicize itself against other fields of study. As Suzanna Danuta Walters argues in “From Here to Queer: Radical Feminism, Postmodernism, and the Lesbian Menace,” queer theory frequently positions itself “as a response” to a sort of feminist and lesbian theorizing enmeshed in identity rather than in queer theory’s resistance to and refusal of identity (842). Scholars like Joshua Gamson echo Walters’ skepticism of queer theory’s postmodern promotions of liberation from identity categories. As Gamson notes in his essay, “Must Identity Movements Self-Destruct? A Queer Dilemma,” as a category “queer” faces the same dangers of “lesbian-feminist” or even “gay” insofar as categories (which “queer” is, despite its categorically deconstructive bent) meant to unify frequently subsume difference. Indeed, at times “queer” like “lesbian-feminist” divorces itself entirely from sexuality or sexual orientation, as, for some, to be queer one needs only be non-normative and to be a

lesbian-feminist, one need only be woman-oriented. All of the identity politics, but none of the sex.<sup>13</sup>

The similarities between lesbian-feminism and queer theory abound, and certainly one lesson to learn from queer theory's historical amnesia is to be wary of claims at newness – a lesson similar to Henry Jenkins' cautions about the myth of the digital revolution. "New" and "old" media do not have the antagonist relationship often imagined, and while the utilization and status of "old" media change when new media emerge, Jenkins argues, "Printing did not kill spoken words. Cinema did not kill theater. Television did not kill radio" (*Convergence Culture* 14). Similarly, queer theory did not kill lesbian-feminist theory. Indeed, just as readers will see a continuation of print periodicals' templates on *AfterEllen* and *Autostraddle* in the form of objectives, forums, and attention to popular culture, so too, through analysis of queer theory in conversation with its theoretical predecessors, will readers see principles and positions of lesbian-feminist theory very much alive. Furthermore, that *The Furies* continued the practice of publishing original fiction and poetry by lesbians suggests that spaces like *The Furies*, *The Ladder*, and *Vice Versa* contribute more than cultural criticisms – they also contribute cultural artifacts. Indeed, in much the same way the Web has been viewed in this project, the discursive spaces of periodicals simultaneously act as a heuristic lens and as an object of analysis, as a vehicle for articulating the lesbian's place in society and as proof that lesbians have always already been an indelible cultural force.

Yet I think another important lesson from applying the framework of convergence to queer theory is that certain ideas and ways of communicating about sexuality have

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<sup>13</sup> See Nikki Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, Chapter 2: "Assimilation or Liberation, Sexuality or Gender?," particularly page 34.

been of consistent interest to many generations and many types of thinkers. As has been the case in previous chapters, I am less interested in what discursive space articulated what particular theory “first” than I am in the relationality between the categories of my analysis. For example, this chapter considers how *The Furies*’ understanding of “the woman-identified woman” speaks to Sedgwick’s argument regarding universalizing conceptions of homosexuality. Another theoretical relation this chapter takes up is *The Furies*’ strategies for organizing across differences, i.e. the techniques discussed for building coalitions within and outside of what they termed “the Lesbian Movement.”<sup>14</sup>

The next section provides context for the years of *The Furies*’ run, demonstrating not only *The Furies*’ generic connection to *Vice Versa*, *The Ladder*, *AfterEllen*, and *Autostraddle*, but also the theoretical and ideological bridges across these spaces.

#### The Time for Revolution...Again: Cultural, Historical, and Theoretical Context of *The Furies*’ Rise

Even with the dramatic retelling of *The Furies*’ wrath and the vehement assertion that lesbians had been “fucked over” by society, *The Furies*’ first issue very closely mirrors the first issues and posts of the other discursive spaces discussed in *Just Between Us Girls*. In Berson’s article, she explains the oppression lesbians face from both men and straight women, urging lesbians to “get out of the straight women’s movement and form their own in order to be taken seriously, to stop straight women from oppressing us, and to force straight women to deal with their own Lesbianism” (1). Thus, *The Furies* positions itself as a space for lesbians to connect with one another and cultivate an

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<sup>14</sup> The Lesbian Movement is the term used by *The Furies* to describe the organized political strategies and gains for lesbians achieved during the early 70s.

ideology centered on their experiences in ways they cannot in the Women's Movement or the Gay Rights Movement, filling a persistent void. *The Furies*, the most explicitly political of the discursive spaces in *Just Between Us Girls*, reveals the political thrust and interconnectedness of mediated community, literature, and theory.

*The Furies* also resembles the other discursive spaces in this project through its cultivation of lesbian authority over issues pertaining to lesbianism, while framing analytical criticism, particularly when it conflicts with another woman's analysis, as crucial to community-building. In the first issue of *The Furies*, Rita Mae Brown responds to Roxane Dunbar's essay "The Movement and the Working Class," describing the article as both helpful and harmful, and stating she will forgo an extensive summary because readers should read the work on their own (she offers an address for readers to write to in order to request the article, emulating preceding magazines' practice of linking readers to information). Before describing her criticisms of the article, Brown sets the terms of *The Furies*' discursive space, describing the goal of the space's dialogue and the potential reach and consequence of that dialogue:

I hesitate to write this response to Roxanne Dunbar's latest article because it is so critical. There are women and men who will lick their lips at the prospect of one woman raised in the working class criticizing another. Therefore, let me state that this article is a political criticism, not a personal attack. Criticism is a form of respect because you take the individual seriously enough to reply to their ideas. ("Response" 5)

Brown aligns herself with Dunbar along particular facets of identity, class and gender, while using her own identification as a lesbian to correct what she calls a "glaring factual

error” in Dunbar’s article – Dunbar’s placement of lesbians in the category of the New Left and her claim that the Lesbian Movement promotes bourgeois ideology (“Response” 5). Indeed, Brown identifies Dunbar as “one of the women who turned Lesbians away from the Women’s Liberation movement by her insistence that Lesbianism was a bedroom issue” (5), a characterization that, despite aspects of their shared backgrounds, puts Dunbar in diametric opposition to Brown’s ideological position and authority, particularly within the space of *The Furies*. This move, and others that mirror it, detracts from Dunbar’s authority to comment on lesbianism at all. For instance, Brown refutes Dunbar’s conflation of the Lesbian Movement with the “New Left,” reminding *Furies*’ readers of the existence of The Daughters of Bilitis in the 50’s (“Response” 5). Much like Lisa Ben asked her readers to keep their contributions to *Vice Versa* “in good taste” so that those outside Ben’s intended audience might not judge lesbians harshly, and *The Ladder* staff concerned itself with the representation of the lesbian in mainstream society, here Brown implicitly reminds readers that those outside their discursive community are watching – and judging. Within the porous bounds of queer women’s discursive spaces lies two sometimes conflicting imperatives: contribute to a heterogeneous discourse (i.e. one may – and is encouraged to – articulate one’s own opinion even if that opinion contradicts others within the discursive space) but do so within the bounds of an “appropriate” lesbian performance.

For *The Furies*, an appropriate lesbian performance encapsulates politics and systemic thinking. As *Vice Versa*’s name hinted at its devotion to countering society’s perception of lesbianism as a vice, and *The Ladder*’s name invoked the image of lesbians climbing out of the darkness of their isolation, *The Furies*’ mythologically-rooted title

(and Berson's inaugural article describing the Furies' story) implies that participants in the space participate on behalf of all women. In the myth of the Furies, the Furies seek vengeance on Orestes for murdering his mother, Clytemnestra, who had murdered her husband, Orestes' father, Agamemnon (a homicide also committed for vengeance, as Agamemnon had sacrificed Clytemnestra's daughter to appease the gods). After suffering at the hands of the Furies, Orestes pleads to the court of Athena for help, and the case goes to trial before the gods. Berson explains the trial thusly,

The point at issue was whether matricide was justifiable to avenge your father's murder, or in other words, whether men or women were to dominate [...] One might have thought that Athena, goddess of wisdom, would have condemned Orestes, but Athena was the creation of the male god, Zeus [...] the first token woman. ("Untitled" 1)

Here, the story of Orestes and the Furies does not simply concern itself with justice for Clytemnestra or her husband Agamemnon, or even for their sacrificed daughter, Iphigenia – for, as Berson summarizes, the result of the trial was “to put an end [...] to the religious belief that motherhood was more divine than fatherhood” (1). The mythical drama of the Furies, considered the goddesses of vengeance, envelopes all of humanity, but particularly women, as the Furies are the accusers of Orestes who seek justice for his murder of Clytemnestra. Their role in the trial leads Berson to describe the Furies as “strong, powerful women, the ‘Angry Ones,’ the avengers of matricide, the protectors of women” (1). To fit within the ideological parameters of this discursive space, then, the critical, systemic discourse Brown describes aspiring towards in her response to Dunbar



must also have the women-oriented focus Berson mines from the story of the Furies, as opposed to the status of “token woman” characterized through Athena.

Such discursive parameters produce a specific type of theory. Theory in the form of articles about leadership, separatism, and coalition-building appears throughout *The Furies*’ run, with on-going discussions and references to past articles embodying what Michael Warner calls the “reflexive circulation of discourse” (*Publics and Counterpublics* 90). Responses to articles like Rita Mae Brown’s “Leadership vs. Stardom” and Charlotte Bunch’s “Separatism and Our Future” continue for issues, with writers challenging and clarifying points, and generally demonstrating the creation of theory itself as an on-going, reflexive process involving various viewpoints. The contributions of writers outside of the collective to the paper as well as the multiple perspectives featured in each issue lead me to disagree with Anne Valk’s characterization of *The Furies* as believing “theory would derive from within the collective, [and thus] the Furies generally disengaged their intellectual development from dialogue with other women and, as a result, alternative views received little coverage in their writings and publications” (234). In a response to Rita Mae Brown’s article “Leadership vs. Stardom,” titled “An Anarchist Plebe Fights Back,” for instance, a writer going by the name Katz takes Brown to task for her premature call for a feminist party and dismissal of anarchism, and with Ginny Berson responding to Katz in the article “Beyond Male Power,” the discussion spans several issues. (I will provide a more in-depth review and analysis of these articles below)

To be fair in my reading of Valk, it’s possible the “alternative views” to which she refers are the homophobic, medicalized opinions *The Ladder* courted in its early

issues, though, by the time of the Lavender Menace action at the Second Congress to Unite Women, *The Ladder* had long since abandoned the practice of granting straight society authority over definitions of lesbianism (see Chapter 1). As Lillian Faderman argues in *Surpassing the Love of Men*, and as argued above through the example of the Stonewall Riots, *The Furies*' relatively polemical tone and focus on keeping theorizations of lesbianism between lesbians derives from the cultural moment of the late 60s and early 70s:

Before 1970 any attempt at redefinition was doomed to failure, since it was drowned out by the writings of medical experts and literary venerables which helped maintain a climate of opinion that affected even those who did not read [...] What was needed was a reawakening of feminism at a time when sexual morality was not rigid. Had there not been a "sexual revolution" about the time feminism was reborn, it is doubtful that attempts at a redefinition would have been sexual, not because lesbianism is truly a sexual category but because the association between lesbianism and unorthodox sex was so firmly imprinted on the popular imagination. (378)

In emphasizing the importance of a variety of historical, social, cultural, and political factors that created the circumstances that rendered possible the discourse within *The Furies*, I hope to resist a linear narrative of progress – or radicalism – wherein each discursive space emerges more radical than the last. Instead, one might focus on the relation between *The Ladder*'s work and the possibilities available to the women behind *The Furies*. Just as *Autostraddle* and *AfterEllen* cite *The Furies*, *The Ladder*, and *Vice Versa* as their predecessors, so do the women of *The Furies* recognize the ideological

possibilities engendered through *The Ladder*. In an interview about her time with *The Furies* and the group's contributions to theory, Ginny Berson states,

Much of what we were saying about political lesbianism, and male supremacy, had been said before, in the 'Woman-Identified Woman' paper by Lavender Menace (out of New York City), and by Martha Shelley and Rita [Mae Brown] in *The Ladder*. But we were among the first to discuss heterosexuality as an institution, to devote so much thought to class analysis, and to go beyond the basic ideas of political lesbianism and male supremacy, expand them, and expand their ramifications for building a total public. ("The Furies" 279)

When considering spaces like *The Furies*, then, it's necessary to view the discourse as stemming from multiple sources, whether those sources are previous publications or strings of correspondence between individuals. This approach allows a dispersal of authority that considers the contributions of non-academically-canonized texts and ideas, so that, for instance, critics can avoid the generalizations regarding fields of theory like lesbian-feminism outlined above.

#### A Lesbian Cannot Live on Theory Alone: Finding the Theoretical Outside of Theory

Before delving into close-readings of select *Furies*' articles, I will offer a general overview of the content within each issue in hopes of demonstrating the intentional relation these discursive spaces perform between theory and literature, poetry, personal essays, etc. Along with the other spaces discussed in this project, the discursive space of *The Furies* cultivates theory buoyed by other cultural artifacts that are theoretically reflective and expressive. In the second article of the first issue of *The Furies*, "Such a

Nice Girl,” Sharon Deevey recounts her experience in the Women’s Liberation Movement, particularly after coming out as a lesbian. In the midst of expressing her frustration with feminists who fail to live lives reflective of their belief in the collective power of women (and the disconnecting force of male supremacy), Deevey makes a point to which many of the personal essays and pieces of fiction return: “A women’s revolution can be made by women only who give their full energy and love to each other, that is, by lesbians” (2). Much of the content of *The Furies*, whether poetry or polemics, reinforces the image of a politically and socially agentive lesbian. Following Deevey’s piece, an article instructing readers in strength-training encourages women to reject the male supremacist expectation that they remain weak and passive, and instead get in touch with their bodies by exercising so that they can better fight oppression (Schwing 3). Similar instructional articles, from how to do a chin-up to basic moves for self-defense, remind readers not only that theory in and of itself is not enough to dismantle male supremacy (and the oppressions stemming from male supremacy), but that theory should affect lives and bodies.

Content that does not seem directly theoretical often provides frameworks for navigating heteronormativity in lesbian discursive spaces. For instance, reviews of films resemble film reviews from other discursive spaces in other chapters, though *The Furies*’ sprawling definition of “lesbian” as a woman-identified woman can be seen at work through the selection of reviewed films and the theorizing that situates these (often seemingly straight, in terms of filmic depiction) characters as central to *Furies*’ readers’ interests as lesbians. Whereas *Vice Versa* and *The Ladder* focused on films (and other media like books) featuring explicitly lesbian material, of the spaces discussed in *Just*

*Between Us Girls, The Furies* begins the pattern of showing lesbians themselves in media not necessarily intended for a lesbian audience. For instance, a review of the 1971 film *The Trojan Women* (Dir. Cacoyannis), criticizes the film for only characterizing women through their relationships to men. In the review titled “The Trojan Hoax,” Charlotte Bunch expresses her unsurprised annoyance at the reduction of these dynamic female historical figures to passive, supporting roles as wives, daughters, or sisters: “[F]rom the movie, one would imagine Hecuba whining her way through the rest of her life. But, according to some sources, this fearless old woman, while a slave, blinded the king of nearby Thrace and murdered his sons” (19). If, in Lisa Ben’s words, this film is “unsitthroughable” for a lesbian audience, it’s not necessarily due to the lack of lesbian representation but rather due to a narrative logic that suggests women’s thoughts, words, and actions derive solely from their relationships to men.

This critique closely resembles what would come to be known as The Bechdel Test. Also known as the Bechdel-Wallace Test or the Mo Movie Measure Note, the criteria that comprise the “test” come from a 1985 issue of Alison Bechdel’s serialized comic strip, *Dykes to Watch Out For*. In the issue, two lesbian friends discuss whether or not to go to a movie, with one telling the other she will only watch movies that depict two female characters who talk to one another about something besides a man.<sup>15</sup> It seems worth noting that Bechdel has expressed surprise in interviews that The Bechdel Test has become so widely known and administered to media, explaining the scene that generated this pop culture evaluator was a depiction of a conversation between her and a friend when trying to determine which movie to see in theaters one day. That these

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<sup>15</sup> Some paraphrased versions of The Bechdel Test include the criterion that the two female characters must have names, though this detail is not included in Bechdel’s comic strip.

conversations, inside jokes, and wry observations between queer women generate such far-reaching theoretical tools further supports the notion that more academic attention should be paid to artifacts that preserve and represent these exchanges. While queer women's discursive spaces did – and do – produce lesbian-focused media, their participants still exist in a heteronormative society that produces media reflective of its heteronormative values. Much like The Bechdel Test, the *The Furies* articulates through its commentary on media why lesbians might feel alienated from certain cultural (and communal) experiences, like going to the movies.

Attending to content that does not seem immediately theoretical – or even lesbian – allows an understanding of the machinations of the theoretical built within a discursive space. This content, whether poetry, fiction, media reviews, or even ads represent the building blocks of what *The Furies* imagined would be a lesbian/feminist world. Ads for women-produced goods occupy the last pages of *The Furies*, showing readers a vision of a women-oriented economy. For instance, not only did *The Furies* run ads for other lesbian publications like *The Ladder*, *The Lesbian Tide*, and *The Gay Blade*, but they also ran ads for lesbian-run printing presses, clothing, and jewelry stores. This practice of building a lesbian economy aligns with the *Furies*' theoretical focus on capitalism as a patriarchal tool, and also demonstrates some potentials of a women-oriented economy to *Furies* participants. For the women behind discursive spaces like *The Furies*, *this* is the world theory engineers.

In the following section, I begin a review and analysis of conversations surrounding two articles: “Leadership and Stardom” by Rita Mae Brown and Charlotte Bunch’s “Separatism and The Women’s Movement.” By continuing to contextualize

these articles and the theories they cultivate with other, concurrent content of *The Furies*, the following section both makes an argument for the presence of concepts central to queer theory (such as organizing across differences) within queer women's discursive spaces and for these spaces' prioritization of a communal approach to theorizing.

#### Re-Theorizing the Theorist: Limitations of Lesbian Authority in Lesbian Spaces

In the same issue containing "The Trojan Hoax," Rita Mae Brown uses her article "Leadership vs. Stardom" to initiate a dialogue about political formations within the lesbian movement. Brown begins by arguing that the Lesbian Movement and the Women's Movement have been stymied by "anti-leadership attitudes," largely due to the fact that those movements' participants had confused leadership with stardom ("Leadership vs. Stardom" 20). According to Brown, women are right to be skeptical of stars – or celebrities of the Women's Movement. Appointed by men and, much like the heterosexual women described in "Women-Identified Women," compensated by the patriarchy for their adherence to oppressive systems of power, stars have no political following and, as Brown argues, never really threaten the balance of power. From Brown's perspective, perhaps most detrimental for women is the fact that stars give the illusion of providing political connection, consciousness raising, and change, but in reality, they keep women isolated from one another. Yet, most significantly for this project, within Brown's attack on stars in the Women's Movement, one sees systems of privilege and oppression within the Women's and Lesbian Movements that endow some with the authority to lead (and the identity of leader) more readily than others.

Brown's descriptions of leaders and the roles they play and challenges they face in the Lesbian Movement reveal enduring issues in lesbian and queer politics and theory and in discursive spaces for queer women. Per Brown's description, in contrast to stars, leaders rise from the movement's ranks, devote time to analysis, practice humility, and show other women how to become leaders themselves. Yet, the deep mistrust of stars leads women to misidentify leaders as stars, and, more often, and more insidiously, according to Brown, the criticisms towards leaders come from "the white, middle-class nature of part of the Lesbian Movement and most of the Women's Liberation Movement" (Brown 20). Brown is right to point out the rampant racism within the Lesbian Movement, though these brief references to racial oppression also highlight the primacy given to gender and sexuality as identity categories over other aspects of identity like race or ethnicity. Indeed, while class-based analysis fills *The Furies* and mentions of race and ethnicity occur with some frequency, few articles exist in *The Furies*' run wherein racial oppression is the primary analytical focus – and no articles exist wherein racial oppression is considered anything other than a by-product of sexism.

This lack of prolonged attention to race signals a problem common among the discursive spaces discussed in *Just Between Us Girls* and, as theorists such as Gloria Anzaldua, E. Patrick Johnson, and Cathy Cohen have argued, with queer theory itself. In his essay "'Quare' Studies, Or (Almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from my Grandmother," Johnson suggests that while queer theory may have acknowledged its "gender trouble," it has failed to acknowledge and deal with its "race trouble," particularly its habits of favoring philosophical abstraction over material realities and overlooking contributions of "non-white, non-middle-class gays, bisexuals,



lesbians and transgendered [*sic*] people in the struggle between homophobia and oppression” (100). Unmistakably, *The Furies* presents its own “race trouble,” particularly insofar as they remained a collective comprised totally of white women throughout their run, which resulted in little content within the discursive space produced by women of color. Notable exceptions to this trend within *The Furies* include lesbian-feminist poets Pat Parker and E. Sharon Gomillion as well as observations concerning ways white privilege operates in the Women’s Liberation and Lesbian Movements (to be discussed later). And so while *The Furies* doesn’t entirely divorce race from sexuality, there is little doubt that race is under-theorized in this space, often subordinated to gender/sexuality.

*The Furies* represents ways in which non-academic discursive spaces reinscribe exclusionary theory and hierarchies often found in academic spaces and society in general. While throughout this project I have made the claim that these discursive spaces facilitate authority to lesbians and queer women over issues concerning lesbianism and queerness, it’s also clear that this facilitation of authority is limited to the space’s theorizations of who, exactly counts as a lesbian, and, therefore, as a theorist. These discursive and theoretical limitations leave scholars with the imperative to remember bell hooks’ insight in “Theory as Liberatory Practice,” that “the possession of a term does not bring a process or practice into being; concurrently one may practice theorizing without ever knowing/possessing the term just as we can live and act in feminist [or lesbian or queer] resistance without ever using the word ‘feminism’ [or lesbian or queer]” (3, bracketed asides my own). With this caution in mind, then, one must attend to the gaps in discursive spaces’ own histories of themselves, in their own accounts of the genealogies of their theories and theorists. In other words, the work *Just Between Us Girls* does by

looking beyond academia and academically-sanctioned spaces for queer theory and theorists must be continued within other academic and non-academic discursive spaces. Again, I think of this work as queer work, indeed, queer theory, because the “meaning” produced is relational and unfixed. In other words, taking a relational view of theory – that is, thinking of the ways in which theory is (re)produced through “conversations” and connections between individuals – requires considering the ways in which concepts, strategies, and philosophies manifest through various, intersecting channels. For instance, while I have argued that *The Furies* frequently subsumes racial identity to sexual/gender identity, the newspaper and collective owe an obvious debt to political and social movements that *did* prioritize racial concerns. As Anne Valk points out, Furies collective members Joan Biren and Sharon Deevey first heard of lesbian-feminism when attending a Revolutionary People’s Constitutional Convention organized by the Black Panther Party (226). Many collective members had their first experiences of political activism in the Civil Rights Movement, and the Black Power movement took place during the same years that lesbian-feminism began gaining traction. Valk argues – and I agree – that understanding the parallels between movements such as the Black Power movement and lesbian-feminism “suggests a way to understand the role that so-called cultural activities play as part of a militant political agenda” (225). Such analysis leads to the conclusion that, although *The Furies* under-theorized race (particularly its connection to sexuality and gender), race theorists’ values and strategies greatly influence the discursive space. More importantly, the relationship between these movements demonstrates that just as theorists must acknowledge queer theory’s debt to lesbian-feminism, so must both fields recognize what they owe to race theorists.

Theorizing Together in a Separatist Space: Provisional Unity and Organizing Across Differences in *The Furies*

This relational production of theory continues in more explicit manners in responses to articles like Brown's "Leadership vs. Stardom," when individuals push against inconsistencies and oversights and also build on ideas from previous issues. Indeed, these conversations throughout *The Furies*' contradict claims that *The Furies* "reserved theory as the domain of a small coterie of women – those who produced the paper – and conceived their readers as 'students' rather than collaborators in movement building" (Valk 234). Published discussion between staff and readers was necessary not only to further *The Furies*' goal of "present[ing] a forum of ideological exchange" (Valk 231) but also for presenting a non-hierarchical network to their readers that resembled the non-hierarchical networks often called for in the paper's articles. In volume 1, issue 4, *Furies*' reader Katz uses Brown's comments on the ideal political structure of the Lesbian Movement as a jumping-off point for, in some ways, a more generalized conversation than the leadership/stardom question introduced by Brown: "I started to write a personal response to Rita Mae Brown about her 'Leadership vs. Stardom' article, but I realized that an open article was more necessary because in printing her article, *The Furies* opened up the broader discussion of structure for the lesbian movement" (10). Primarily, Katz takes issue with Brown's calls for a lesbian political party and her characterization of those who disagree with her as "anti-leadership, cowardly, and middle-class" (10). Katz positions herself as a "white, working class, man-hating dyke" (10), an identity position that gives her the experiential authority to answer Brown, who

identifies similarly, and who, Katz feels, has made an argument for the Lesbian Movement rife with classist undertones. Katz takes issue with Brown's call for a lesbian party, particularly because the creation of the type of party Brown seems to defend is motivated by a desire to "lead the poor, illiterate masses" (11). According to Katz, the idea of parties is inherently sexist and classist, particularly considering the less-than-radical potential of a political structure that merely allows its constituents a place in, rather than the dismantling of, an oppressive system. The model of membership and leadership within such political structures, argues Katz, is based on elitist standards. Katz insists, for instance, that gaining membership into parties "has always been dependent on verbosity, articulacy, good connections, on being some kind of intellectual, some kind of militant strategist" (10). It strikes me that, in both articles, Brown and Katz demonstrate articulacy and intellectualism, delving into historically informed analyses of past parties, systemic critiques of long-standing political practices, and careful rebuttals to explicit and implicit sexist and classist arguments. And so it may be important here to pause and parse the difference between exclusionary intellectualism (labeled elitism) and the intellectual engagement practiced in *The Furies*.

For *The Furies*, much like queer theory, elitist intellectualism can be marked by its divorce from action. For instance, after describing the elitist standards determining party membership, Katz shares a story about Lenin and the Bolshevik Party wherein Lenin and the central committee were meeting to decide when to lead the masses towards revolution when a child interrupts the discussion to inform the men that the Winter Palace had been seized and the Revolution had begun (11). Katz concludes, "So all these middle-class scholar cocks got off their fat butts and ran on down to the Winter Palace to

make like they were the vanguard of this great event” (11). I do not necessarily read this as a specific critique of scholars or even middle-class men, but rather of the brand of intellectualism practiced by them in this narrative. For Katz, the issue does not seem to derive from the fact that these men, for instance, used big words or participated in theoretical conversations, but rather that these conversations occurred at the expense of material action. One should not, in other words, forgo seizing the Winter Palace in order to theorize how best to seize the Winter Palace. Such prioritizing of discourse over action reveals a disconnection from the purpose of discourse/theory. Situating the discourse within *The Furies* as precursor to queer theory demonstrates queer theory’s historical investment in a connection between theory, discursivity, and material and political reality.

Additionally, for Katz, the fact remains that the power structures of parties work in such a way that ideology is constructed by a few and disseminated to many, whereas Katz imagines a less hierarchical approach to theory-building: “We can only share a common political ideology (as you said a party must do) when we share it. Not when we join a party that has it” (11). A similar distrust of theory – or, more accurately, ways of theorizing – at work on *AfterEllen* makes itself visible in *The Furies*, as participants wrestle with modes of thought that have historically failed to recognize queer women (see Chapter 3). Significantly, Katz interrogates the limits of theorizing/forming an ideology on behalf of lesbians as a group, articulating concern with reinscribing hierarchies and eliding differences – foci many accuse lesbian-feminists, particularly separatists, of lacking. Katz challenges Brown’s call for a national party, asking, “Are you ready to form a party in a movement where lesbians of color are not yet fully

participant? Are you willing to form a party in a movement where most of its middle-class members are classist?” (11). Exchanges like the one between Brown and Katz, and assertions of ideological oversight (like what Katz views as Brown’s elision of race and class within her theorizations of a women-oriented political ideology) indicate a dynamic theorization of lesbian subjectivity wherein conceptions of what “counts” as lesbianism and lesbian politics can be challenged and re-visioned as well as an awareness of the limitations of organizing around identity categories. Often, within queer theorists’ analyses of identity-based communities, particularly communities organized around the commonality of sexual difference from dominant society, theorists point to the fictitious nature of community (and, of course, identity). Yet, two important facts are often lost in these theorizations: Many individuals within these communities are aware that the unity performed under the label “community” is provisional, that uniting, that all other aspects of identity in fact *cannot* be subsumed to sexuality indefinitely. In other words, queer theorists did not invent the idea that no two lesbians are exactly alike – lesbians in the discursive spaces examined in *Just Between Us Girls* demonstrate concentrated efforts to understand, and in some cases reconcile, differences between individuals with whom they share seemingly little aside from an attraction to women. Relatedly, rather than serving as a roadblock or void in communities organized around sexuality, issues of difference provide political and theoretical fuel to discussions regarding identity and community formations.

Here one might turn to *Gender Trouble* and its argument of exigence that feminist theory takes the existence of identity (and identity-based community) as one of its central, foundational assumptions. Famously, Butler provides an alternative account of

identity that is provisional and performative, unlike, as Butler's framing implies, feminist scholarship of the past:

If one "is" a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered 'person' transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities.

*(Gender Trouble 3)*

To say Butler's arguments in *Gender Trouble* have been influential in academic theory would be an understatement, and to say her ideas have been accepted without question would be a mischaracterization of the interrogative nature of queer theory. However, the image of *Gender Trouble* as the knight who slays feminist theory's essentialist dragon guarding the treasure trove of identity politics not only reduces a historically multifaceted field but entirely overlooks lesbian-feminism as a branch of feminist theory. Certainly, in "An Anarchist Plebe Fights Back," Katz not only harbors skepticism towards the idea that lesbian-feminists can organize around a collective identity, she also argues that a national organization of lesbian-feminists could not adequately represent individuals who locate themselves at, in Butler's words decades later, "intersect[ions] [of] racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of being" (*Gender Trouble 3*).

About a decade after *Gender Trouble*'s first edition, Butler wrote a preface for the updated version in which she explicitly defines the theorizations in *Gender Trouble* against lesbian-feminist theory. Butler's accusations and assumptions concerning lesbian-feminism are common enough that her description of the field is worth quoting at length:

Whereas feminists of the 1980s assumed that lesbianism meets feminism in lesbian-feminism, *Gender Trouble* sought to refuse the notion that lesbian practice instantiates feminist theory, and set up a more troubled relation between the two terms. Lesbianism in this text does not represent a return to what is most important about being a woman; it does not consecrate femininity or signal a gynocentric world. Lesbianism is not the erotic consummation of a set of political beliefs (sexuality and belief are related in a much more complex fashion, and very often at odds with each other). (*Gender Trouble* xi)

This definitional maneuver in what is often considered one of the founding texts of queer theory profoundly mischaracterizes lesbian-feminism and lesbian-feminist theory. After all, issues of *The Furies* teem with dialogue, directions, and, yes, sometimes diatribes regarding what kinds of lesbian performances constitute feminist politics. In other words, the coupling of lesbianism and feminism was not the immediate, harmonious marriage Butler seems to imagine. Indeed, Butler's reading of lesbian-feminism implies some sort of cohesive agreement on what constitutes "lesbian practice," which, even within a single discursive space like *The Furies*, let alone decades of lesbian-feminism, never existed. As evidenced from the many and varying articles asserting effective political strategies for lesbian-feminists as well as the numerous critiques of lesbian-feminism and proffered solutions for these problems, *The Furies* does not treat lesbianism as "the erotic consummation of a set of political beliefs" as Butler accuses in the above quote. Further, in Butler's suggestion that in *Gender Trouble* she "set[s] up a more troubled relationship [between lesbianism and feminism]" than lesbian-feminists have historically, she seems to forget the nascence of lesbian-feminism: the rupturing of the Women's Movement.



From Del Martin's and Phyllis Lyon's contentious application for the couple's membership in NOW to the Lavender Menace action, there appears to be little historical or theoretical evidence to support Butler's assumption that lesbians were/are unaware of their own "gender trouble." In fact, from lesbians' struggles in the feminist movement and in the gay movement, I would argue that lesbians' experiences and theorizations of sexuality and gender construct an incredibly complicated relationship between lesbianism and feminism.

Butler enacts the erasure she warns against in *Gender Trouble* by presenting a monolithic version of feminist and lesbian-feminist theory as a stable truth and not as a construct just as imaginary as identity or community. In order to establish the newness and necessity of her argument, Butler reductively claims, "For the most part, feminist theory has assumed that there is some existing identity, understood through the category of women, who not only initiates feminist interests and goals within discourse, but constitutes the subject for whom political representation is pursued" (*Gender Trouble* 1). Again, Katz, and in her response to Katz within the same issue, Ginny Berson, do not express naïve belief in the power of representation, but rather point out the identities that would likely be subsumed by an attempt to represent the interests of "all" women, which suggests to me a long-standing concern regarding the relation between representation and the represented "subject." Indeed, in "Beyond Male Power," Ginny Berson acknowledges the shortcomings of Brown's article pointed out by Katz and attempts to rectify them, offering, for instance, a definition of a party as "a national organization which can plan, organize, coordinate, and communicate. We mean an organization which does institutionalize power and hierarchy among people or offices, but which allows leaders,

and not stars, to lead” (13). Berson’s attention to Katz’s concerns with the “Stars vs. Leaders” article further demonstrates the dynamic engagement in constructing categories like “lesbian,” “community,” and “politics,” as opposed to a reliance on the fiction of these categories’ stability.<sup>16</sup> Again, here one finds not the static understanding of identity ascribed to lesbian-feminism, but rather an investment in on-going theorizations of dynamic, provisional unity.

Overlooking these theorizations not only deprives contemporary readers of theoretical nuance, but also perpetuates a theory/politics binary that disregards the symbiotic relationship between the two categories. For instance, part of the impetus behind *Gender Trouble* appears to be Butler’s concern that feminist theorists have postponed their political duties in order to pursue a fruitless theorizing of “woman” as a stable subject. In the introduction to her text, Butler states, “It is no longer clear that feminist theory ought to try to settle the questions of primary identity in order to get on with the task of politics” (*Gender Trouble* xi). Yet, from the theory analyzed in *Just Between Us Girls*, it’s not clear to me that lesbians or feminists (or lesbian-feminists) *had* considered settled theorizations of primary identity as a prerequisite for politics. (Here, too, I should be clear that in her agreement in the prematurity of a national political party for lesbians, Berson nonetheless continues to encourage readers to pursue political endeavors, such as starting their own collectives to articulate their specific goals and strategies on a national level). Indeed, so much of the theory in the discursive spaces

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<sup>16</sup> Indeed, while, ultimately, Berson’s article defends the eventual implementation of a lesbian-feminist party despite its structural and systemic limitations, she nonetheless acquiesces to many of Katz’s complaints, stating, “We did not mean to imply that a small group is a [consciousness-raising group]. We are a small group and we are urging other people to form and be in small groups in order to develop their political direction. We apologize for the misuses of the word ‘anarchy’ and for its equation with emotionalism, cowardice, and individualism [...] The use of ‘anarchy’ to describe individualism, classism, lack of discipline, and anti-leadership attitudes was wrong” (“Beyond Male Power” 14).

examined in this project works to decenter definitions of “woman” from “such defining institutions [as] phallogocentrism and compulsory heterosexuality” (*Gender Trouble* xi), while also treating the definition of identity categories as on-going, collaborative projects. By rendering invisible the intricate theorizations of lesbian-feminist theorists, black feminists, and others, Butler and many queer theorists in general miss the opportunity to draw connections and contradictions between various theorizations of gender and sexuality, that do, in fact, frequently include considerations of the constructed, provisional, powerful, and sometimes violent nature of categorization.

Again, in a way not inconsistent with what scholars have come to view as queer theory, *The Furies* views identity categories as “sites of necessary trouble” as Butler conceives of them in “Imitation and Gender Insubordination” (372). For instance, as stated above, Berson concurs with Katz that forming a national lesbian-feminist political party is premature,<sup>17</sup> yet she nonetheless argues for the eventual necessity of such a structure, because the world Katz imagines of loosely structured networks of individuals cooperating with one another for the common good is not possible in a pre-revolution society (“Beyond Male Power” 13). The problem for Berson does not lie in a devotion to structure or, I would argue, even, an “effort to locate a common identity as the foundation for a feminist politics” (*Gender Trouble* xi). Indeed, a close reading of Berson’s article clearly shows that she does not believe politics arise from political parties based on individuals’ primary identity as “women,” but rather “those politics happen because there is a need for them, because people are oppressed and see in those politics the key to their

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<sup>17</sup> For Berson, a lesbian-feminist party is premature because there exists an insufficient amount of lesbian-feminist ideology to fuel political strategies, the lesbian-feminist movement is too white and middle-class to create a truly revolutionary party, and, in Berson’s words, “there are too many unanswered questions about what form the organization should take in its initial stages” (“Beyond Male Power” 14)

liberation” (14). Here readers see Berson linking organizational strategies and politics to experiences, rather than to stable conceptions of identity. It is also not clear to me from the dialogue between Brown, Katz, and Berson that a conception of a transcendental, common identity “constrains the discourse on feminist politics” in *The Furies* (*Gender Trouble* xi), particularly because, as referenced above, Berson locates the possibility of shared politics within experiences of oppression, *not* experiences of womanhood.

My interest here lies in the ways both the discourses of performative politics and identity politics may be found flourishing side-by-side, not in diametric opposition to one another – particularly in what may be gained in understandings of gender, sexuality, and identity when readers reject queer theory’s definitional and theoretical positioning of itself against fields like lesbian-feminism. In Charlotte Bunch’s “Separatism and Our Future,” as another example, Bunch writes about “the necessity and limits of separatism” as well as “a vision and strategy for the future [of the lesbian-feminist movement]” (3). I focus on *The Furies*’ theorizations of separatism here as a counterpoint to Butler’s gloss of lesbian-feminism because I believe part of the ease with which (queer) theorists dismiss lesbian-feminism derives from a suspicion and misunderstanding of the practice of separatism, specifically an inclination to conflate separatism with essentialism. Bunch’s article, and the articles responding to her ideas in “Separatism and Our Future,” however, demonstrate attention to and theorizations concerning the differences that proliferate under provisional categorizations of “sameness.”

In her article, Bunch describes the circumstances in the Women’s Movement that led to many seeking separatist groups, links these circumstances to problems within those separatist groups in which women sought refuge, and advocates for a “non-purist”

approach to organizing marginalized individuals, constructing a fluid, relationally-oriented version of lesbian-feminist identity and politics. The beginning of “Separatism and Our Future” outlines the motivations for and benefits of separatist politics, describing the opportunities separatism provides to avoid being with one’s oppressor, create analyses of individuals’ particular experiences of oppression, change one’s consciousness, and reaffirm one’s own often unrecognized experiences. Yet misunderstandings and misuses of separatism provoke difficulties, fragmentation, and reinscribed oppression, and Bunch focuses her article on the causes and solutions to these misunderstandings. Arguing that “separatism is at its most problematic when it functions as a goal and goes unquestioned” (“Separatism and Our Future” 3), Bunch immediately positions the act of separating – and gathering – based on a shared identity (like gender and sexuality) as provisional, as a practice to be interrogated consistently by its practitioners.

Bunch’s concerns with separatism demonstrate ways in which, both inside and outside of academic spaces, lesbian-feminists have been aware of and theorizing about not only the limits of identity politics but also the strategic deployment of identity categories for political goals. Indeed, Bunch ascribes to no myths of transcendental identity categories or gynocentric utopias in her own interrogation of separatism, drawing from her own experience in separatist groups to point out the problems with separatism as a political strategy (though Bunch is careful to state that the problems she mentions exist in all political movements, not just separatism). The consciousness-raising work done both intentionally and incidentally within separatist groups often leave women “immobilized by seeing themselves as oppressor and oppressed at the same time,” and

some women end their efforts in their political movements or use their oppression as an excuse to remain unchanged (“Separatism and Our Future” 3). In this section of the article, Bunch urges women to stay in their movements when definitions of identity become complicated, not because “lesbian-feminist” erases class, race, or ethnicity concerns, but because dealing with oppression within separatist movements helps groups build a political framework to understand and combat previously overlooked oppression.

Bunch’s politically utilitarian approach to identity manifests again in her call for separatist groups to form coalitions, a suggestion that reveals ways lesbian-feminists organize across differences. This focus aligns *The Furies*’ lesbian-feminism with queer theory, which Kathy Rudy states, “stands against the policy of categorization and is invested instead in building coalitions of difference along political lines” (213). Writing in the issue that announces the Furies collective’s disbandment (and the continuation of the newspaper), Bunch posits that problems in *The Furies* derived from a perceived conflation of lesbianism as an identity and lesbian-feminist consciousness: “Of course, lesbians are most likely to develop lesbian/feminist consciousness, but anyone can criticize white male heterosexual domination and fight against its privileges and oppressions” (“Separatism and Our Future” 4). Again, Bunch does not imagine lesbian-feminist consciousness as an essentialized force that faithfully and without fail arises from lesbians, but instead here suggests that the experiences of oppression propel the development of a consciousness fit to analyze and fight white male supremacy. Additionally, Bunch decries exclusionary tactics that cost women political allies, reflecting, “we [separatists] slip into the purist assumption that if you aren’t *x* then you can’t be in our revolution rather than stressing the development of *x* consciousness” (4).

Bunch asks readers to remember that separatist lesbian-feminists strive for a “working unity among women” (4), a phrase and idea elucidated later in the article when Bunch outlines her visions for the future of the lesbian-feminist movement, urging women to “continue to raise consciousness about women oppression and other oppressions that divide people. But our object in raising these divisions is to unite beyond them” (5). Here Bunch clearly advocates for a provisional uniting that acknowledges difference and is motivated by the possibility of material/political gain, a strategy that blurs the line between essentialism and constructionism.

While Bunch, along with other writers analyzed throughout this project, uses language often associated with essentialism like “unity” and “identity,” the concepts at work within formulations of identity and community reflect a queer grappling with those very categories. For their part, Furies collective members have acknowledged the limitations of their discourse, the inability of language to contain their ideas. Rita Mae Brown, for example, reflects:

We explored new territory and didn't have a language to describe it. We fell back on the language of the political Left to try and explain the dynamics within the group. As you know, this language is tossed about so loosely in the early seventies that it became devalued, useless. By the simple act of speaking in this cheapened jargon we lessened our chances to communicate and drew further apart. (“The Furies Collective” 130).

Brown's concern with “cheapened jargon” anticipates a common frustration with queer theory, though I'm not sure I would go so far as Brown does in calling the language “useless.” Instead, theorists may do well to take Bonnie Zimmerman's advice and

“refocus our attention on the connecting exchange of language, rather than on the isolating structure of identity, allowing our political language to derive richness and variety from its many dialects, idioms, and even ungrammatical idiosyncrasies” (682). Cultivating connections between Butler’s *Gender Trouble* and *The Furies* reveals many points of convergence: both advocate the practice of coalitional politics, stressing relationality and analysis as foundational for political efficacy; both believe in the body itself as historically-inscribed and in gender as a fundamental aspect of the body’s inscription, as opposed to viewing the body as a pre-existing subject unchanged throughout time; and both frequently derive theory from skepticism regarding societal and cultural divisions like “subject/object” and even “man/woman.” I’m not claiming that these theories are identical, but rather that queer theorists may benefit from exploring the relationship between existential and performative theories.

While *The Furies* folded after ten issues, the influence of the discursive space can still be seen not only through the continued theorizations of female sexuality within discursive spaces for queer women, but also through a concretized understanding of lesbianism as a sexual *and* political identity. Members of the collective went on to found Olivia Records (which would later become Olivia Travel, a lesbian travel company), Diana Press, Moonforce (a feminist filmmaking organization), and *Quest: A Feminist Quarterly*. This convergence of lesbianism and feminism, of desire and politics, remains visible as, for the remainder of the project, *Just Between Us Girls* goes online.



Chapter 3: Going Online to be a Lesbian: *AfterEllen*, Lesbian Community, and (Queer?)

Theorizing on the Web

*“When I spoke at the conference on homosexuality in 1989, I found myself telling my friends beforehand that I was off to Yale to be a lesbian, which of course didn’t mean that I wasn’t one before, but that somehow then, as I spoke in that context, I was one in some more thorough and totalizing way, at least for the time being.”*

Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination”

*The depth of women’s rage and fear regarding sexuality and its relation to power and pain is real, even when the dialogue sounds simplistic, self-righteous, or like parallel monologues.*

Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality”

*“She’s a lesbian. They’re lesbianing together.”*

Pennsatucky, “Fucksgiving,” *Orange is the New Black*

On September 20, 2016, former Editor-in-Chief (EIC) of *AfterEllen*, Trish Bendix, published a post to her *Tumblr* account that shocked fans of lesbian media:

After 14 years, *AfterEllen* as we know it will be effectively shutting down as of Friday. Here are the facts: Evolve Media purchased *AfterEllen* from Viacom two years ago. They gave us two fiscal years to become their LGBT property and profit in that space, and they found we are not as profitable as moms and fashion. And, yes, “they” are mainly white heterosexual men, which is important to note

because not only is this the story for us, but for a lot of other properties—large-scale media outlets, lesbian bars out-priced by neighborhoods they helped establish, housing in queer meccas like Portland that is being turned into condos and AirBNBs [...].

In the wake of the news, trepidation seemed contagious, especially online. Articles framed the site's closure as a sort of horseman of the lesbian media apocalypse, with headlines that warned of "the end of lesbian media" or equated the loss of *AfterEllen* to the loss of "a generation of queer women's media" (Allen); and the last remaining website devoted to queer women's media and news, *Autostraddle*, published a heartfelt goodbye wrapped in a reminder to its readers that, as an independently owned web-facing magazine for queer women, they too were "always on the brink of not existing anymore" due to financial constraints (Hogan, "AfterEllen is Shutting Down").

The next day, the general manager of TotallyHer, the company that acquired *AfterEllen* and fired Bendix, took to the site to announce that rumors of its death had been greatly exaggerated. In an article titled "False Rumor: We Are Not Shutting Down," Emrah Kovacoglu attempted to "set the record straight," and assured readers that "you will still be able to access the site, all of its content, and communicate with others through the forums. We will continue to work with our freelancers and contributors to cover the many topics and news that are important to the LGBT community."

*AfterEllen* had pulled a lesbian Tom Sawyer, crashing its own funeral and then returning to the land of the living as though nothing out of the ordinary had transpired. But while Tom Sawyer's reappearance was met with embraces and rejoicing, readers responded to *AfterEllen*'s posthumous announcement with skepticism. As Caitlin Logan

observes in summation of *AfterEllen*'s shake-up, "The site was pronounced dead, only to jump out of its grave and deny it ever lost consciousness." Kovacoglu's article received 328 comments, most of which consisted of readers questioning the sincerity and integrity of Kovacoglu's words and encouraging each other to archive the site on The WayBackMachine and then take their clicks to *Autostraddle* (which, after Bendix's announcement, purchased the domain name *AfterAfterEllen*). The most upvoted comment on Kovacoglu's article came from "Dorothy Snarker," an *AfterEllen* veteran recapper and fan favorite. Snarker backed up Bendix's original claim that the site is shutting down,

In essence, what TotallyHer (the company that owns *AfterEllen*) is claiming is that *AfterEllen* the site will remain up – at least for now. [...] But it will no longer have an editor or any queer women steering any daily fresh content.

TotallyHer claims they will continue to work with freelancers for new content. But to date none of the site's regular freelancers – myself included – have been contacted about continuing to write or even given notice about this abrupt editorial change. Like, Emrah, do you even know who the writers for this site are? Or care?

This gives me zero confidence that whatever new pieces possibly go up in the future will represent our community [...]

Within Bendix's and Snarker's reactions to the *AfterEllen* shake-up lies a warning to both readers and the new authorities behind the site: Whatever TotallyHer manages to revive *AfterEllen* as, with the power of a male-owned media corporation, it won't be as a space for lesbians. In Bendix's announcement, she frames *AfterEllen*'s closure as the result of a capitalist, racist, heteronormative, and sexist culture: "They gave us two fiscal years to

become their LGBT property and profit in that space, and they found we are not as profitable as moms and fashion. And, yes, ‘they’ are mainly white, heterosexual men.” Snarker takes a similar approach, not only voicing her concern that the site will no longer be run by queer women but also that TotallyHer’s ignorance of *AfterEllen* was so thorough and willful that management didn’t even know the names of the common contributors. How could these sources possibly “represent our community”? And so it seemed that, even if *AfterEllen* remained accessible, the site “as [lesbians] knew it” was dead (Bendix).

For about two-and-a-half months after Bendix’s *Tumblr* post, no new content was posted on *AfterEllen*, the old writers for the site began writing for other digital spaces, and it appeared *AfterEllen* could indeed be added to the litany of vanquished lesbian spaces Bendix referenced in her *Tumblr* post. But then *AfterEllen* named a new EIC, Memoree Joelle. In her introductory article, Joelle promised readers she would stay true to the site’s original mission of “providing a fun, feminist perspective on the way lesbians and bisexual women are portrayed in pop culture,” and shares her vision for broadening the site’s focus in terms of age and racial diversity (“Greetings from Your New Editor-in-Chief”). In the same article, Joelle assured readers, “*AfterEllen* has been a kind of lighthouse. While we may be separated geographically, or by culture, or age, or race or identity, this bright light spans our vast ocean. The thought of that light being extinguished is devastating. Please be assured, the light has not been extinguished.”

Yet, as will be explored throughout this chapter, for some that light had transformed from a source of hope into a spotlight illuminating the fractures within the lesbian community and the violence facilitated through theory. Roughly three years after

Joelle was named EIC of *AfterEllen*, she and her business partner purchased the site through their limited liability company, Lesbian Nation. The reference to Jill Johnston's 1973 book on lesbian-feminist separatism, *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution*, solidifies both *AfterEllen*'s ideological link to lesbian-separatist spaces like *The Furies*, and also speaks to a moment of ideological and technological convergence, wherein an interpretation of lesbian-separatist ideals manifests in a digital platform. With all of this recent history in mind, this chapter argues for the importance of recognizing the far-reaching consequences of theory, particularly when those consequences are violent, and even when those facilitating discourse refuse to call their discourse "theory." *AfterEllen* represents an opportunity to explore the theory that proliferates within "anti-theory" spaces, particularly as these spaces migrate to the Web.

To begin this chapter, I will first offer a brief history of *AfterEllen*, from its 2002 inception by Sarah Warn to its current embodiment at the time of this writing. Unlike the other publications examined in this project, uncovering the entirety of *AfterEllen*'s run proved impossible, largely because forums have been deleted and restructured during the acquisitions of the site (more on this later). To re-conceive *AfterEllen*'s complex, nuanced history in a way befitting the website meant searching through archives of the website, perusing the forums, and analyzing comment sections of articles that recalled "the good old days" (Snarker) or simply drew comparisons across different periods in the website's history. I believe some of my conclusions have implications not just for scholars hoping to examine digital discursive spaces, but also for scholars seeking to curate queer history online. Moreover, this chapter circles back to questions of queer theory's origins in popular queer discourse and considers the Web at once a heuristic for

and object of interpretation. In keeping with this focus, I look to forum conversations and readers' responses to articles as well as articles themselves as examples of the everyday proximity of queer women on the Web to queer theory.

### Going Where No Lesbian Magazine Has Gone Before: The Early Years and Goals of *AfterEllen* (or Taking the Lesbian Community Online)

Despite its new medium of the Web, *AfterEllen*'s exigency mirrors that of the other discursive spaces discussed in *Just Between Us Girls*. As Sarah Warn, the founder of *AfterEllen*, remembers, in 2002 finding information about lesbian and bisexual issues and media was difficult, because LGBT news and media outlets often sidelined such topics in favor of focusing on gay men. Something of a popular culture connoisseur, Warn also wanted to find other lesbians who would celebrate, critique, and analyze media centered on lesbians and bisexual women. More specifically, Warn recalls, "an acquaintance I met at a party suggested I do something with all the random lesbian TV factoids I was boring her with" (Kregloe). And so, with much enthusiasm and little money, having inherited the vision (and problems) of her lesbian foremothers,<sup>1</sup> Warn created a blog named *AfterEllen*.

The name of the site temporally positions it in the cultural moments after Ellen Degeneres publicly came out as a lesbian. Degeneres' coming out took place over various media platforms, capturing national attention and reigniting lesbians' hopes and fears about mainstream visibility. Degeneres publicly announced her sexuality on the 1997 cover of *TIME* magazine; beneath her smiling figure was the now famous line, "Yep, I'm

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<sup>1</sup> See previous chapters and Introduction for explanation of the origins of *Vice Versa*, *The Ladder*, and *The Furies*.

Gay.” She was then interviewed about her sexuality by Diane Sawyer on *20/20* and on the *Oprah* show. A week later, her character Ellen Morgan came out on the sitcom *Ellen*. Immediately, there were repercussions. Advertisers like JCPenney, Chrysler, and Wendy’s decided not to buy airtime during *Ellen* (Adhikari and Francis), TV executives pulled back on promotions for the show, religious groups protested outside of ABC’s stations, and ABC began putting disclaimers at the beginning of *Ellen* episodes that warned of content inappropriate for children (Hampson). A year after the infamous “Puppy Episode” aired, ABC cancelled the show and Degeneres believed she had lost her career. Apart from a short-lived 2001 CBS sitcom, *The Ellen Show*, which was cancelled after 13 episodes, Degeneres wouldn’t reclaim (and surpass) her old levels of success until 2003 when she voiced Dory in *Finding Nemo* and launched *The Ellen Degeneres Show*.

In explanation of *AfterEllen*’s name in the 2002 About page of the site, Warn explains the import she placed on Degeneres coming out, indicating that the consequences of the publicity around this performance reverberate for lesbians and bisexual women (despite the fact that at the site’s beginning, Degeneres had yet to make what many would consider to be her comeback):

[Degeneres coming out] marked a strategic turning point in public awareness of lesbian/bisexual characters in mainstream movies, music, books, and television shows, etc. The very fact that Ellen’s coming-out was discussed by the media at such length and for over such a considerable period of time ensured that subsequent lesbian [and] bisexual characters, storylines, and onscreen events would be much less controversial. This in turn produced an ‘explosion’ (in

relative terms) of lesbian/bisexual visibility in entertainment and the media over the last five years. (“About AfterEllen.com” 2002)

It’s difficult to resist reading Warn’s cautious optimism at the emerging age of media for lesbians in concert with Lisa Ben’s enthusiastic predictions for lesbian media in “Here to Stay” (see Introduction). Both Ben and Warn insist to their readers not so much that “It Gets Better,” but rather, “It’s getting better,” and point to the need for discursive spaces for queer women to gather in order to make sense of and facilitate these changes. And, indeed, Degeneres’s explosive rise to fame coincided with *AfterEllen*’s early years of existence, seemingly bolstering the site’s claims that a new age of lesbian media was dawning.

*AfterEllen* quickly cultivated what has been referred to as a “cult following” (The Team), and the site’s success is often linked to two other significant media events, demonstrating the role of media convergence in subcultural formation: the premiere of Showtime’s *The L Word* (*TLW*, 2004) and the greater accessibility of wireless high-speed Internet. When Warn began posting recaps of *TLW* on *AfterEllen* and facilitating discussion between other fans, the site’s readership “exploded” (Cameron, “Constructing Queer Female Cyberspace”). Scholars like Maria San Filippo and Kelsey Cameron have established the significance of *TLW* in the construction of queer female web spaces. Indeed, as Cameron argues in her study of fandom’s relationship to digital spaces for queer women, “queer female cyberspace as it exists today emerged alongside and often through *TLW*, as women gathered together online to discuss and critique and then stayed together even after its run” (“Constructing Female Cyberspace”). Scholars have paid much attention to *AfterEllen*’s ties with *TLW* (see Julie Levin Russo’s “Labor of Love:



Charting *The L Word*,” Maria San Filippo’s “Before and After *AfterEllen*: Online Queer Cinephile Communities as Critical Counterpublics,” and *Reading The L Word: Outing Contemporary Television* for examples), and these sorts of conversations substantiate the significance of convergence as a lens to study online spaces for queer women, particularly as these conversations facilitate the development of lesbian subjectivities and discourse. According to Kate O’Riordan, “queer/cyber subjects have been understood as being produced through those practices where digital media and queer cultures intersect and are produced through one another” (15). While media has been converging in discursive spaces for queer women since Lisa Ben reviewed *The Children of Loneliness* in the first issue of *Vice Versa*, the affordances of the Web meant that queer women could gather around media and correspond with one another with a sense of immediacy. The longing for connection to information, for the discovery of community, and for the existence of a space of belonging, continued to occupy queer women into the digital age, and the Web offered a promising platform for the realization of these desires.

As *AfterEllen* continued to gain popularity, Warn and her growing staff began the process of finding dependable streams of revenue to support the site’s development. Warn and her partner launched *AfterElton* (a media site for gay men) and housed both sites under their company Erosion Media (Bernard “After *AfterEllen*”). In 2006, *AfterEllen* was acquired by MTV/Logo. Logo is a gay-focused cable network which aired *AfterEllen* videos on their channel, provided *AfterEllen* with more access to viewers, and increased the site’s revenue so that the digital space could expand. The site did grow, and in 2009 Warn stepped down as EIC (though she still contributed her column, “Visibility Matters” to the site regularly) and Karman Kregloe, who had been another editor for

*AfterEllen*, took her place. In 2014, when Kregloe left the EIC role and Trish Bendix, who, at the time, had written for *AfterEllen* for a decade, stepped into the position, Logo sold *AfterEllen* to Evolve Media (the company that owns TotallyHer). As Cameron argues, “*AfterEllen*’s 2014 acquisition tends to be read as a moment of corporate takeover, when capitalist logics of monetization intrude upon fan and community spaces,” and, of course, the 2016 shake-up detailed at the beginning of this chapter underscores *AfterEllen* users’ simultaneous distrust of and dependence on these capitalist logics. The other discursive spaces discussed in this project subsisted on subscriptions, donations, and, in the case of *The Ladder* and *The Furies*, the financial backing of the lesbian organizations facilitating those spaces. When these spaces folded, they all folded due to a lack of resources, a problem *AfterEllen* hoped to combat.

*AfterEllen*’s distinction as the only discursive space in *Just Between Us Girls* with connection to corporate money provides an opportunity to examine the strained relationship between capitalism and queer women. Similarly to Cameron and other scholars like Heather Murray and Gavin Brown, however, I believe there is more to the story than capitalism and lesbianism as irreconcilable bed-fellows, for that framing also ends with lesbianism’s inevitable subsumation under capitalism. As has been demonstrated through *The Furies*’ and *The Ladder*’s use of ads for lesbian-made products, lesbians have found ways to cultivate a lesbian subculture through certain kinds of participation in the capitalist market.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, as discussed later in the chapter, competing systems of value structure *AfterEllen*, with corporate interests visible in some ways and discursive participants’ interests visible in others. Specifically, later sections in

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<sup>2</sup> In some ways, the circulation and production of *Vice Versa* subverts capitalism, as Lisa Ben not only gave the magazine out for free, but also produced it on company time (see the Introduction).

this chapter explore *AfterEllen* writers' and members' priority that the site remain (or, in some cases, become) "authentically" lesbian.

This concern with what makes a space "authentically" lesbian (and even what makes a lesbian authentically lesbian) motivates the theories of gender and sexuality permeating *AfterEllen*. Much like *The Ladder*, *AfterEllen*'s objectives of visibility and representation manifest in many different theorizations of lesbianism and lesbian community throughout its (continued) run. Thus, the end of the chapter focuses on the site's life after the announcement of its shutdown and Joelle's eventual tenure as EIC, while the next section analyzes the structures, ideologies, and discursive practices that make *AfterEllen* a lesbian space.

### Lesbianing on *AfterEllen*: Theorizing and Performing Lesbianism in an Online Communication Network

As previous chapters have supported, part of queer theorists' and LGBT historians' intrigue over physical and discursive spaces stems from the role of place and space in identity formation. Place-and-space-based affordances of lesbian print publications allowed, for instance, Lisa Ben to meet lesbians without relying on gay bars, the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) to inspire throngs of lesbians to move to San Francisco, and *The Furies* to spread lesbian-feminist theory across the country.<sup>3</sup> When lesbian and queer women's spaces began developing online, the Web increased the abilities of these spaces to negotiate geographical distance and to connect to a multitude of individuals, though particular limitations and challenges revealed themselves as scholars like Mary

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<sup>3</sup> See the Introduction for a discussion of Lisa Ben and *Vice Versa*, Chapter 1 for analysis of the DOB and *The Ladder*, and Chapter 2 for examination of *The Furies*.

Bryson, Nina Wakeford, and Kate O’Riordan debunked myths of the Web’s radical potential. Because the Web disturbs some normative notions of the function of space while reinforcing others, it’s important to attend to queer theorists’ and Web scholars’ dissections of space online and offline in order to grasp a central reason the Web can so successfully stand in as an image of liberation for LGBT individuals.

Queer theorists have little doubt that theorizing sexuality involves analysis of not only *what* an individual or group of individuals does (or, indeed, *who* one does “it” with), but also *where* one is located, the space one occupies as a sexual(ized) subject. In “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” Judith Butler asks what it means to “theorize as a lesbian,” and argues both that identity categories are produced by regulatory regimes and therefore dangerous, and that these categories are “sites of necessary trouble” that can produce pleasure through their instability (14). To illustrate her argument, she shares the epigraphic quote, deconstructing the phrase “going to Yale to be a lesbian” and the idea of “playing a lesbian” through a performative lens: “to say I ‘play’ at being one is not to say that I am not one ‘really’; rather, how and where I play at being one is the way in which that ‘being’ gets established, circulated, and confirmed” (18). When Butler reflects on going to Yale to be a lesbian, she does more than argue for a subjectivity constantly reconstituted and troubled through repetition, she points out the contextually-dependent nature of such performances – the “how and where” of performing “lesbian” help facilitate reception, recognition, and sometimes ruptures of the identity category. Extending the consequences of Butler’s argument, one might conclude that going to Yale to be a lesbian requires/produces a different kind of “lesbianing” than going to a lesbian bar or the grocery store, particularly because the “how” of one’s performance of identity

depends on the tools or techniques for performance enabled and allowed by the “where.” Sara Ahmed also asserts the role of “where” and “how” in ontological performance. In her analysis of nonnormative orientations through queer phenomenology, Ahmed argues for the significance of the “where of the body’s dwelling,” pointing out that only through recognizing the “here” of the body does one manage to determine the “there” of orientation (*Queer Phenomenology* 8). The place of dwelling and the body have a symbiotic relationship for Ahmed, with both leaving impressions on the other so that while the body is shaped by its location so is “the skin of the social [...] affected by the comings and goings of different bodies” (8). In this way, what Ahmed terms “the histories of arrival” shape “home,” as the stories of how one arrives at, departs from, and takes up space in this location influence the very shape of the location itself. Yet part of the pain of returning home as a queer person lies in “home’s” dependency on heterosexual ideologies that produce “orientations” towards heterosexual objects, which can leave the queer individual with few tools for expressing belonging and many potential landmines to negotiate as their orientations towards nonnormative objects (like a same-sex partner) may be “read as a refusal to reproduce and therefore as a threat to the social ordering of life itself” (Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* 91). Thus, while one may change “home” or even Yale by performances of lesbianism, the pre-existing histories of these spaces offer affordances and challenges that inform the possibilities and limits of these performances.

The spaces that queers gather to talk, play, perform, or fuck facilitate queer identity and queer theory: here one may consider the amount of queer theory that muses on scenes from bars or clubs, the queer theory devoted to drag performances that take

place away from the well-lit streets of the mainstream. Theorists like Jay Prosser, Judith Halberstam, and Lucas Cassidy Crawford have explored ways queer bodies, particularly trans bodies, become conflated with specific spaces (like the city or Yale) and patterns of movements to certain spaces. For instance, Halberstam discusses the trope of the “metronarrative,” which aligns trans identities with movements from the country to the city, often diminishing the experience of rural queerness (*In a Queer Time* 36). Indeed, as Crawford argues, transgender community and transgender identity frequently find expression through geographic or territorial metaphors (Here Crawford cites the examples of Janice Raymond’s *The Transsexual Empire* and Sandy Stone’s “The Empire Strikes Back,” both of which metaphorically territorialize the trans body). Again one might imagine Halberstam’s argument regarding the metronarrative extended to our contemporary moment, where, as physical, embodied spaces for queer women to gather become ever rarer, queer female identities arguably become conflated with movements to *virtual* space – like the Web.

These lessons on the symbiotic relationship between space and sexuality – and all of the issues of agency, authority, and visibility that reveal themselves through this dynamic – have important implications for queer theorists and scholars in general. After all, Judith Butler wasn’t only going to Yale to be a lesbian, she was going to Yale to be a theorist. And, just as “going to Yale to be a lesbian” made Butler feel like a lesbian “in some more thorough and totalizing way” (18), so too does Yale affect Butler’s performance as a theorist. Recalling bell hooks’ “Theory as Liberatory Practice”<sup>4</sup> in which she describes the rare and subversive opportunity to discuss race and gender with a

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<sup>4</sup> See Introduction for more engagement with hooks’ essay.

group of black women (67) further demonstrates the affordances and limitations of space and place when facilitating theory. For instance, while hooks argues for the benefits of theorizing race and gender with other black women (e.g. the subversion of censorship and the opportunity to base theory on lived experiences), she also notes that spaces that support such discourse may identify as anti-theory, believing theory to be the domain of elite intellectuals unconcerned (and unaffected) by the realities of oppression (66). Queer theory has been accused of a similar pedantic position, and the distrust of theory that hooks pinpoints in nonacademic communities arises frequently within the discursive space of *AfterEllen*. Despite these misgivings, this project maintains, whatever their intention, individuals theorize gender and sexuality on *AfterEllen*, using the discursive space to cultivate lesbian identity and community.

But what does it mean to occupy and cultivate a space on the Web? Web scholars have also turned to questions of space, and, like queer theorists, engaged in the relationship between identity and space. As mentioned above, the Web changes how one uses space, so any range of activities generally necessitating privacy or relegated to the domestic sphere – paying bills, corresponding with a friend, watching pornography - may be undergone in “public” spaces. However, while the Web augments physical space, Mark Graham argues that theorists must keep in mind that it cannot *transcend* those physical spaces. So while a closeted teenage lesbian from a small rural town might “go to” *AfterEllen* to discuss a popular television show or to meet others in the forums, she ultimately remains in her living room with her laptop. Furthermore, spatial metaphors organize conceptions of and objectives for the Web and often these metaphors mask power imbalances and issues of access that occur online. Consider, for example, how

frequently the Web is framed as a *place* for everyone to *go* for resources despite the fact that information online overwhelmingly caters to a white, able-bodied audience, making information pertaining to marginalized individuals harder to track down. Graham and other Web scholars argue that the term “cyberspace” (problematically) implies that the Web exists as some sort of separate place where individuals around the world come together no matter their location. While the term cyberspace has fallen out of favor, other online spatial metaphors abound (chatroom, *website*, web address, etc.).

The hope that technology may facilitate the transcension or manipulation of space and place has a long history. Mark Graham cites examples of communication technologies preceding the Web, like the telegraph and telephone, stating, “In 1846 [...] a proposal to connect European and American cities via an Atlantic telegraph [...] stated that one of the benefits would be the fact that ‘all of the inhabitants of the earth would be *brought into one intellectual neighborhood* and be at the same time perfectly freed from those contaminations which might under other circumstances be received’” (178, my emphasis). Graham outlines the hope that communication technologies may create a shared space, a neighborhood, where individuals who may have otherwise never communicated, can share thoughts and build knowledge. Such visions align with the objectives of the discursive spaces analyzed in this project, which longed to connect isolated and scattered lesbians to one another in a forum where they could share their experiences and opinions. Other examples Graham offers further emphasize the belief of philosophers, inventors, and consumers of media throughout the centuries that communication technologies could dismantle and restructure time and space. However, Graham ultimately cautions that dependence on spatial and geographical metaphors to



describe communication technologies like the Web obfuscates place-based social, economic, and political power imbalances by enforcing an online/offline worldview that teases with the possibility of transcendence.

While this chapter argues for the possibilities of performing space and place online, it also heeds the warnings of Web scholars who worry that unchecked optimism around this technology's affordances obscures awareness of the Web's very real constraints. Despite his warnings about online limitations, Graham allows that "virtuality" can still facilitate "a site for the alternate performances that have been so immensely important to queer studies, cyberpunk literature, and various online social movements" (180). Graham's reference to "alternative performances" seems to exclude the performance of place, focusing instead on "performances" like coming out. However, other Web theorists have begun focusing attention on ways individuals perform place online and the implications of these performances for sexuality. In "Language, Sexuality, and Place: The View from Cyberspace," Brian King argues that Web users perform sexualized place (as well as "place-based" sexuality) in online chat-rooms through the user interface, spatial metaphors (e.g. the *chatroom*), and interactions between chatroom users that further perform and establish the "placeness" of the site. Referencing JL Austin's theory of the felicity of speech acts wherein speech acts are neither true nor false, but successful or unsuccessful, King argues that (the performance of) place is a necessary component of the performance of sexuality: "We become sexual subjects within these places rather than being *a priori* sexualized subjects, with our ability to feel sexy or sexually aroused in a certain place hinging partly upon reiterations of sexualized places that have been 'felicitous'" (3). In this way, Butler's success in going to Yale to be

a lesbian also depends on successful performances *of Yale* as a place for lesbianing. The fact that Butler's performance as a sexualized subject ties itself to a performance as an academic/theorist suggests certain heteronormative spaces may institutionalize marginalized performances, containing them within normatively acceptable and controlled parameters. A history of performances, of "arrivals and departures," inform a place's possibilities for performances of subjectivity. Online, while the performance of place might manifest in different manners than corresponding offline performances, understanding how the placeness of a website is established reveals the site's own parameters for the performance of sexuality.

This attention to online space as a "place" accounts for Graham's and others' warning that the metaphorical physicality of the Web not be viewed as transcendent, and also subverts sociolinguists' focus on "space" as "large-scale spatial relations" (like neighborhoods or regions), focusing instead on "ephemeral social spaces" like the ones that exist online (Graham 4). In his analysis of a gay chatroom, King suggests that the interface design comprises only a small extent of online spatiality; linguistic performances embraced or resisted by users help establish a site's sense of place. For instance, King calls attention to linguistic repetitions of "place," such as consistent references to the chatroom as "in here," as well as the utilization of city names for individual chatrooms within the site. The linguistic performances of place, such as ways that screennames allude to drag queens or play with camp, help situate the chatroom in the tradition of gay clubs and bars: a place to cruise, flirt, and connect. Neither of the websites discussed in this project host chatrooms, but *AfterEllen's* forums, comment

sections, articles, vlogs, etc. utilize many of the same performative tactics in order to establish a “placeness” that is necessary for identity performance.

Discursive structures built into *AfterEllen*, such as the site’s 2002 “About” page, enforce not only the performance of the website as a place but also the performances of lesbianism and theorizing sanctioned within the space. According to *AfterEllen*’s 2002 “About” page, as mentioned above, as lesbian/bisexual visibility slowly increases in popular culture, *AfterEllen* offers an “alternative voice” to other “critiques of the media or entertainment by lesbians or bisexual women on the Web.” The page argues that aforementioned popular culture critiques generally do (at least) one of three things: 1) offer extreme opinions that either condemn or worship mainstream media, 2) offer “bland rubber-stamp reporting,” or 3) offer thorough analysis rendered “inaccessible” by academic jargon. In contrast, *AfterEllen* characterizes its voice as “commonsense” and “everywoman,” claiming this voice is rooted in “the belief that lesbian and bisexual visibility in entertainment and the media is important and has progressed but still has plenty of room for improvement” (“About AfterEllen.com”). These descriptions of the ideals and philosophies promoted by the site create an expectation that discourse in the space will align with the site’s stated values. While *AfterEllen* aims to “promote thought and discussion by presenting differing opinions on the same subject whenever possible” (“About”), sanctioned discourse would not, for example, be laden with academic jargon or dismissive of the importance of popular culture to lesbians and bisexual women.

Diving into the Wreck: Recovering Lost Lesbian Archives and Re-Theorizing Lost Lesbian Identity on *AfterEllen*

Despite the fact that communication technologies often facilitate this performance of placeness, when discussing the Web's impact on community and identity formation, many LGBT scholars emphasize the unmooring of individuals from place. In "The Demise of the Gay Enclave," Nikki Usher and Eleanor Morrison examine the consequences of the "gay community's" move online, stating,

The factors that enable and constrain [online] community engagement and local storytelling (and ultimately create the conditions for civic engagement) are a distinct departure from those that existed in physical neighborhoods. The claims upon individuals, who now are located both globally and locally, have also shifted as they negotiate being members of a gay 'community' that is unbounded by geography. (279)

The previous chapters of this project have asserted that one of the most lauded aspects of the Web for LGBT identity – the idea that this platform liberates individuals from place-boundness – has been a central focus of predigital discursive spaces for queer women. While it's important to attend to the ways in which online spaces facilitate *a different type* of negotiation between the global and the local than predigital spaces, it's also important to attend to the ways that LGBT individuals have had to negotiate between the global and the local for decades, particularly when access to "global" and "local" resources were difficult to come by. As Graham makes apparent through his history of the hopes attached to communication technologies, attempts at locating oneself within a global/local network did not always manifest physically. For instance, Martin Meeker notes that *The Ladder* editors frequently received letters from women outside of San Francisco (where the DOB rented office space), expressing their envy of the

opportunities for lesbians in that area or their desire to relocate to “a place that was home to a group of people with a new conception and practice of community to offer” (91).<sup>5</sup> As Martin Meeker points out in *Contacts Desired*, the creation of new DOB chapters and individual lesbians providing names of potential new subscribers helped to provide an alternative to face-to-face communications and connect individuals across the country. While the previous chapters have attended to the specific manifestations of the global and the local in print publications, this chapter focuses on *AfterEllen* users’ global/local negotiations, and how pre-digital discursive spaces influence the online navigation of these identities.

In “Before and After *AfterEllen*,” Maria San Filippo analyzes changes in *AfterEllen*’s coverage of film after its acquisition by Logo. According to Filippo, *AfterEllen* was unique insofar as it was “conceived and designed to facilitate global access and user interaction while forging a discursive sphere around a localized identity-based virtual community. *AfterEllen* offers a vital example of contemporary media fan-activism fostering a ‘glocal’ cinephile community alongside a queer counterpublic” (117). While Filippo’s study largely focuses on *AfterEllen*’s position as a “digital communit[y] of cinephiles and media activists” with “counterpublic potential,” I want to linger on her framing of *AfterEllen* as a “glocal” community in an attempt to parse out the specific ways *AfterEllen* defines itself as a community with global and local reach. It’s not difficult to imagine the Web as a globalizing force as it provides access to more individuals than printed media, and Filippo suggests not only *AfterEllen*’s accessibility

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<sup>5</sup> San Francisco wasn’t the only place that the printed word helped transform into a “gay neighborhood.” In *Contacts Desired*, Meeker states that New York’s Greenwich Village had a similar appeal to lesbians, partially thanks to depictions of the neighborhood in paperback fiction (89).

but also its content as evidence of its global potential, as *AfterEllen* promotes international lesbian films and filmmakers (130). Aside from *AfterEllen*'s cinematic global coverage, it also introduced a weekly column called "Foreign Affairs: A new column about International LGBT TV" in 2015. Members also generated threads on the forums like "International" where individuals post their home country in hopes of finding other members with the same nationality or sharing stories about their lives as lesbians or bisexual women in different countries. *AfterEllen*'s presentation of itself as global reinforces a long-standing objective for queer women's discursive spaces: the cultivation of an expanding social network. When this objective converges with the Web, theorizations of a far-reaching lesbian/bisexual subjectivity become visible more quickly than when similar theorizations are facilitated via print-based communication networks.

Despite confidence that the Web facilitates global identity frameworks, critics are suspicious of the Web's potential for localization. Usher and Morrison's skepticism stems from the disembodied online world that reduces the necessity of (and, arguably, possibility for) face-to-face communications:

The coherent local storytelling network has been dissolved into something more amorphous as its anchor – the gay neighborhood – fades. The context for communication, a central place for gays to speak about gay community concerns and issues as well as to perform gay identity, has been de-localized away from the physical community. Gays no longer have the same ability to gather and to feel physically connected to the community they can call their own. (Usher and Morrison 278)

To be clear, Usher and Morrison do not place the blame for de-localization solely on the Web; they tend to view the Web as the frontier lesbians and gays moved to as their physical neighborhoods shrank. However, Usher's and Morrison's essay necessarily focuses on recognizable physical gay spaces (like gay neighborhoods), and also seems to assume an equal level of access to these public spaces for gay men and lesbians, not to mention racial and ethnic minorities. This sort of analysis is profoundly important for understanding ways that physical spaces for gays and lesbians function or collapse, but Usher and Morrison fail to acknowledge the slipperiness between mediated and physical spaces, the frequency with which a mediated space – like a newsletter – may facilitate access to physical spaces like a gay neighborhood, and the symbiotic reliance of physical spaces on mediated communication networks. As seen in earlier chapters, these physical spaces become established as such partially through mediated communication: Before gays and lesbians would flock to San Francisco's gay neighborhoods, many first had to learn of the city's queer potential in letters from friends, magazines, or bulletins from gay and lesbian organizations. The communication networks that carry news of these sorts of promised lands have helped construct the image of neighborhoods in San Francisco and places like it as local sites for gays and lesbians, even for those who would never visit. Moreover, throughout LGBT history, storytelling networks and performances of local sexual identity often *could not* develop in physical relation to gay neighborhoods.<sup>6</sup> Not everyone can go to San Francisco – or Yale – to be a lesbian.

The performance of placeness that occurs on sites like *AfterEllen* indeed promotes the development of local identity with tenuous connections to physical space. The

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<sup>6</sup> See Chapter 1.

consistent comparisons of *AfterEllen* to a lesbian bar, the linguistic performances of spaces on the site like the forums or the comments as “here,” “there,” and/or places to “go to,” and the acknowledgement of site-specific rules both explicitly and implicitly suggest that a sense of communal locality may develop not only through physical but also virtual spaces. In making this claim, I am not arguing that the virtual has taken the place of the physical for lesbians and other queer women (indeed, the alarm at the closing of lesbian spaces is a common focus of *AfterEllen*, *Autostraddle*, and their predigital foremothers), but that the virtual has always had a place for queer women in developing a sense of the local, and that digital spaces like *AfterEllen* may not present the drastic shift in ideological priorities in this regard that some scholars imagine. What I’m arguing for here is an understanding of the virtual that encapsulates the predigital experiences of individuals whose primary involvements in knowledge and community acquisition and identity formation transpired in non-physical spaces.

So, if the above types of performances help establish *AfterEllen* as a place, what sort of performances establish *AfterEllen* as place for lesbians and bisexual women? Both Streitmatter and Filippo argue that queer discursive spaces like *Vice Versa* and *AfterEllen* must maintain a sense of identity. Streitmatter, like Filippo, argues that *Vice Versa* created “the prototype for the American gay and lesbian press” (5), and that one persisting characteristic *Vice Versa* developed was an open forum for discussing lesbian issues (6). While Streitmatter does not stress the role these forums played in developing a lesbian identity, the introduction has argued that such developments are a significant consequence of the prototype for these discursive spaces developed by Lisa Ben. Filippo insightfully argues that in order to thrive discursive spaces like *AfterEllen* produce



markers of “authenticity” which is partially established through some element of exclusion. For instance, “This site is for lesbian and bisexual women” also suggests this site is *not* for straight women or men. Filippo summarizes the traits of queer cultural criticism introduced by *Vice Versa*, including, “Address to a presumed preconstituted community of like-minded and identified readers, reinforced through the assurances of authenticity and safety, as well as exclusivity marked by ‘insider’ references and ‘by us, for us, about us’ discourse” (121). However, as Filippo argues, once Logo acquired the site, attempts at “authenticity” became a lower priority than assuaging corporate interests. Filippo observes that after Logo’s acquisition *AfterEllen*’s coverage of media expanded to that which did not “seem to warrant mandatory coverage by a lesbian media site” (132). For instance, forum-users complain about an influx of articles interviewing straight celebrities who (sometimes) play lesbian characters, while others complain that the site focuses on popular culture at the expense of lesbians’ lived experiences.<sup>7</sup> This corporatized shrinking of the exclusionary characteristics of the site endangered its air of authenticity. In other words, the more *AfterEllen* circulated content that did not read as lesbian-centered to its members, the less the members respected *AfterEllen*’s authenticity as a lesbian space.

What seems implicit and important to me in Filippo’s reading of the site after the Logo acquisition and in my own understanding of the site after its “shut-down” is the site members’ authority in accepting or rejecting *AfterEllen*’s claims to authenticity. While the Introduction argues that Lisa Ben’s interactions with media helped create the category of “lesbian texts,” *AfterEllen*’s transformations over the years exemplify ways discursive

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<sup>7</sup> While Warn envisioned *AfterEllen* as a site devoted to popular culture, it very soon began additionally covering news and politics pertaining to lesbians.

spaces continually re-negotiate and redefine categories central to their existence. It may seem obvious that *AfterEllen*'s definition of a lesbian text – and, indeed, lesbianism itself – differs from *Vice Versa*'s or *The Ladder*'s, but there's something less obvious, and I would suggest more seemingly insidious, about *AfterEllen*'s definitions of these categories changing with the tide of corporatization. In short, many *AfterEllen* and media critics considered ideological shifts on the site to be directly and sometimes solely related to its corporate acquisition. However, as I have suggested above, and as other critics have stated about the functions of communication networks, publics, and discursive spaces in general, alterations in the make-up of these spaces is not a matter of “top-down” revision. In other words, TotallyHer's definition of lesbianism or lesbian texts may be rejected by *AfterEllen* users who, through features on the site such as commenting and the forums, have the technological platforms and motivation necessary to maintain the “for us, by us” discourse that Filippo argues is a grounding quality of lesbian counterpublics. It also seems important to add that *AfterEllen* members echo Filippo's observations on authenticity in the forums and articles' comment sections, remarking not only on content unrelated to their interests but also on the presence of ads on the site clearly not marketed towards *AfterEllen*'s ostensible audience.

Additionally, many complaints on “The New AE” forum thread revolve around the altering of site features in a way that disregards the priorities of long-time members. For instance, as will be explored below, *AfterEllen* members have expressed investment in the forums as a space similar to the “Readers Respond” section in *The Ladder*, a space in which individuals can exchange opinions and, sometimes, critique the discursive space itself. Changes made to the website under corporate authority frequently dismayed and

discouraged *AfterEllen* members, who noted an onslaught of ads, slow-loading content, and a sense that, to quote one comment on the “False Rumor: We Are Not Shutting Down” article, “the company running [*AfterEllen*] cares about our community only to the extent that we can be monetized” (Fannie Wolfe). I emphasize users’ reactions to changes in the site’s interface over content because the presence of the forums serves as evidence of *AfterEllen* members’ ability to re-establish their place as “insiders” within a community that has expanded its reach so far as to potentially exclude the marginalized users by and for whom the site was created. If this strategy smacks of using the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house, that’s because, as Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green note in *Spreadable Media*, “the potential for collective action and discursive struggle are limited when audience members are forced to use a corporation’s own platforms to pose their critiques of that company’s practices” (57). Taking to the forums to discuss *AfterEllen*’s (mis)facilitation of lesbian identity not only gives the site “clicks” but also constrains counter-discourse within the moderated platforms provided by the site owners – owners who have instigated the counter-discourse through their rejection of these space’s promises to promote “for us, about us, by us” discourse.

The rejection of these sorts of promises indicates a failure of site owners to uphold their end of what Jenkins, Ford, and Green call the “moral economy” (*Spreadable Media*). The authors argue that in order for a moral economy to function,

All participants need to feel that the parties involved are behaving in a morally appropriate fashion. In many cases, the moral economy holds in check the aggressive pursuit of short-term interests in favor of decisions that preserve long-term social relations among participants. (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 52).

While moral economies do not remain stagnant but rather shift with social, cultural, political, and technological changes, certain tenets of past moral economies continue to influence present day discursive spaces like *AfterEllen*. Examining these spaces to determine enduring properties of the moral economies of queer women's spaces illuminates not only on what precedes the "end" of particular spaces (such as the closure of lesbian magazines or even lesbian bars and bookstores) but also on ways queer women re-interpret and re-negotiate their stakes in the moral economy. For instance, the outrage and distrust expressed in the comments on Emrah Kovacolgu's article "False Rumor: We Are Not Shutting Down" indicates moral indignation that a male heterosexual corporate figurehead would contradict the words of the site's lesbian writers and EIC. One *AfterEllen* member, Zee D-V, explicitly references Kovacolgu's identity in their comment: "That you, a man are on a queer women's site calling the women who run and contribute to this site essentially liars shows me where you are going." Indeed, by sending an "outsider" to *AfterEllen* to quell distress and by forbidding Bendix to post her goodbye message on the site, Kovacolgu and others behind TotallyHer did not honor readers' expectations of "for us, about us, by us" discourse or practices that align with the site's longtime motto that "Visibility Matters." Changing the site's infrastructure (e.g. reconfiguring the forums) also betrays readers' valuation of the site's facilitation of an open forum for discussing issues concerning lesbians and bisexual women. These actions by TotallyHer and the widespread response by readers both on *AfterEllen* and on other sites like *Autostraddle* and *The Advocate* represent a breakdown in the moral economy on *AfterEllen*, and also provide insight into why not only *AfterEllen* users but queer media critics in general perpetuated the belief that the site had "shut down." In the eyes of the

users and of those familiar with the practices of queer discursive spaces, the site had unilaterally reneged on its moral contract with its users, rendering the place (at least temporarily) defunct. Moral economies render visible (sometimes conflicting) values and expectations of discursive participants and companies, particularly insofar as *AfterEllen* members protest site-imposed limitations on performances and theorizations of lesbian and bisexual subjectivity.

The erasure of the old forums represents one of several vital disruptions in *AfterEllen*'s moral economy, yet members nonetheless use the new forums and comment sections on new content as a means of protesting or counteracting "The New AE's" identity. In a thread titled "What happened to AE," users discuss the consequences of the 2014 Viacom overhaul of the website, providing examples of automatically changed usernames, altered "joined" dates and other personal statistics like the amount of messages published. Member julia3 recounts her history on the site "back when it was just a wee blog sort of thing and Sarah Warn wrote most of the stuff" and says she was "very disappointed to lose my whole history here with the recent changes." In another thread called "general observations of the new ae," a member asks, "When will we be able to change our name back to the one we were using before so that it actually shows up when we post? Who made the executive decision to use the name associated with a user's email account? What happened to our avatars? Everyone has been stripped of their identity" (Eloise). Throughout these threads, multiple users reference a "lost history" as a consequence of the deleted forums, with more than one user commenting on the amount of work that would go into rebuilding. As one member says, "How many times can I give advice to the same deluded lovestruck lesbian infatuated with a random straight girl?"

(Spygirl). In the “Welcome to the New & Improved *AfterEllen*” thread that introduces Logo’s instantiation of the site, one user asks about regaining access to the threads from the previous forum, saying, “This was one of the best features of the site in my opinion. Having access to this comprehensive database is like having a wealth of knowledge and experience at your fingertips and delving into these past stories and situations similar to my own not only helps me better understand my own situation, but also allows me to extract valuable advice and perspective applicable to my own life that I ordinarily might not have access to” (lacydc). In the thread “Dear You,” more members lament what one calls “the crushing blow of nuking the old forum archives” (Bluenote). Clearly, *AfterEllen* users recognize the forums as a community resource *they* created, as an archive of valuable but still hard-to-find knowledge.

### Reimagining the “Lesbian Nation”: The New *AfterEllen*, Transphobia, and Theorizing Lesbianism

Theorizations of lesbianism and lesbian community on *AfterEllen* have a long, diverse history. Many articles explore the intersectionality of lesbianism, emphasizing the multiple components of identity negotiated by queer women. For example, one article titled, “Race, Relationships, and the Challenges of Lesbian Life” pushes for an intersectional understanding of women, stating, “[...] even within the sameness of shared womanhood, there is a multitude of difference contained in our lives. And when we consider women as a social unit or political class, those differences cannot be denied. Women aren’t homogenous” (Heuchan). Other content such as “The Benefits of Feminist Values in Business” (Stromberg), “Older Lesbians Deserve Recognition as Feminist

Pioneers and Sisters” (Huechan), and the “Feminist Friday” column that functioned as a weekly round-up of feminist news, reinforce the site’s theorizations of a lesbianism inseparable from feminism. Gender identity has also garnered attention on the site, with a piece on butchness by Jack Halberstam published in 2015 and an insightful conversation between an *AfterEllen* writer and Julia Serano published in 2013 about Serano’s book *Excluded* (Bianco).

In December 2016 when *AfterEllen* announced its new EIC, Memoree Joelle, controversy erupted. Individuals shared screenshots of an October 2016 tweet in which Joelle shared a Change.org petition, demanding the Human Rights Campaign, GLAAD, The Advocate, and other LGBT organizations “take the L out of LGBT.” The petition is a response to an earlier failed petition that had demanded the same organizations drop the “T” from the acronym, claiming “we feel their ideology is not only completely different from that promoted by the LGB community (LGB is about sexual orientation, trans is about gender identity), but is ultimately regressive and actually hostile to the goals of women and gay men” (“Drop the T”). While the newer petition signed by Joelle promotes the same anti-trans ideology, it takes a slightly different rhetorical approach, saying, “The addition of the T to the LGBT has resulted in Lesbians being silenced and threatened, all women and girls to be at risk for our safety, and our interests to take a backseat to those of transgenderist males [*sic*] who co-opt our name and culture” (“Statement: L is Out of GBT”). The petition goes on to claim that LGBT publications and organizations routinely attack lesbians with “slurs” like TERF (Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist) and cis (an often-used abbreviation for cisgender). Joelle not only tweeted the petition but displayed her comment on the petition, both of which were

shared not only on *Twitter* by former *AfterEllen* writer Elaine Atwell<sup>8</sup> but also by sites like *LGBT Laughs Tumblr* (the site occasionally shares non-humorous news-worthy posts under the tag #not funny). Upon receiving a mixture of backlash and support, Joelle deleted her name and comment from the petition as well as her tweet, though, of course, nothing's ever *really* gone from the Web, and discussions about the implications of this news for *AfterEllen* continued.

To say that lesbians cannot exist with – are indeed endangered by – trans individuals demands a re-theorizing of the lesbian subjectivity performed and promoted on *AfterEllen*. This claim is not to say that *AfterEllen* had been a bastion of trans acceptance before the October 2016 shake-up or that lesbian identity isn't constantly re-negotiated, but I am arguing that in this particular moment of grasping at authenticity, *AfterEllen* has implicitly and explicitly taken bold stances on gender identity, in particular the separating of gender/sexuality from one another. The article titled “Queer Identified Women Physically Assault Lesbian at Gay Bar,” which received 356 comments, provides an opportunity to analyze the type of theorizing that occurs around gender and sexuality, particularly as these categories relate to transness and lesbianism, on *AfterEllen*. The article describes an attack on Taelor Furry by a transman and “a group of queer-identified females.” According to Furry, the attackers were incited by her misgendering of the transman mentioned above. When Furry was asked to leave the bar, the article states, she was “jumped” by the group, beaten, and called a “TERF” and a “bitch.” After describing the attack, the article goes on to say

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<sup>8</sup> *Autostraddle* writer Heather Hogan notes in her Tumblr post “the lesbophobia thing” that after Atwell (who had written for *AfterEllen* for five years) questioned Joelle's support of the petition, Atwell's byline was removed from the hundreds of articles she had written during her time at *AfterEllen*.



TERF is a slur, created and used by the queer community, which can be applied to anyone who questions or appears to question any of the popular claims of gender ideology. One of the quickest ways to be called a TERF is to say publicly that homosexuality is defined by a sexual attraction to the same sex and a revulsion to the opposite sex. Lesbians are frequently the targets of this homophobic rhetoric, online and in person. The queer party line is that lesbians should be willing to have sex with transwomen, regardless of their transition status, because transwomen are women, full stop. TERF is being used as an excuse to incite violence against women and is considered hate speech.

(Macdonald, “Queer Identified Women Assault Lesbian”)

In this paragraph one can see a theorization of lesbianism threatened by “gender ideology,” which is a term *AfterEllen* writers and commenters frequently use to describe conceptualizations of gender as socially constructed or as a performance. Strategic essentialism, a political approach developed by Gayatri Spivak wherein marginalized groups temporarily organize around essentialized categories to effectively mobilize, is a dangerous concept on the new *AfterEllen*, one consistently rejected by *AfterEllen* writers and commenters. Indeed, I’d suggest that “queer,” on these sites and in general, has become a term that enacts strategic essentialism, and *AfterEllen* writers’ and users’ distrust of “queer” and “theory” stems from a fear of elision. As this article concludes and as *AfterEllen* members’ comments on the article solidify, strategic essentialism leads to the dilution of “lesbian” spaces and identity, as lesbians feel their needs and desires become de-prioritized: “It would seem that certain so-called ‘safe spaces’ do not extend that sentiment to lesbians, who are increasingly becoming a marginalized and attacked

group within the LGBT” (Macdonald, “Queer Identified Women Assault Lesbian”). This positioning echoes the sentiment behind the “Take the L out of LGBT” petition, implying that the affinity politics necessary for such a grouping to succeed ultimately fail the lesbians in the LGBT community. Consider also for example Macdonald’s remarks in the article “When Queerness Becomes Cultural Capital,” that “The reason I mind [being called queer] is because queer, in functioning as a catchall, serves to obscure what it is about my life, my community, my partners, that I needed to learn to be proud of in the first place [...] Queer as a catchall term makes it really hard for lesbians to assert and maintain this boundary [of identity], because it makes it impossible to name this boundary.” This queer theory on *AfterEllen* concerns itself with discursivity, specificity, and, in many participants’ minds, survival.

Many articles on the new *AfterEllen* engage in the dangers of strategic essentialism for the lesbian community, opting for a more separatist performance of lesbianism that, unlike *The Furies*, seems largely uninterested in theorizing the potential of coalitions with other marginalized groups. For instance, on April 26, 2018, *AfterEllen* reposted an article originally published on a website called *Lesbians Over Everything*. As the site’s name suggests, *Lesbians Over Everything* focuses on lesbians exclusively and aims to “provide a platform where lesbians can share our own stories without interruption” (“About Us”). In linking to other sites and organizations, *AfterEllen* continues the tradition of “creating a bibliography of lesbian materials” (Streitmatter 12). Just as Lisa Ben “transformed *Vice Versa* into a virtual card catalog for lesbian material” (Streitmatter 12), *AfterEllen* similarly points readers to various information and material pertinent to lesbians. As has been argued in previous chapters, the types of resources

shared by these discursive spaces redound to the space's identity, as the resources help establish assumed needs and desires of the group(s) served by the discursive space. In this way, *AfterEllen*'s reposting of the article from *Lesbians Over Everything* reflects *AfterEllen*'s attempts to cultivate an authentic/exclusive identity not merely by endorsing the website and the article's message but also by positioning the site and article as an extension of *AfterEllen*'s own discursive engineering and performance of lesbianism.

*AfterEllen* supports an essentialist and exclusive theorization of lesbianism partially through linking lesbian erasure and oppression to inclusivity. For *AfterEllen*, the word 'queer' and the idea of 'queer theory' does not represent that tantalizing challenge it did to academics in the 90s, but rather a threat of extinction as *AfterEllen* writers see queerness as undermining realities of lesbian existence (an argument *AfterEllen* often extends to transness). By theorizing lesbianism's relationship to other sexual and gender minorities, *AfterEllen* nonetheless embarks on an analysis common to queer theory: the ways identities can comprise and compromise one another. In the article from *Lesbians Over Everything*, titled "Why I am a Lesbian (Not Queer)," Bit Blair and Ashley Obinwanne argue that the inclusivity of "queerness" jettisons power from lesbianism by subtly reinforcing patriarchal stereotypes about sexual liberation and positivity.

According to Blair and Obinwanne, while "'queer' means 'yes' [...] 'Lesbian' is a word that means 'yes, but only if,' and to the 50% who don't clear the 'only if,' it means 'no.'" Thus, for the authors, a reason for the fear women who experience same-sex attraction have in embracing the label "lesbian": in a culture that conditions women to be caretakers and sexual objects, the foreclosure of sexual interaction with men incites derision, for heteropatriarchal society disrupts not only lesbians' existence but also the agency of

women in general. Again, these are not new arguments. In “Compulsory Heterosexuality,” Adrienne Rich analyzes “heterosexuality itself as a beachhead of male dominance” (13) and ties the erasure of lesbianism to the reinforcement of heterosexuality as a political institution (17). In issue 4 of *Vice Versa*, Lisa Ben likewise connects oppression of patriarchy to the maintenance of heterosexuality, opining that, while in the past marriage and domestic work may have been a woman’s only prospect, “in these days of frozen foods, motion picture palaces, compact apartments, modern innovations and female independence, there is no reason why a woman should have to look for a man for food and shelter [...] unless she really wants to” (“Here to Stay” 5). If these arguments seem like they would invite the practice of strategic essentialism (e.g. a coalition between lesbians and straight women with the objective of interrogating and dismantling male sexual dominance), *AfterEllen* swerves ideologically right in its theorization of the dangers of such groupings:

Lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, trans people, and even certain heterosexuals are deemed ‘queer.’ It is the favored term because it removes most of the distinctions between members of each group and as such, people in the ‘queer community’ who hold privilege over others are spared from having to acknowledge it.

(Obinwanne and Blair)

For Obinwanne and Blair, this lack of distinction between members of any queer or LGBT grouping results in lesbian erasure as normative frameworks like heteronormativity and patriarchy reinscribe themselves.

This trend of theorizing lesbian space and identity on *AfterEllen* also involves a theorization of transwomen that reveals what I’ve come to view as a structural

component of the framework used on *AfterEllen* to theorize lesbian identity: gender essentialism as a defensive identity performance. In articles like “Queer-Identified Women Physically Assault Lesbian at Gay Bar,” writers and commenters argue that transness endangers lesbians both because, as Jack Halberstam notes in “Butch/FTM Border Wars and the Masculine Continuum,” “some lesbians seem to see FTMs as traitors to a ‘women’s’ movement who cross over and become the enemy” (287) and because, as Macdonald puts it, “The queer party line is that lesbians should be willing to have sex with transwomen, regardless of their transition status, because transwomen are women, full stop.” While defining one’s identity always necessarily involves some sort of definition of an other, if only to delineate who one is not, it seems important to emphasize here that transwomen are the other who occupy a majority of *AfterEllen*’s content. Part of the consequence of this is the formulation of a performance of lesbianism perpetually on the verge of extinction, while another related consequence is the theorization of a stable but stagnant binary and biologically essentialist gender system.

All of the above may seem too unrelenting and essentialist to categorize as queer theory, and, indeed, many *AfterEllen* users would enthusiastically reject the label for their discourse. In the comment section of “Queer Identified Women Attack Lesbian in Gay Bar,” *AfterEllen* member, pixie, replies to a comment that questions how “anyone can call queer theory and gender identity politics progressive,” stating, “So many people are fooled by it, but at this point, I’d rather hang with straight people who are unaffected by queer theory than so called members of my own community (queers will never be part of my community but they’re supposed to be or something idk).” While *AfterEllen* itself has not published any articles focused on queer theory and I could not find a queer theory

discussion thread in the forums, this sort of exchange frequently occurs in the comments of articles discussing non-conforming gender identities including but not limited to transness, non-binarism, and gender fluidity. Between explicit mentions of theory in general and the trends of topics and discussions on *AfterEllen*, there's no question that many *AfterEllen* participants have familiarity with concepts in gender theory, queer theory, and even post-structuralism, and that these concepts inform their online performances of gender and sexuality.

In March 2019, *AfterEllen*'s lesbian-first theorizing came full circle when Joelle purchased the site under her newly formed company, Lesbian Nation. In her statement announcing the acquisition, Joelle explains she purchased the site in hopes of guaranteeing its longevity as “the only media site that caters content specifically for lesbian and bi women” and promises to stay true to *AfterEllen*'s mission (“Announcing Our Acquisition”). In the context of the influx of transphobic rhetoric propping up theorizations of lesbian identity on the website, *AfterEllen*'s housing under Lesbian Nation reveals, at least, a fitting metaphor for the site's understanding of itself as a discursive space, and, at most, a promise to continue its exclusionary theorizing of gender and sexuality. By my persistence in naming this discourse ‘theory’ despite *AfterEllen* members’ general contempt for the term, I do not mean to discount *AfterEllen* participants’ rejection of ‘theory’ but to argue that upon finding particular concepts of gender and queer theory unsatisfying or insufficient, *AfterEllen* users built their own. Indeed, in categorizing the discourse analyzed above *theory*, I am not suggesting the discourse is intellectually elevated or progressive. Sometimes theory is bad. Sometimes theory is profoundly harmful and even violent, whether that theory travels through the

channels of the Web or through academic journals, books, or lectures. This project's impetus partially derives from a need to challenge queer theory's insular, elitist positioning and cultivate a vision of the field that not only embraces but elevates the marginalized voices eclipsed by star academics and other institutional machinations. Perhaps most importantly, *AfterEllen* and its predigital foremothers demonstrate the deeply personal, political and practical roots of theory as queer women build and utilize theory to shape their spaces and values. Perhaps most significantly, these spaces challenge academic assumptions about theoretical expertise – that is, who counts as a theorist or what counts as theorizing – showcasing methods by which marginalized individuals variably recognize, reject, and renegotiate constructions of authority, identity, and community.

Chapter 4: When Discursive Spaces Collide: *Autostraddle*, *AfterEllen*, and Queer

Theorizing for an Inclusive Lesbian Community

*Solidarity does not assume that our struggles are the same struggles, or that our pain is the same pain, or that our hope is for the same future. Solidarity involves commitment, and work, as well as the recognition that even if we do not have the same feelings, or the same lives, or the same bodies, we do live on common ground.*

Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*

When *The CW*'s popular sci-fi show *The 100* (2014) killed off a lesbian character, fan-favorite Lexa (Alycia Debnam-Carey), with a stray bullet, the shot was heard 'round queer women's media spheres. Lexa, a fierce warrior in the post-apocalyptic setting of the show, dies in the scene directly after she consummates her relationship with the show's bisexual protagonist, Clarke. The manner of Lexa's death – the fact that she was killed in her bedroom rather than in battle – along with the death's timing directly after the show's first depiction of a same-sex relationship between women invoked the contemporary presence of historical concerns with queer women's representation in media. Queer fans expressed anger and disappointment for the way the death reenacted a troubling history of lesbian representation seemingly invisible or unimportant to the show's creators. Some fans of the show called for a boycott. Others used *Twitter* to accuse the show's creator, Jason Rothenberg, of queerbaiting,<sup>1</sup> referencing his past

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<sup>1</sup> Queerbaiting is the media practice of implying a same-sex relationship may occur (or even *is* occurring) but never actually depicting that relationship. As a term, "queerbaiting" became popular online, but lesbian discursive spaces have been invested in this concept since *Vice Versa*. See, for example, Lisa Ben's review of *Children of Loneliness*, wherein she complains there was no depiction of love between the two female characters aside from a hand being placed on one character's shoulder, "a casual gesture indeed" ("The Children of Loneliness" 9).



assurances to and pleas for trust from LGBT fans who expressed concern for Lexa's longevity when the possibilities of romance with Clarke became clear (another indication that queer women know and are invested in histories of queer women's representation). Fans accusing Rothenberg of queerbaiting felt the offensiveness of Lexa's death derived from the meta-narrative formed through Rothenberg's online interactions with LGBT fans. Rothenberg and cast and crew members actively engaged with *The 100* fans online, and as Lexa and Clarke's relationship progressed from "will-they-or-won't-they" to "when-will-they" and LGBT fans shared their trepidation with the show's creator on Twitter, Rothenberg repeatedly assured them that *The 100* could be trusted to responsibly represent female sexual minorities ("Toxic Regulation"). As queer media scholar Kelsey Cameron notes of *The 100* team's interaction with fans, "The crew's sustained engagement had signaled to many queer viewers that *The 100* understood their investments and would treat them well [...] Both the proximity of sex and death and the echoes of previous dead lesbian characters<sup>2</sup> activated pre-existing fan anger" ("Toxic Regulation" 5). When Lexa died in her lover's arms from a bullet not even meant for her, queer women felt their trust had been misplaced.

As in other media, in television, queer characters, particularly female queer characters, have a history of meeting grisly ends. "Dead Lesbian Syndrome" is a subset of the "Bury Your Gays" trope, which refers to the pattern of LGBT characters dying on television frequently and often in violent and tragic ways. As Cameron argues, understanding the backlash to any queer female character's death requires connecting the death to a history of LGBT representation, particularly on network television, which has

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<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the most famous parallel to Lexa's death is the death of Tara Maclay on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003). Tara was also killed by a stray bullet directly after making love to her girlfriend.

often operated within industry-regulated codes of “acceptable” representation, such as the Code of Practices for Television Broadcasters.<sup>3</sup> According to these codes, shows might, for instance, include a character with an “abnormal” sexuality so long as that character’s arc fits within a framework of heteronormative morality; hence a reason LGBT characters tend to find tragedy on the heels of romance or revelation, dying or dramatically exiting a show after confirmation of their sexuality. Cameron insists on an understanding of television’s representation of lesbian and bisexual characters that acknowledges the shadow cast by these regulations, stating that even as the regulations fade into memory, their consequences for storytelling linger.

In an effort to record this history and contextualize viewers’ reactions to Lexa’s death, *Autostraddle*, an independently owned website operated by and for queer women, created a list that includes every lesbian and bisexual character killed in a television show since 1976. While Cameron cites *Autostraddle*’s list as evidence of a long-standing industry practice of killing female queer characters, I’m interested in *Autostraddle*’s framing of this and other trends in queer women’s lives as theory and as an act of community formation historically connected to practices in pre-digital queer women’s discursive spaces. Cameron’s focus on the histories of industry regulation of television’s queer storylines offers important insight on the influence of media history on fandom’s perspectives and actions. This chapter builds on that work to specify how various acts of resistance, such as *Autostraddle*’s “List of 202 Dead Lesbian and Bisexual Characters on

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<sup>3</sup> The Code of Practice for Television Broadcasters was created by the National Association of Radio and Television Broadcasters in 1951 and continued to be updated until it was declared illegal in 1982. While the Code was, in Kelsey Cameron’s words, “more a description of best practice rather than a legally binding statute,” it nonetheless “represents an attempt at articulating a shared, collective vision of how television should work, one that operates above the level of an individual station or studio” (“Toxic Regulation” 8)

TV,” build from decades of tradition of queer women gathering around media to theorize their identities and media’s influence on these identities.

This chapter begins by offering a brief history of *Autostraddle*’s development from personal blog to, at the time of this writing, the most popular website for queer women. While sharing many similarities with *AfterEllen*, including the site’s relationship to *The L Word (TLW)*, *Autostraddle* also cultivates a dynamic with its readers enabled largely through its independently-owned status and reliance on donations of readers’ money and site-content. Building on previous chapters’ accounts of queer women’s uses of mediated discursive spaces to facilitate their political agendas (like protesting and boycotting, for example), this chapter resists characterizations of online political action as “slacktivism” in efforts to explore what a historicizing view of LGBT politics online reveals about the Web *and* queer women’s politics - politics which, as this project has demonstrated, have always been mediated. Just as *The Furies* viewed their newspaper as a space to theorize and strategize in order to facilitate political action, so too does *Autostraddle* provide space for readers to put their experiences as queer women in a social, cultural, and political context. Much like *Vice Versa*, *The Ladder*, and *AfterEllen*, *Autostraddle* divides its focus among politics, popular culture, and community formation both online and offline. Indeed, as in all of the discursive spaces discussed in *Just Between Us Girls*, *Autostraddle* frequently blurs distinctions between these categories, particularly insofar as *Autostraddle* considers the representation of queer women itself a political issue, or, at the very least, a vehicle towards forming community and altering public perceptions of queer female sexuality. With this in mind, I read *Autostraddle*’s commentary on popular culture, like, for example, their reaction to Lexa’s death on *The*

100, as discourse that theorizes both the role of popular culture and representation in queer women's lives and the ruptures in the relationships between gender and sexuality as well as other aspects of identity like race, class, and education.

This chapter ends with consideration of *Autostraddle*'s theorization of queer women's identity, positioning the discursive space's theories of community against *AfterEllen*'s. As previous chapters have established the role of personal experience in theorizing, *Just Between Us Girls* uses the discourse between and around both websites regarding trans-inclusivity in the lesbian community to examine the role theories of gender and sexuality play in lived experiences.

#### The New Girl in Town: *Autostraddle* Enters the Queer Web Scene

With the development of more effective wireless connection and the increased popularity of laptops, social practices around the computer shifted, rendering it a more appropriate medium for fostering queer women's communities, and opening the door for the relative success of websites like *AfterEllen* and *Autostraddle*. Like *AfterEllen*, *Autostraddle*'s creation coincided with certain cultural and technological events that impacted its early success: Both have beginnings inextricable from *The L Word* and both originated in the early 2000's, when high-speed wireless Internet was becoming more widely available. In "An Oral History: How *The L Word* Fandom Built *Autostraddle*," *Autostraddle* founder Mary Lyn Bernard (aka Riese) describes the way that "uber private browsing" coincided with television fans spilling into online communities and fandoms, allowing more individuals to explore their interests without being on display in the family computer room. These social and cultural patterns that develop alongside technology

have been described by Lisa Gitelman as “protocols,” a set of cultural, economic, and legal norms that occur around a medium (5).<sup>4</sup> Thus, spatial and temporal protocols around the Web shifted as wireless connection found its way into more and more households – no more rushing offline due to an expected phone-call, no more browsing while worrying about family members looking over one’s shoulder – not when one could take one’s computer to the nearest WiFi hotspot to go online. In 2006, Riese began what would become *Autostraddle* as a blog devoted to recapping *TLW*, naming the blog *The Road Best Straddled*, a title for a book-in-progress she was writing about bisexuality (“How *The L Word* Fandom Built *Autostraddle*”). Through her interactions with readers on her blog and other blogs devoted to *The L Word*, Riese met the women who helped her build *Autostraddle*. The name *Autostraddle* is a portmanteau of *The Road Best Straddled* and the name of Riese’s personal blog, *This Girl Calls Automatic Win*, or *Autowin*.

Particular protocols around the Web render it an appropriate inheritor of queer women’s discursive spaces, specifically insofar as many of the protocols developed around lesbian print periodicals remain recognizable in online discursive spaces for queer women. In *Magic and Loss: The Art of the Internet*, Virginia Heffernan marvels at the paradigmatic alterations caused by the Web, particularly insofar as “it turns experiences from the material world that used to be densely physical – involving licking stamps, say, or winding clocks or driving cars to shopping centers – into frictionless, weightless, and fantastic abstractions” (17). Heffernan’s text is rich with cogent observations about life with the Web, though I would suggest that in considering paradigmatic shifts from print to the Web, it’s important to acknowledge congruous characteristics that render some

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<sup>4</sup> See also Henry Jenkins’ *Convergence Culture* 14.

forms of print similarly “magical.” The sexual communications networks created by the predigital pioneers of queer women’s discursive spaces also dramatically shifted paradigms, so that the experience of meeting another lesbian or gathering information on lesbianism, for example, no longer relied on “densely physical” interactions, like going to a lesbian bar or taking the bus to the library and checking out a book. Both *Vice Versa* and *The Ladder* encouraged readers to pass along their copies of issues to other lesbians, a sort of socialized performance of reading that resembles “sharing” articles or entire sites online. *Autostraddle* readers know to visit the site for news and politics filtered through queer perspectives in much the same way readers of lesbian periodicals read about rising political stars, voting blocs, and picketing in their magazines. Additionally, just as participants in print discursive spaces for queer women negotiated a porous privacy so too do Web users pressed against the reality of doxing and of cyber-footprints leading to consumerism. Users engaged in a “private” browsing session, for instance, may be surprised to later see advertisements selling an item they recently viewed online, clear evidence of corporate eyes peering into windows. Even websites devoted to helping closeted LGBT youth come out frequently warn participants to remember clever screennames and obscure photos may not guarantee privacy.

None of this is to diminish the significant differences between print and the Web – instantaneous and far-reaching connection come to mind as examples of the “newness” of the Web – but to consider what previous chapters in *Just Between Us Girls* might reveal about LGBT propensity for the Web. Since as early as 1997, a majority of LGBT youth have found the Web “crucial” in accepting their sexual orientation and have come out online before coming out offline, according to *!OutProud!/Oasis Internet Survey of*

*Queer and Questioning Youth* (Walsh and Kryzon 19). Here it may be useful to recall the hundreds of letters sent to *Ladder* staff in which women varyingly sought advice, shared life stories, or detailed their opinions on lesbianism – all of which involved coming out insofar as the letter-writers frequently identified themselves as lesbians (and sometimes alluded to friends, family members, and coworkers who remained ignorant of the writer’s sexuality). With this history in mind, then, the fact that so many LGBT individuals come out online should tell scholars as much about coming out as it does about the Web. In other words, attention to technology should not eclipse attention to social and (sub)cultural structures that inform the use of that technology.

“Come to My Window”<sup>5</sup>: *Autostraddle* Theorizes a Place Online for LGBTQ Women

*Autostraddle* continues the legacy of providing an open forum by, for, and about queer women that blurs distinctions between popular culture and politics, the individual and the community, and exclusivity and inclusivity. The “About” page on *Autostraddle*’s site lists the site’s mission, values, and rules, which closely mirror objectives and philosophies of other discursive spaces discussed in this project. *Autostraddle*’s description of itself and the community it hopes to foster relies on theoretical understandings of gender, sexuality, and the role of discursive space in queer women’s culture, identity, and politics.

*Autostraddle*’s girl-on-girl culture is rooted in basic social values and ideals – we want women to feel good about themselves, we want equality and visibility for all marginalized groups and ultimately, we’d like to change the world.

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<sup>5</sup> “Come to My Window” is a popular song by lesbian singer Melissa Etheridge.

We seek to be a fresh, energizing voice for lesbian, bisexual and queer women, one that takes the reader seriously and encourages intelligent discourse, one that entertains with funny, uncensored and brutally honest conversation and content and one that also provides photos of hot girls.

We endorse an “it takes a village” approach to the LGBTQ webiverse. We encourage community and support amongst women on the web and do not encourage competition between websites or other media outlets. We believe change is best accomplished when working together as activists, artists, and thinkers.

We’re here to listen, to change, and we do not ask what our users can do for us, but what we can do for our users! (“What is Autostraddle?”)

*Autostraddle*’s negotiation between “serious” issues (politics and activism, for example) and what the site terms “fluff” (“photos of hot girls”) echoes the multi-faceted agendas of its predecessors, both online and off. Just as the other discursive spaces examined in *Just Between Us Girls* seek to provide a space for “for us, by us, about us” discourse, so too does *Autostraddle* end the introduction of its mission by emphasizing their role as facilitators of their readers’ thoughts and desires. The fact that 96% of *Autostraddle*’s revenue comes from its readers helps cement this dynamic (“Be an Autostraddle Plus Member”). For instance, as Nicole Pasulka summarizes in “Clicking the Bean: The History of the Internet’s Most Popular *L Word* Blog,” “Relying on readers for money through donations and the gatherings [A-Camp and other *Autostraddle*-sponsored events<sup>6</sup>] means *Autostraddle*’s audience plays a unique role in shaping the site’s articles.

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<sup>6</sup> Marketed as a “curated conference/camp/retreat [combination],” A-Camp is open to *Autostraddle* members and hosts discussion groups, performances (famous queer musicians and comedians attend each



In the past readers have pushed the founding editors – most of whom are white and cisgender – to include writing by transgender women and women of color.” The “About” page further endows *Autostraddle* participants with authority as “activists, artists, and thinkers” who can accomplish change by working together (“What is Autostraddle?”). By positioning itself as a part of a larger LGBTQ “webiverse” and encouraging women to support one another on the Web, *Autostraddle* creates an expectation of diplomatic theorizing. Just as *AfterEllen* discouraged academic jargon, so too would *Autostraddle* discourage combative dialogue (though the “About” page welcomes varying opinions). Additionally, like *Vice Versa*, *The Ladder*, and *AfterEllen*, *Autostraddle*’s efforts towards “visibility for all marginalized groups” manifests most obviously in attention to popular culture, like its aforementioned list of “202 Dead Lesbian and Bisexual Characters on TV,” although articles like “Every Lesbian, Bisexual, Queer And/Or Trans Woman Running for US Office in 2018” and “Lesbian Married Couple Battle South Africa’s Homophobic Dept. of Home Affairs Over Spousal Visa” indicate not only that *Autostraddle* aims for visibility in politics and popular culture but also the connection of the two spheres.

*Autostraddle*’s “About” page helps establish its sense of “placeness” through making explicit the parameters for participation on the site as well as promoting the values and objectives of the community associated with the site. While other chapters have examined how discursive spaces have structured membership through a model of exclusivity, *Autostraddle* lists “inclusiveness” as one of its seven core values, naming its

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year), panels, and dances. The cost per registration for the 2019 A-Camp is \$750 (plus a nonrefundable \$75 registration fee), and *Autostraddle* organizes a select number of “camperships” each year to sponsor *Autostraddle* members who cannot afford A-Camp (A-Camp).

community “LGBTQ women,” which is notable for its diversion from *AfterEllen*’s practice of treating “women” and “trans” as well as “lesbian” and “queer” as mutually exclusive, antagonistic categories. Of course, this is not to say that *Autostraddle* totally eschews the exclusivity model for membership in practice, particularly insofar as by virtue of its focus on LGBTQ women, the site implies the separateness of its community from straight women and men. Yet *Autostraddle* inscribes within its site’s description a commitment to viewing the LGBTQ community as a dynamic, continually developing body:

We are a trans-friendly website and aim to make *Autostraddle* an accepting and supportive environment for lesbian, bisexual, and queer trans women. Although *Autostraddle* is a website created for and primarily aimed at bisexual and queer women, as the community evolves we are starting to include work by and about non-binary-identified people too. (“What is Autostraddle?”)

Here *Autostraddle* recognizes the need for the pre-constituted community to expand, to create room for members who may initially seem to fall outside of categories necessary for membership. Whereas *AfterEllen*’s post-2016 performances of lesbianism frequently rely on a defensive essentialism that elevates “biological women” by emphasizing the danger posed to women by trans, queer, and (to a lesser extent) non-binary individuals, *Autostraddle* appears to welcome the alliance between women (cisgender, trans, and queer) and other marginalized gender identities (more on this strategic essentialism later). Contestations of gender also seem less anxious on *Autostraddle* than its foremothers’ – *The Ladder*’s focus on white, middle class, feminine lesbians and *AfterEllen*’s devotion to essentialism have been replaced by articles like “What is Agender?” and “Waiter,

There's Some Theory in My Gender." *Autostraddle* performs its own unique sense of placeness through its multifaceted approach to theorizing gender and its community. By including notes about trans and non-binary readers and content on its About page, *Autostraddle* defines its success partially through its ability to embrace these members, which means, for example, circulating theories of gender that address these identities in good faith.

### Theorizing "Girl on Girl Culture": From Lesbian Spaces to Queer Women's Communities

The gender theories published on *Autostraddle* vary in terms of their disciplinary focus (some are devoted to untangling biological myths of gender while others interrogate specific cultural performances of gender, for instance), foregrounding the site's commitment to inclusive theorizing. *Autostraddle* does not attempt to provide one "answer" to gender identity but instead provides a multitude of articles from a variety of fields to demonstrate the importance of interrogating identity categories, particularly because privileged narratives of identity obscure the diversity within identity groups. *Autostraddle* invests in queer theory that reveals gaps in narratives pretending at wholeness, an intervention that often reveals a multitude of truths or ways of knowing existing simultaneously. In "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," Judith Butler reminds readers of the vast diversity of the lesbian and gay community, cautioning them regarding what can be lost when identity masquerades as cohesive for political purposes: "Which version of lesbian or gay ought to be rendered visible, and which internal exclusions will that rendering visible institute? Can the visibility of identity suffice as a

political strategy, or can it only be the starting point for a strategic intervention which calls for a transformation of policy?” (19). Theorists on *Autostraddle* seem to have taken these concerns about visibility seriously, often devoting time to deconstructing the process by which one has been rendered invisible. For example, one *Autostraddle* article, “Science Will Not Save Us: Medicine, Research Ethics, and My Transgender Body” by Anna Lauren Hoffman explains her hesitance to root definitions of transness in scientific discourse by analyzing the ontological limits of medical research concerning transness. Discussing the medical research into gender dysphoria, Hoffman argues,

If I were to report feeling like “I have a girl’s brain trapped in a boy’s body,” then my account is roughly continuous with medical research suggesting that, indeed, a brain can follow a developmental pattern similar to that of females while the rest of the body develops along a path typical of males. If, however, I were to reject that familiar trope and instead say that “I didn’t hate being a boy but I like being a girl better,” the connection between my own account of my identity and scientific descriptions becomes less clear [...] Put another way, the former description is easily reconciled with the ontology of medical research while the latter comes into conflict. But a problem arises when we seek to reconcile this conflict: which account “counts”? Which account is considered valid? Which is dismissed?

This unpacking of identity narratives strikes me as queer for its refusal to foreclose the possibilities of trans as an ontological position. Hoffman argues that medical fields produce their own “ways of knowing” and that identity narratives that fall outside of these ways of knowing are frequently rendered invisible or considered invalid. Hoffman’s

analysis prioritizes individual experience over scientific/medical discourse, in much the same way spaces like *The Furies*, *The Ladder*, and *Vice Versa* challenged “expertise” around lesbianism or queerness that did not derive from lesbian or queer experience. Indeed, here Hoffman’s concern arises around personal experiences’ devaluation in the context of “professional, scientific” discourse, and this cultivation of experiential authority in the face of medicalized scientific discourse aligns with *Vice Versa*, *The Ladder*, and *AfterEllen*’s negotiations of knowledge and power. In the discursive space facilitated by *Autostraddle*, individuals become queer theorists by identifying as queer and engaging in discourse that theorizes sexuality and gender.

In placing value on individuals’ experiences of their gender and sexuality, *Autostraddle* follows in the tradition of endowing discursive participants with authority over their own identities, while also, through their interactions with readers, leaving traces that evidence the difficulty of diffusing agency within a space imbricated within hierarchies. As discussed in Chapter 1, when Phyllis Lyon “killed” her pseudonym and attached her real name to her articles, she made a claim to individual rather than collective authority over queer female sexuality.<sup>7</sup> While examining *Autostraddle*’s facilitation of queer women’s authority, I would like to return to Butler’s and Hoffman’s question about possibilities for (in)visibility within various accounts of queer experience: When experiential accounts conflict, even accounts between members of a discursive space, what accounts remain visible and which are disregarded? How might the discursive space’s power structures meld with ideological and technical possibilities and limits to affect performances of experiential authority? *Autostraddle*’s editorial process,

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<sup>7</sup> See *Contacts Desired*, page 93 for Martin Meeker’s discussion of *The Ladder*’s progression from the article “Your Name is Safe” to “Ann Ferguson is Dead.”

which Heather Hogan details in a post apologizing for the site's coverage of the movie *Sausage Party*, attempts to pair individual writers with stories that feature characters who identify in ways similar to the writers covering the piece, a strategy that puts issues of experiential authority at the forefront of the site. For instance, in discussing the process for recapping *Orange is the New Black (OITNB)*, Hogan states

My main priorities in our *OITNB* coverage were: 1) Making sure the majority of our reviews were written by women of color. And 2) Making sure any writer who shared an identity with an episode's feature character had first dibs on writing about that episode. I told all of our writers they needed to be willing to trade or give up their review slots, if necessary, to achieve this goal. ("We Messed Up")

*Autostraddle* performs authenticity here not through exclusion but through assurances of experiential authority. While articles like Hoffman's examine the everyday devaluing of queer women's authority over their own lives, *Autostraddle* aims to provide a space where that authority is built into the space's structure via policies like the one described above.

Of course, as has been seen in the manifestations of editorial authority in *The Ladder* and *AfterEllen*, the transference of authority or restructuring of hierarchies is never a simple matter of policy or infrastructure. The above explanation of *Autostraddle*'s general editorial policy comes encased in an apology for a time that policy failed to translate into practice. *Autostraddle* accepted a pitch from a freelancer who had watched Seth Rogen's animated film *Sausage Party* and felt Salma Hayeck's portrayal of a queer taco merited coverage on the site. In her review, the (white) freelancer did not

note the stereotypical depiction of a Latina character as a taco or the indicators that the taco may in fact be bisexual, absences that drew frustration from *Autostraddle* readers. In response, Senior Editor Heather Hogan posted an article entitled “We Messed Up,” which detailed how the article came to be published and how *Autostraddle* planned to “stop mistakes like this from happening.” Hogan explains that because *Autostraddle* employs a small full-time staff, freelancers cover material staff will not experience firsthand, which means the editorial policy quoted above wherein writers who share identities with featured characters in media cover those particular episodes does not always apply to freelancers. In recounting the responses to the review, Hogan notes:

After we published the review, we heard from Latinx readers who believe the portrayal of Salma Hayek’s taco was racist and that it reinforced harmful stereotypes. We heard from readers who were upset that we labeled the taco a lesbian when it seems more likely that she was bisexual. We heard from readers who questioned the consent of the sexual encounter between the taco and the hot dog bun. We heard from readers who found the taco to be a damaging portrayal of a predatory queer woman. (“We Messed Up”)

If all of this seems a little too ridiculous to be sincere or a prime example of queer women taking themselves too seriously,<sup>8</sup> then recall the historical stakes of representation for queer women (who lack sexually embodied spaces) and *Autostraddle*’s aim to facilitate a queer authority for its participants without rendering invisible marginalized voices within

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<sup>8</sup> *Autostraddle*’s apology was widely mocked online. For instance, the website *Back2Stonewall* discussed the apology in the “Special Snowflake Award” column, closing the article by claiming the website’s “We Messed Up” piece “prove[s] that man-hating lesbians are still alive and un-well but also that they themselves [are racist] and have no sense of humor” (Kohler). While the original review of the movie is no longer available through *Autostraddle*, one can find the review on *AfterEllen*.

an already marginalized community. Indeed, Hogan frames the review (which was taken down after backlash from readers) as a lesson that hierarchies continue to infect communities marginalized individuals create for themselves, that these spaces do not exist apart from the larger systems of power shaping mainstream society, saying, “I was blinded by my own whiteness existing inside a system of white supremacy” (“We Messed Up”). In this example, Hogan makes clear that oppression and privilege continue to operate at the intersections of identity and within the complicated hierarchies of society and a discursive space entangled with white supremacy and capitalism. While the efforts to control damage caused by the *Sausage Party* review certainly reinforce the durability of representation as a concern for queer women’s discursive spaces, the conflict also reflects that sometimes conflicting logics (social, cultural, economic, etc.) operate on the Web and within discursive spaces in general, which can lead to a breakdown of the moral economy, as discussed in Chapter 2.

As demonstrated by *Autostraddle*’s thorough response to backlash over the *Sausage Party* review, the website follows in the footsteps of the other discursive spaces in this project by deriving much of its theory from unpacking the symbiotic relationship between society, queer women, and popular culture. Recall Lisa Ben’s coverage of the film *The Children of Loneliness* (see the Introduction) that she takes a moment to reflect on the audience’s reaction to the sparse representation of queerness in the film: “The few close-up scenes of effeminate men in the café were met by wisecracks and snickers by quite a few in the audience. And so it is that most of us who are accustomed to see a man and a woman look longingly at each other, are wont to laugh because any other combination seems new, and therefore grotesque and odd” (“The Children of Loneliness”



13). Ben speaks to more than popular culture's role in normalization for straight society, she also speaks to the role of popular culture for the lesbian in straight society, as can be deduced from her alignment with "most of us who are accustomed to seeing a man and a woman" as the singular romantic pairing within media. Likewise, though by virtue of its community values and guidelines *Autostraddle* often frames the significance of queer representation implicitly, the contemporary website also posits a causal relationship between queer women's conceptions of themselves and media. As mentioned above, *Autostraddle* devoted coverage to *The 100* and, specifically, Lexa's death. At the end of the *Autostraddle* recap of *The 100* episode "13," the recapper explains the systemic nature of her concern for the creative decisions of the show as well as a *raison d'être* for the site's attention to representation of queer women:

There is a mass communication theory called cultivation theory that assumes there are common themes in all of television and hypothesizes that heavy viewers will begin to perceive reality as it is portrayed. What does it say when so many lesbian storylines end tragically? [...] It has been cultivated in us for decades. The writers and producers have to acknowledge where their story falls in this narrative. And what effect can it have on us? (Karly)

Though Karly phrases the question rhetorically, the implicit answer lies not only in her own article but within *Autostraddle*'s philosophies and site infrastructure. Just as *The Ladder* concerned itself with "Representation of the Lesbian" and *AfterEllen* proclaimed to site-users that "Visibility Matters," *Autostraddle* content emphasizes the role of media representation in queer women's lives. Larry Gross and James D. Woods agree that mass media enforces the public's perception of morality, often by "propagating stories and

images of cultural deviants” and their punishment (5). These portrayals help produce a sense of mutuality among audiences who see “good” characters rewarded with happy endings and “bad” characters narratively penalized.

Often the framework of deviance produced by media enforces a communal morality. For instance, viewers of *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit (SVU)* all agree that “the nature of sexually-based offenses are especially heinous.” This moral logic asserted in the prologue of each episode is enforced by the fact that the show’s narrative centers on the detectives pitted against the sexual criminals of New York City. Mass media also shows viewers what to watch for and who to root for, and so many *SVU* viewers may also watch the show for hints of romance between Olivia Benson and Eliot Stabler. Yet, as has been shown in this project’s analysis of interactions around media within predigital discursive spaces like *The Furies*, *The Ladder* and *Vice Versa*, queer media spaces produce an alternative sense of mutuality through establishing new frameworks for queer female audiences and acknowledging ruptures and inconsistencies within the predominate heteronormative and patriarchal framework. In the case of *Law and Order: SVU*, for instance, queer viewers may develop a sense of mutuality through a collective interpretation of Olivia Benson as a lesbian by embracing subtext – like Olivia’s relationship with female District Attorney Alex Cabot – and metatext – like an understanding of Olivia’s leather jacket and short haircut as indicators of “butchness.” In this example, queer female viewers make a text their own by filtering a narrative through historical and subcultural frameworks structural in their own communities, decoding “signs” in the text to decipher hidden sameness between themselves and the characters. Here, I would take a cue from Kelsey Cameron’s work on queer women’s relationships to

media, and recall that, for much of television's early history, if queer desire was presented in a show, that desire was coded in order to comply with viewing regulations; and so these efforts to decrypt subtext have roots in decades of queer media interaction.

Frequently, *Autostraddle* makes this history visible and situates it within its cultural context, exploring its implications for queers and queerness. "202 Dead Lesbian and Bisexual Characters" represents arguably the site's most popular theorizing of this kind. To introduce the list, which was created in response to Lexa's death, Riese provides a brief overview of the history of lesbian and bisexual women's representation on television, including a link that directs readers to an earlier *Autostraddle* article titled "10 First-Ever Lesbian Characters on American TV: Killers, Tramps, Thieves, and Therapists." While generally describing this representational history, Riese also interpolates her readers as lesbian and bisexual viewers who have emotional stakes in this topic: "Until the last five or so years, lesbian and bisexual characters seemed entirely unable to date an actual woman or stay alive for more than three episodes, let alone an entire run, of a show [...] *We* comprise such a teeny-tiny fraction of the characters on television to begin with that killing us off so haphazardly feels especially cruel" ("All 202 Dead Lesbian and Bisexual Characters" [emphasis added]). The shared identities of queer women and media consumers allow some community values to remain implicit within the space; after all, on *Autostraddle* a queer woman addressing an audience of queer women does not need to restate the significance of media representation for the LGBT community. Indeed, this performance of shared knowledge helps create the impression of a cohesive community. However, by linking to articles that in fact do explore the role of representation for queer women (like *The 100* recap that describes and reacts to Lexa's

death), the site also invites readers to educate themselves on the issue and join the “in-group.” Additionally, Riese’s introduction to the list explains the criteria used for inclusion: Characters on the list must be openly “lesbian or bisexual or queer female[s],” have appeared for more than one episode (here Riese notes “a handful of exceptions [...because] something about the characterization still fits with the Bury Your Gays trope”), and cannot be from victim-of-the-week or patient-of-the-week dramas. Notably, and humorously, Riese edits the introduction to add:

Okay, I’ve added Xena after doing further research and because if one more commenter takes up space on this thread — a thread I’m using to find more characters to add, and also to engage with thoughtful/funny readers who have opinions and feelings — to tell me that I “forgot” Xena without reading this introduction, I will become the 200th dead lesbian and the cause of death will be “Walked off a cliff with a commenter in her arms. Murder-suicide.” But Xena will be the one and only inclusion based on subtext.

The inclusion of Xena on the list showcases both the extent to which subcultural communities can reclaim a text through their own alternative reading methods as well as the complicated distribution of control and agency between *Autostraddle* staff and *Autostraddle* readers. Further complicating issues of control and agency is the fact that, at the time of this writing, the list continues to be updated by *Autostraddle* staff, often through suggestions left by readers in the comments. The reach and immediacy afforded by the Web makes the list and representational trend seem alive and dynamic, something to continue to monitor and analyze.

Through these continual additions to the list, descriptions of the frequently violent deaths of the characters, and contextualizing information via links and comments, “202 Dead Lesbian and Bisexual Television Characters” challenges normalized understandings of the connections between representation and reality. While examining “toxic” fan practices tied to the Bury Your Gays and Dead Lesbian Syndrome tropes,<sup>9</sup> Cameron notes that most critics engaged in analysis of these tropes treat them as contemporary phenomena, but that such an approach “does little to account for the ways in which present-day fan activism takes shape against long histories of industry practices that continue to influence when and how queer characters appear on television” (“Toxic Regulation” 2). While Cameron’s observation rings true regarding the scholars published in academic journals, *Autostraddle*’s list of dead lesbian and bisexual characters directs readers to past articles that explore the industry regulations Cameron argues scholars often neglect. For instance, in the aforementioned “10 First Ever Lesbian Characters” article linked to within the list of dead lesbian and bisexual characters, Riese directs readers to three additional sources: an additional *Autostraddle* article on “Lesbian Kisses on American Television” as well as Stephen Tropiano’s *The Prime Time Closet: A History of Gays and Lesbians on TV* and Steven Capsuto’s *Alternative Channels: The Uncensored Story of Gay and Lesbian Images on Radio and Television*. *Autostraddle*’s links and other references situate Dead Lesbian Syndrome within not only a history of industry regulation but also a discursive history – *Autostraddle* links to TVTropes.org, a website that describes tropes on television and provides examples of these tropes across technologies as media converge on the Web. The network created by *Autostraddle*

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<sup>9</sup> Toxic fan practices might include hate speech, threats, or doxing by fans in response to a creative decision involving a fictional franchise.

through these references functions as a virtual card catalogue that charts the history of this trend of representation and provides community newcomers with the opportunity to learn and perform the shared knowledge the network establishes.

Additionally, commenters use the list to pinpoint other related tropes that normalize #DeadLesbianSyndrome, connecting these trends in representation to systemic cultural forces like misogyny and racism, propelling discussions towards questions of intersectionality and queerness. For instance, while descriptions of some character deaths are short – e.g. “cancer” or “gunshot wound” – others include references to characters responsible for the death. Frequently, lesbian or bisexual characters on this list die at the hands of a man: The character of Tina Greer from *Smallville*, for example dies from being “impaled through the chest on a large piece of wood during a fight with a male character” while Cristina from *Tierra de Lobos* dies of a “head injury sustained during a scuffle with a jealous man who was going to shoot her.” Participants notice these patterns and offer additional metrics to clarify the quality of LGBT representation on television, like “time after romantic revelation/encounter [before death]” and “manner of death” when compared to straight characters’ deaths (Dawn). One commenter suggests that the violent manner of many of the deaths on the list “might be about general media violence growing along with the inclusion of bi and lesbian characters in recent years, but I think it’s mostly about cultural misogyny; TV loves to dramatize over-the-top violence against women” (Zahra). This exchange emphasizes issues of misogynistic violence and explicit displays of nonnormative sexuality while also criticizing and rejecting the moral framework implied through the continued narrative punishment of lesbians and bisexual women. The discourse produced here functions not only as a contextualizing historical

narrative but also as a thoughtful analysis and rejection of the sense of mutuality produced by mainstream media. This queer theorizing deconstructs hetero-patriarchal narratives of morality and offers alternative frameworks of meaning-making. As Larry Gross and James D. Woods argue in their introduction to the *Columbia Reader on Lesbian and Gay Men in Media, Society, and Politics*, “Ultimately, the most effective form of resistance to the hegemony of mainstream is to speak for oneself, to disseminate narratives and images that counter the accepted, oppressive, or inaccurate ones” (16). In the case of *Autostraddle*’s list of dead lesbian and bisexual characters, the discursive participants disseminate theories of the ties between gender, sexuality, representation and violence.

As has been examined in previous chapters, compiling these histories can entail its own kind of violence, particularly insofar as histories contribute to the social, political, and ontological framing of bodies, framing some lives, to use Judith Butler’s terms, as “grievable” or “precarious” and others as not really “lives” at all. In Butler’s *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable*, she considers the inevitability and consequences of framing, as “to be a body is to be exposed to social crafting and form, and that is what makes the ontology of the body a social ontology” (3). Butler interrogates framings that present lives as precarious and grievable, arguing that “if certain lives do not qualify as lives or are, from the start, not conceivable as lives within certain epistemological frames, then these lives are never lived nor lost in the full sense” (*Frames of War* 1). Norms enable apprehension of a life *as a life*, but norms are not deterministic, and individuals are able to discern when something exists outside of the normalizing frames that facilitate recognizability (*Frames of War* 4-5). In the example of *Autostraddle*’s list of dead lesbian

and bisexual characters on television, discursive participants both re-frame lesbian and bisexual characters as precarious and grievable and also, through its very act of framing through particular vectors of identity (sexuality and gender), invites continued re-framings. For instance, the list makes no specific comments about race, leaving commenters to reframe the narrative constructed by *Autostraddle*. Carmen Phillips, a writer on the *Autostraddle* team, remarks on the high number of women of color on the list, asking, “Are there any black queer women who make it to being alive at the end of the show (or at least the end of their show arc)??? I’m not being snarky, I’m honestly curious. I’m racking my brain and can’t think of any. Right now it feels like if you are black woman who enjoys sex with women, you’ve got a 100% death sentence...” Other commenters join in the thread to comment on the fate of black queer women in television, providing Phillips with examples of happy, living queer female characters while also expressing collective unhappiness with trends of representation for queer women of color. Another commenter, Tara, notes that many of the characters on the list die directly after giving birth, speculating that this pattern represents “a triple insult” wherein a lesbian character is forced to fulfill a heterosexual narrative by giving birth and then dying so that she won’t “corrupt” the child. In this comment, Tara recognizes a heteronormative framing of queer female characters that renders them expendable and reduced to a reproductive function. Thus, in facilitating ongoing discourse in a forum for queer women, *Autostraddle*’s framings do exactly what Butler claims frames inevitably do – break within themselves. The constant reframings that occur through comments and editorial additions permit and perform the camouflaged vulnerability of norms to rupture.



I would argue that the theories disseminated through *Autostraddle*'s list of dead lesbian and bisexual female characters and the framing it produces undergoes multiple ruptures. First, through the creation of the list of dead lesbian and bisexual television characters, *Autostraddle* breaks from the framing of representation that undervalues the subjective and ontological relationship between queer women and popular culture (i.e. "Who cares if a queer character dies? It's just a television show."). Secondly, *Autostraddle* commenters frequently reframe the list to acknowledge aspects of identity that *Autostraddle*'s framework fails to emphasize. Butler argues that this breaking of frames constitutes important cultural and political work, stating,

What happens when a frame breaks within itself is that a taken-for-granted reality is called into question, exposing the orchestrating designs of authority who sought to control the frame. This suggests that [apprehending life in its precariousness] is not only a question of finding new content, but also of working with received renditions of reality to show how they can and do break with themselves. (12)

Undoubtedly, the spaces discussed in *Just Between Us Girls* both create new content and critique received content, though the Web enables more immediate exposures of authority and recontextualization than predigital spaces, which can result in a multitude of reframings as shown in the list of dead lesbian and bisexual characters. Here, it's useful to recall Martin Meeker's reflection that "the ways people access information can be as important as the information itself" (*Contacts Desired* 255). For *Autostraddle*, part of the significance of the Web as the technology facilitating its discourse lies in the Web's ability to enable to temporal logic of the list – that it continues *ad infinitum*. Indeed,

multiple frameworks may exist – and rupture – simultaneously, as the Web affords *Autostraddle* with the ability to include and circulate a multitude of opinions, philosophies, and voices.

Often, *Autostraddle* facilitates polyphonic theorizations on a topic, publishing interviews, “Roundtables” and “Open Threads” where several writers provide thoughts on an issue or, even in the case of individually-authored pieces, inviting readers to share their thoughts in the comments. I follow the definition of “polyphony” developed by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, wherein he argues that polyphony is “a quality of independent unmerged voices and consciousnesses” (6). For Bakhtin, true polyphony occurs not just through the presence of multiple perspectives or “voices,” but when all voices present have “equal rights” (6). In the case of the novel, for instance, the author’s voice does not supersede characters’ voices, and rather than the discourse within the novel following a linear, predetermined path, the voices interact with and relate to one another, thus creating meaning. While media scholars have noted the applicability of polyphony, heteroglossia, and dialogism to the Web (See Ananda Mitra and Eric Watts “Theorizing Cyberspace: the Idea of Voice Applied to Internet Discourse” for example), I see these qualities as characteristic of the predigital discursive spaces examined in this project as well, and, thus, as a historically established discursive framework for queer women’s online spaces like *Autostraddle*. For example, *The Ladder* frequently published various readers’ responses to topics such as gender presentation and causes of lesbianism. Publishing responses was not the equivalent of “solving” the issue; frequently topics of discourse recurred, whether through editorial calls for responses or through the “Readers Respond” section of the magazine. *Autostraddle* emulates this practice, returning over

and over again to topics relating to gender, sexuality, and identity so that even when reading an article authored by a single person, *Autostraddle* participants can follow links at the bottom of the webpage to recommended articles on the same or similar subjects. The immediate availability of these articles stands as a major affordance of the Web, as opposed to print periodicals analyzed in this project which may have, for instance, referenced articles from previous issues but could not enable immediate access to back issues.

*Autostraddle*'s queer refusal to settle on a single, definitive answer when asking questions about identity, gender, and sexuality fuels an inclusive type of theorizing consistent with the ideals of female solidarity expressed on the "About" page. In "What We Mean When We Say 'Femme': A Round Table," eight sections of the article explore eight different writers' thoughts on "femme" as an identity, aesthetic, and performance. The separate pieces do not respond to one another; a "Round Table" is not so much a conversation between writers as it is a collection of responses to questions. In the introduction to the "Round Table," "Round Table" participant Cecelia remarks on the differences in age, race, and gender identities of the contributors to the article, reflecting "the only thing we have in common is that we're queer and that, in our own deeply personal way, we breathe life into the word femme. But like so many other differences, we don't agree on what the word femme means to us. This is the beauty of gender fluidity." Here Cecelia lays out the discursive and ideological framework for the "Round Table": Authority within this article derives from each author's identity insofar as each author identifies as femme and queer. The views shared throughout the "Round Table" differ in content and tone, and, of course, despite their unity under the label "femme," the

authors express distinctive identity traits throughout their contributions to the “Round Table,” implying, for instance, Bryn, a non-binary individual, has as much authority to define “femme” as the cisgender individuals sharing their thoughts. Answers in this “Round Table” often contradict one another, with, for example, Rudy arguing that femme is more than an aesthetic, because reducing an identity to an aesthetic “removes the politics from things,” while Erin and YAT/TA both separately identifying femme as at least partially aesthetic, but imply that aesthetics may have their own political consequences. A few of the authors associate femme with their connections to other people and tie their identity as femme to emotional labor while others see femme as necessarily divorced from emotional labor. All seem to agree that some sort of relationship between femme and femininity exists, but there’s no agreement as to what that relationship looks like. Cecelia describes femme as the “rebellious teenage daughter of femininity,” emphasizing the divergence of “femme” from traditional femininity. Bryn, on the other hand, explains that living as a non-binary femme requires “reclaim[ing] a way of living that isn’t defined by my assigned gender but by my experience of femininity.” There is very little harmony to be found in here if one conflates consensus with harmony. However, here one can find coexistence without subordination.

Yet coexistence is not always possible, particularly between two discursive spaces with ostensibly overlapping target audiences and very different theorizations about who counts as a sanctioned participant in their space. When Memoree Joelle was named *AfterEllen*’s new EIC, the site began featuring transmisogynistic content with more and more regularity. As Lauren Strapagiel notes,

Since [Joelle became EIC], there's been a shift in *AfterEllen*'s tone. [...] It started with small mentions, like articles that perpetuated the anti-trans myth that trans women are trying to force lesbian-identified women to sleep with trans women who haven't had bottom surgery. That's a common refrain from a minority of lesbians who do not see trans women as valid or able to identify as lesbians.

The editors at *Autostraddle* appear to have been watching these changes raptly, with Riese posting to *Twitter* to criticize *AfterEllen* for a steady stream of anti-trans content that she saw culminating in *AfterEllen*'s article, "Girl Dick, the Cotton Ceiling, and the Cultural War on Lesbians, Girls, and Women." Expressing her dismay at the discourse facilitated by *AfterEllen*, Riese elaborates, "As a lesbian, I'm horrified that this [is] what so many lesbians are being told it means to be a lesbian [...] Publicly shaming women for the specific aspects of their body that you aren't attracted to and requesting words be redefined to meet [your] specific attractions is NOT LESBIAN FEMINISM" (@autowin). Here Riese draws a line in the sand around performances of lesbian-feminism, a type of ideology and identity that had early beginnings in *The Ladder*, continued to develop through *The Furies*, and continues to influence the creation and governing of lesbians' and queer women's discursive spaces. Despite *AfterEllen* and *Autostraddle*'s shared objectives and theoretical lineages, they each, as Riese implies in her *Twitter* post, practice very different versions of lesbian-feminist theory. This feud between the two most popular lesbian websites<sup>10</sup> and the impassioned responses to each site's theorizations of lesbianism and lesbian-feminism indicate the high stakes of theory

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<sup>10</sup> *AfterEllen* and *Autostraddle* each claim to be the most popular lesbian website; though recently *AfterEllen* EIC Joelle has claimed that *AfterEllen* is the *only* lesbian website left online, implying that because *Autostraddle* and websites like *DIVA* and *Curve* include trans women in their site's focus, they are not lesbian websites.

for queer women. As this project has demonstrated, lesbians' and queer women's discursive spaces facilitate many affordances: connection to a dispersed community, opportunities to collectively construct knowledge about one's identity, and the cultivation of authority to name and analyze one's own experiences. However, access to these spaces and their affordances is contingent on an understanding of one's identity that matches the space's conception of that identity. In other words, a lesbian space does not function *as a lesbian space* for those who fall outside of its theorizations of lesbianism.

And so an ongoing debate based in theories of gender and sexuality ("Who/What counts as a lesbian/lesbian space?") once again became visible as queer women's discursive spaces responded to *AfterEllen's* increasingly vocal trans-exclusion. In December 2018, *Autostraddle* added its name to a letter signed by other leading publications for lesbian, bisexual, and queer women,<sup>11</sup> condemning anti-trans rhetoric in queer female spaces and calling for solidarity with the trans community. The letter, titled "Not in Our Name," describes itself as "an unapologetic message of support and solidarity to the trans community," and extols the virtues of a lesbian community inclusive of trans women, affirming that lesbians are not erased but rather "enriched by trans friends, lovers, parents, children, colleagues and siblings." The statement goes on to condemn the writers and editors who believe only they have the right to define "lesbian," as well as the "male-owned media companies who profit from the traffic generated by these companies."<sup>12</sup> The letter closes by historically positioning the publications signing

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<sup>11</sup> Aside from *DIVA* (a European magazine for lesbian and bisexual women) and *Autostraddle*, other publications that added their name to the statement of solidarity include: *Curve*, *Tagg Magazine*, *Lez Spread the Word*, *DapperQ*, and *GO Magazine*.

<sup>12</sup> As discussed in Chapter 2, *The Furies'* greatly distrusted male-owned media institutions, and believed one of the first steps to liberating women was to create women-owned media institutions.

the statement of solidarity, recalling the past persecution of lesbians, and stating, “And just as [trans people] supported us, so we must support those among us who are trans, or risk ending up on the wrong side of history.” In this statement, not only theory but specific methods of theorizing help ensure a community’s development, as the text advocates for a space where various theorizations of lesbianism can prosper. This belief aligns *Autostraddle* with the other discursive spaces of this project that aim to provide an open forum for lesbians to share their, sometimes conflicting, views and opinions. No specific publication was named in the statement, but the world of queer women’s websites is so small, that referencing *AfterEllen* was likely unnecessary.

At least, *AfterEllen* clearly got the message. When *The Advocate* published an article to put the “Not in Our Names” statement in context, it explicitly named *AfterEllen* in its title, “Female Editors Reject *AfterEllen*, Other Sites’ Anti-Trans Agenda,”<sup>13</sup> and *NBC News* published a piece further delving into the conflict, titled “Pro-lesbian or trans-exclusionary? Old animosities boil into public view,” which also mentioned *AfterEllen*. In Joelle’s response posted to *AfterEllen*, Joelle accuses the site’s critics of the same kind of insular, disengaged theorizing the “Not in Our Names” statement attributed to *AfterEllen*,

The truth is *AfterEllen* published some Op-Eds that a few writers at a few publications claim are “hateful” because they disagree. If that is the case, they would surely debate each point per article or write articles addressing each point on their own? But I don’t think that is their intention. Quite often these

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<sup>13</sup> In *The Advocate*’s article, *Diva* editor and co-author of the “Not in Our Names” statement, Carrie Lyell confirmed *AfterEllen* was among the websites to which the statement refers.

individuals have pulled things out of context to start a sort of homophobia campaign that exclusively targets lesbians.

Joelle frames the critiques of her site's ideology as a refusal to participate in intellectual discourse and an attempt to discriminate against lesbians, while *Autostraddle* and other signatories of the statement imply the theory facilitated by sites like *AfterEllen* "must be challenged so feminism can move forward" ("Not in Our Name"). Clearly the two sites' distinct conceptions of lesbianism lead to distinct formulations of lesbian (and, in *Autostraddle*'s case, queer) community.

When "theory" converges with discursive spaces for marginalized individuals, which, I would argue, it always does to a certain extent, the connection between theory and lived experience becomes clear. It's not only that denying the experiences of queer and lesbian trans women is antithetical to what's meant to be an open forum for lesbians and queer women, it's also that such theories of gender and sexuality incite fear, erasure, and violence – all experiences that lesbian and queer women's discursive spaces of this project have aimed to combat. Dangerous theory facilitates dangerous reality, as understandings of oneself and others clearly impacts the way one treats oneself and others. With violence against trans women, particularly trans women of color, disturbingly common, the urgency of the "Not in Our Name" statement derives from a clear relationship between "real life" and theories of gender and sexuality.



## Epilogue: A Theory of Our Own

*...I am sorry to break off so abruptly. Are there no men present? Do you promise me that behind that red curtain over there the figure of Sir Chartres Biron is not concealed? We are all women, you assure me? Then I may tell you that the very next words I read were these – “Chloe liked Olivia...” Do not start. Do not blush. Let us admit in the privacy of our own society that these things sometimes happen. Sometimes women do like women.*

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

On the first day of the first queer theory class I ever took, we embarked on a question that's occupied me ever since: What should/can theory do? I was pensive through the discussion. New to graduate school, I was also new to being queer, having very recently come out. I didn't know what queer theory could or should do, but I knew what I *wanted* it to do. Like bell hooks in “Theory as Liberatory Practice,” I came to theory seeking comfort and clarity. Queer theory could, I hoped, shed light on questions I hadn't had the opportunity to ask about being queer. While I didn't know it at the time, I had run into the same issue as other queer women throughout history: school, church, pop culture, and politics had taught me what it meant to be straight, but no one had taught me what it meant to be queer.

I have to admit that, along with going to queer theory for a new structure of meaning-making, I also went to queer theory looking for queer women – and when I looked up from jotting down highlights of the class's conversation, I found one. I no longer have my notes from that class session, so I don't recall what my other classmates said when asked about the purpose and capacity of theory. I imagine the white board was

filled with words like “analyze” and “deconstruct” as we all sat in an approximation of a circle in a small room with too many desks when a woman with a bright-red undercut wearing combat boots said, “Privilege lets us look away. Theory makes us turn back.”

I was struck by her statement, no doubt, partially as a result of my own situation as a person who had recently surrendered the heterosexual privilege that had been largely invisible to me my entire life. But I was also struck by this comment because it came from a person whose queerness and theoretical aptitude seemed recognizable to me. I wanted to learn queer theory’s function, but more than that, I wanted to learn how queer theory functioned for this woman and others like her – and me. Unfortunately, she was auditing the course and showed up only one more time, during which, in what struck me then as a compelling display of queerness, she astutely described the politics of fisting only to never attend another session. Still, the impulse to trace the convergence of my work as a queer theorist and my life as a queer stayed with me.

And so, in *Just Between Us Girls*, I have done my best to “turn back.”<sup>1</sup> Turning back has involved returning to conceptions of academically canonized queer theory and re-centering the women pushed to its margins, but turning back has also involved returning to a question my own academic privilege had allowed me to overlook: How do the contexts in which we theorize influence our theory? Answering this question involved journeying to physical and virtual spaces. UCLA’s archives, contemporary websites, and online databases housing issues of *The Furies*, *Vice Versa*, and *The Ladder* all revealed

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<sup>1</sup> See Heather Love’s *Feeling Backward: Loss and Politics of Queer History* for her critical gesture of the “backwards turn” (looking back at texts neglected for their negative depictions of queerness) and this gesture’s connection to queerness. Love argues that queer theory itself derives power from the backwards turn insofar as “queer theorists drew on the confrontational, stigma-afflicted activism of groups like ACT UP and Queer Nation” (2). While my classmate did not reference Love or this work specifically, I suspect her insight into the utility of theory was inspired by *Feeling Backward*.

robust theorizations of lesbianism, bisexuality, and queerness, and these theorizations were positioned as conversations that invited readers to join. While I could often sense the phantom of canonical queer theory texts hovering over conversations about coming out or the constructed nature of gender and sex roles, for instance, I also realized that the authority of theory in these discursive spaces derived from queer female experiences. It wasn't that any idea about queerness was accepted because a queer woman shared it, it was more that these spaces had inscribed in their structure an invitation to speak, a reassurance that queer women indeed had something to say about queer female sexuality. The theory produced in these spaces is inextricably and unabashedly engaged with the personal as queer women develop systems of meaning-making to counteract the narratives of heteronormative society.

The project has turned back to past discursive spaces to reconsider their connection to academically canonized queer theory, while also turning back to concerns that have haunted queer theory since its inception. Some of these concerns must be put to rest in order for queer theorists to theorize ethically. For instance, as this project has shown, the fear that queer theory is insulated within the academy derives from a limited conception of theory. Those of us who study and teach queer theory must recognize the theorizing that occurs outside of academic journals and classrooms if we are to responsibly theorize. Understandings of gender, sexuality, race, etc. and the role these categories play in the lived experiences of individuals, greatly impact material lives. When a person's or group's understanding of the world renders them unable to recognize the humanity in others, bad theory is operating. Students who leave our classrooms never to set foot in a university (or eyes on a theory text) again will still theorize without our

lesson plans and rubrics to guide them. Sometimes this theory will manifest in comment sections online, sometimes in line for the bathroom, sometimes in voting booths.

For this project, turning back has also required taking another look at assumptions and fears about the Web. Much like queer theory, the Web has both been heralded as a sign of a more progressive, radical era and positioned as a harbinger of doom. If queer theory and queerness were in danger of erasing lesbian and feminist studies, the Web was also figured as the blithe destroyer of the printed word, literacy, and common courtesy. But as this project has used convergence theory to demonstrate, the Web is the latest in a long line of communication technologies, and while it has its own distinct affordances and limitations, it also repackages many characteristics of technologies preceding it. Hence a reason the promise of discourse “just between us girls” has continued to fuel the facilitation of discursive spaces from print-based media to the Web.

In the epigraphic quote, when, during her lecture, Virginia Woolf’s narrator worries about the presence of Sir Chartres Biron, the man who presided over the obscenity trial for Radclyffe Hall’s novel *The Well of Loneliness*, she acknowledges that certain ways of reading, thinking, and being are only possible when women are around women. “Chloe liked Olivia”<sup>2</sup> would not be worthy of note in many male-oriented texts, Woolf contends, but among the company of women, this relationship has the potential to upend heteronormative systems of meaning-making. More than that, the truth that only dares speak its name between women, that “sometimes these things do happen, sometimes women do like women,” helps bring clarity and comfort to queer women searching for identity and community.

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<sup>2</sup> Chloe and Olivia are two characters in the fictional novel discussed in *A Room of One’s Own, Life’s Adventures*.

Academic privilege has allowed us to look away from everyday uses of queer theory, as we've grown more and more comfortable in a discipline that has demanded of us sustained discomfort with discipline. I am not, in this project, calling for everyone to burn their copies of *Gender Trouble* or *Epistemology of the Closet* – I have used and benefited from canonized queer theory in this project and in my life. But I am hoping academics will look beyond the sources that have become familiar and dependable and commonsense to consider how queer theory is enriched when facilitated in spaces by, for, and about queer women – a context that academia writ large does not enable. This project has begun exploration of discursive spaces neglected by the academy, hoping to construct an enhanced theoretical lineage, but there's much work to be done. The scope of this project made it impossible to give sustained attention to the entirety of any single discursive space examined, but, more importantly, the “turning back” *Just Between Us Girls* performs must be consistently reenacted. The point of turning back isn't to locate the origin of an idea or to dethrone reigning queer theorists, but to listen for voices that have been lost in the din of academic institutionalization.

This project's loose conception of theory may prove frustrating to readers who have waited throughout the project for an answer to “What is theory?” or, God forbid, “What is queerness?” But queer theory and queerness have done themselves few favors by attempting to define themselves against the fields and identities that helped create them. And so, instead of providing a “new” definition of queer theory, I hope *Just Between Us Girls* will provoke readers to also “turn back” at their own definitions and ways of thinking that limit the possibility of connection. Once we make this change in our perspective, I believe we can stop worrying about queer theory's relevance outside

the academy and start thinking about the queer theory that's always existed outside of the academy. In short, I hope that in considering this nonacademic discourse queer theory, we as academics might turn back to our own limiting perceptions on what counts as "queer" and "theory."

In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf's narrator turns back to history as manifested in the library at the University where she's giving her lecture, and she marvels at the lack of women represented, both as subjects and as authors. The narrator muses:

It would be ambitious beyond my daring, I thought, looking about the shelves for books that were not there, to suggest to the students of those famous colleges that they should rewrite history, though I own that it often seems a little queer as it is, unreal, lop-sided; but why should they not add a supplement to history? Calling it, of course, by some inconspicuous name so that women might figure there without impropriety? (45)

I'd like to end *Just Between Us Girls* by asking, what if we refuse to call discourse between queer women about queerness "by some inconspicuous name"? What if we just call it queer theory? I believe persisting in the term "queer" to describe theory in spaces where the term is refused or critiqued also helps queer theorists keep in mind the work of convergence, not eradication, "queer" should accomplish. Convergence as a theory demands this turning back, this reconsideration of what has been deemed obsolete and its role in what has been embraced as new and radical. And as for what queer theory itself should accomplish? I think we can only know if we search outside the academy for those who would join us in rewriting the history of queer theory, and with it, queer theory itself.

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