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Love's Lesbian Refrain of Feeling: 'Bette and Tina' and the Subversion of Heterosexual Affect

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Making love with worlds

[1] The broadcasting of *The L Word* on Showtime from 2004 to 2009 coincided with the emergence of a new era of mediated sociality driven by social media. Launched in 2005, YouTube quickly became a repository for watching and re-watching *The L Word*, particularly through the offerings of 'fan vidders' (Jenkins 2006) whose editorial processes of 'redaction' (John Hartley cited in Burgess and Green 2009, 48) incorporated inflections of lived spectatorship into the viewing experience. Through a type of audio-visual pastiche, this YouTube genre (of *The L Word* 'mash-ups') modified the 'surfaces and intensities' (Grosz 1995, 179) of the show, reconstituting *The L Word* as a site of *articulation*. This essay claims that the incorporation of a cultural spectrum of reflexive spectatorship into the YouTube viewing experience modified the cadence of the story that *The L Word* tells and variously reoriented the show both around and away from the theme of lesbian subjectification. In particular, the change in cadence brought about by fans' YouTube viewing is interpreted here as a lesbian 'refrain of feeling' that subverts the heterosexual properties ascribed to the show by its normative media context.

[2] Fan videos of Bette (Jennifer Beals) and Tina (Laurel Holloman) are replete with images of returning. In these 'TiBette' videos, love's repetition is bursting with singularity: I love you. I love you. I love you. 'Over and Over Again',^[1] as one Bette and Tina fan vidder put it. Over and over, fans return to Bette and Tina—'first, last and forever.'^[2] Creating 'new material by the process of editing existing content' (Burgess and Green 2009, 48), fans' 'viewing strategies' (Jenkins 2012, 73) position *The L Word* as a palette of lesbian affects. Scenes of intimate expression are cut away from an original sequence and enjoined together, typically for the duration of a love song, to orchestrate a *visual display* of affective contact and a *cultural display* of lesbian articulation. This production of affective display is historically cognisant as the emergence of the 'lesbian intimate' (Cefai 2014). In *The L Word* online viewing culture, lesbian intimacy becomes the basis of viewers' interactions with these repetitious scenes and in so doing engenders a lesbian refrain of feeling 'in love'. Affected by the enigma of the other, we generate a new expression. A singular mingling generates a new world; a promise of a world to make love with. Because, 'we always make love with worlds' (Deleuze and Guattari 1984, 323). The refrain of feeling in love promises a world, a journeying to 'the gift that keeps on *giving* when people can rely on re-experiencing their intimates' fundamental sympathy with the project of repetition and recognition' (Berlant 2008, 15).

[3] Since the early twentieth century US society has been shaped by 'the selling of heterosexual and heterofamilial love' (Berlant 2008a, 178). Although national and consumer sexual citizenship are not co-extensive (Burns and Davies 2009), 'newly emergent neoliberal "equality" politics' (Duggan 2001, 45) foster the convergence of national and consumer forms of sexual identity. Mainstream media representations of *The L Word* typify the interlinking between national and consumer sexual citizenship, and this interlinking is particularly evident in the idea of 'universal love'. The show's anti-homophobic stance is consistent with its neoliberal discourse of privatisation, which is to be expected given the show's production for a cable TV economy that is consumer-led. The narrative content of *The L Word* reflexively invokes the show as a representational vehicle of liberal justice that is consistent with neoliberal capitalist principles of self-determination. Attending to the universality of love as an allegory of social justice, references to *The L Word* in mainstream media reassert the broader neoliberal rhetoric of choice and an associated individualistic discourse of rights, that have together conducted the rise of *the intimate* to the sphere of national politics (Berlant 1999). The universal love associated with *The L Word* is a type of call for 'equality' that cannot be extricated from the 'juro-politics of affect that uses trauma and stigma to measure injustice through a *feeling* someone has' (Berlant 1999, 83). This raises questions about the remediated *articulation* of the show and its refrains of feeling.

[4] In the US context, people's requests for a just emotion have historically and problematically ascended from the grassroots political emotion of the Civil Rights Movement to a national imaginary that mobilises their feelings to legitimise structural oppression. Campaign slogans such as 'Love is a Human Right' (Amnesty International) and 'Some Girls Marry Girls. Get Over It!' (Stonewall, UK) capture the juridical reforming of (homosexual) intimacy by the state. Not only has the right to marry become entrenched in a discourse about emotional equity, love is taking on distinction as a human right. A certain Universal Love Discourse can be understood as an elucidation of this national deployment of intimacy. In interacting with this mainstream love discourse, fan vidders' 'circulation of media content' (Jenkins 2006, 3) might produce an opportunity to love differently.

[5] Taking into account 'the difference between the structure of an affect and the experience we associate with a typical emotional event' (Berlant 2008b, 4), this article attends to viewers' online interactions with Bette and Tina since the latter express an emotional encounter that disarticulates Universal Love as a symbolic register of sexual neutrality. Viewers forge a lesbian refrain of feeling in love through their interactions with Bette and Tina and their refrain engenders an 'adequate, experimental, or hitherto unworked out, way of (re)thinking lesbianism or lesbian desire' (Grosz 1995, 175). Advancing a queer and feminist engagement with popular culture, I am drawing on Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's notion of the refrain in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987)^[3] in order to think how the lesbian body can be territorialised by love. That is, rather than 'talk about lesbian or gay "identities," ... lesbian psychologies, about the physical genesis of lesbian desires' or 'about the meaning, signification, or representation of these desires' (Grosz 1995, 174), I will consider how loving Bette and Tina gestures towards the bodily horizon of lesbian difference,^[4] towards a 'becoming-lesbian' (Nigianni 2009, 168). To do so, I explore how the singularity of feeling in love entails two potential worlds—that of the self and the other—that in their interrelation make a new world, or make the world anew.

[6] The work of emotion is a further dimension to the sexually specific understanding of the politics of feeling. In *The Managed Heart* (2003), the feminist Marxist sociologist Arlie Hochschild argues that: 'In managing feeling, we contribute to the creation of it' (18). Based on her research with flight attendants, Hochschild defines *emotional labour* as the requirement to 'induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in Others' (7). By becoming 'estranged or alienated from an aspect of the self ... that is *used* to do the work' (7, italics in original), the worker's emotional labour encroaches on their private emotion. Queer criticism of heterosexuality's normative demand implicitly and explicitly recognises the emotional labour of producing a heterosexual 'state of mind'^[5] in others.^[6] Bette and Tina's refrain of feeling deterritorialises the pressure to feel heterosexual, creating a temporal lesbian escape from the emotional labour of 'compulsory heterosexuality' (Rich 1986).

[7] As we 'come into contact with the way another person affectively engages with their surroundings' (Stark 2012, 105), a part of the self, 'a small region of the world' (Deleuze 1993, 25) expressed in the other unfolds a potential 'subdivision' or 'enlightened region' (25) in us.^[7] In a world where the possibility of love is territorialised by heterosexuality, lesbian love exists as a *fragment* of intimacy (in both senses of: a remnant or ruin of heterosexual power structures, but also, a fracture of heterosexuality).^[8] The audio-visual affects of Bette and Tina videos create a refrain of feeling allowing a fragment of lesbian intimacy to take form. Mobilising the rhizomatic relations of lesbian culture, Bette and Tina's refrain of feeling in love becomes 'a profound placeholder that provides an affective confirmation of the idea of a shared confirming imaginary in advance of inhabiting a material world in which that feeling can actually be lived' (Berlant 2008, 3).

[8] Locating the possibility of 'queer affect' (Berlant 2001, 443) in the archive of 'women's culture' (Berlant 2008a), this article both stays with and moves from the figurative and queer theory's 'prohibitively realist' 'representational paradigms' of love (Berlant 2001, 447). My examination begins by identifying the discursive tracts in mainstream media discourse that dismiss love's sexual difference and entrench (possibilities for) feeling within homophobic knowledge. Initially, I claim that the Universal Love Discourse curtails possibilities for lesbian love by 'straightening' (Ahmed 2006) *The L Word's* affective milieu. I understand the need to straighten lesbian affect as stemming from 'the repetitions of intimate conventionality', for 'to change the aesthetics of love, its archive of reference, inevitably animates discourses of instability from anxiety through revolution' (Berlant 2001, 438).

[9] Through a case study of laughter on the lesbian media website *After Ellen*, I explore the instability of heterosexuality by introducing the idea that refrains of feeling are charged by sexual difference.^[9] The denial of love's sexual specificity—understood here as a defence mechanism against instability and anxiety—repudiates sexual subjectivity and ultimately sexual difference. Far from liberating love, universalism naturalises heterosexuality in its current form. Contrary to this naturalisation, Bette and Tina's sexual difference instils a change in 'the aesthetics of love' (Berlant 2001, 438). Fans' reproductions of their own versions of Bette and Tina love then further modify love's aesthetics; their modifications express 'the desire to become more than oneself, to become exchangeable, to become

oriented toward a publicness that corresponds to an expanding interiority' (Berlant 2001, 443). On this basis I suggest that refrains of feeling are intricately and inextricably connected to 'self-extension' (443). Any lesbian extension through the capacity to feel is contingent on the mingling of selves and a language of intimate existence—linguistic and non-linguistic—ready to territorialise the body. In witnessing this territorialisation, I attend to the corrosion of lesbian love through the negating actions of the Universal Love Discourse.

Heterolove in the Universal Love Discourse

[10] Lesbian love does not arise out of thin air or the hidden heterosexuality of love's neutrality. Opportunity to express intimacy between women and to subvert dominant meanings through the expression of feeling is created in lesbian and gay cultures (e.g. see Cvetkovich 2003; Munt 1998). Although the pre-existing lesbian cultures that make *The L Word* possible circumscribe cultural space through lesbian participation (i.e. to the exclusion of straight people), as a mainstream media text *The L Word* navigates dominant representations by incorporating heterosexual viewing perspectives.^[10] This navigation takes the form of an engagement with the straight worry that is discursively constructed by mainstream media. Discursive representations manifest worry for what straight audiences will think, how they will respond, and whether or not they will be *alienated*, orienting *The L Word* as a lesbian object that is perceivable via straight emotion. This has the effect of centering the heterosexual subject as the point of origin for all sexual experience as well as the point of entry into media and cultural sites. The medicalisation of sexuality annexes lesbian sexuality from the origins of love, perceived as distinct from 'sexuality' (that is associated with *homosexuality*). Representing love as being *beyond* sexuality resolves heterosexual anxiety by folding lesbian difference back into heterosexual culture.

[11] With billboards proudly proclaiming 'Same Sex. Different City,' Showtime marketed its production of the first ever lesbian drama series by cleverly punning on the then recently concluded TV series *Sex and the City* (HBO 1998-2004). Subsequent public appearances of *The L Word's* cast and crew, however, sidelined this initial marketing rhetoric of postfeminist sexual agency in favour of discussions about love. Speaking at a televised interview during the first year of broadcasting, actor Mia Kirshner reflects on her decision to play Jenny:

I didn't look at it from the point of view of sexuality, the way I approached the show. I think the themes of the show extend far beyond gay or straight. [Like?] Intimacy. [Right] I think it's about people's desires to connect with each other and I think that's a universal theme, so it's hard for me to even think of the show as a gay show.^[11]

Kirshner's reflection on 'sexuality' points to an anxiety about marketability that is also discernable in the show's script. For instance, a final season plot (512, 'Loyal and True') follows the decision of a fictional Hollywood production company to change the ending of its film *Lez Girls*: rather than staying gay, 'Jessie' goes back to 'Jim'. Tina, the producer of the movie, protests to her colleagues: 'We worked really hard on a movie that we believed in and the marketing people just come along and change the whole ending? The guy gets the girl in the end?! This is the movie that was supposed to change all that'. In the storyline, reshooting the final scene redirects the film's entire sexual meaning. As the film credits roll the

viewer enters the relation of the virtual folding into the real, abandoned by the film's semiotic and sensory envelope and left with a remaining impression only of what was. In the film within the TV show, sending 'Jessie' back to 'Jim' is the shortest route to reconfiguring the whole scene as heterosexual. '*Lez Girls*' (punning on 'les' for lesbian) becomes '*The Girls*'. The manipulation of the lesbian story into a heterosexual one portrays the bodily 'straightening' (Ahmed 2006, 66)^[12] of the lesbian film—depicting how *The L Word* itself undergoes a continuous process of straightening.

[12] 'Look, Tina, if a movie's too gay it's gonna alienate audiences', Adele (Malaya Rivera Drew) tells Tina. Feelings that do not fulfil the normative 'promise of a feeling' (Ahmed 2010, 42) can cause people and things to become 'affect aliens' (42) that 'do not desire in the right way' (240 n.31).^[13] Straight worry attaches an anticipatory failure to the lesbian text. In this example, worry that the lesbian film will be unable to provide pleasure or satisfactory ways of relating, or that the film will offend or disturb, renders '*Lez Girls*' an 'affect alien' (158) before it has even appeared. Anticipatory affects such as disgust and boredom prevent lesbian women from becoming 'objects to be desired' (Ahmed 2006, 70). (The generation of these affects relies on the disavowal of other affects, such as excitement, interest and enjoyment—except in the pornographic image that fetishises (lesbian) sex by replacing intimacy with the straight male body.) Straightening media as a way of managing the affective intensities that representations stir in their audiences closes down possibility for the viewers to reciprocate lesbian feeling. The fact that in the end '*Lez Girls*' never gets made illustrates the anticipatory nature of affective straightening. Anticipation allows the incitement of further anxiety in lieu of the arrival of the affect alien / alien affect, whose perpetual circumnavigation precisely circumnavigates lesbian reciprocity.

[13] Showtime's anticipatory worry about marketability—expressed to the tune of a \$10 million marketing budget (Brown and Westbrook 2013)—picks up on the 'audience appeal' of the idea of love as universal. Comments on YouTube read as follows:

I am straight but I must say in another world I could easily be with another woman.^[14]

Bette is OMG! I love her ... I'm straight and somehow she manages to turn me on ... and Tibette is the ultimate great couple on *The L Word*! Go Tibette!^[15]

It helps one to dream of finding that kind of love/relationship ... straight or gay.^[16]

Oh my ... this makes me want to cry! I am straight but damn – love is indeed universal! These women brought their characters to life in a way that makes me question my own sexuality – but then again, it's not JUST sexuality – it's LOVE ... It is possible to LOVE just anyone – male or female ... love can take away all the labels ... it just is!!^[17]

The idea that love is *beyond* sexuality has a certain utility. By perceiving Bette and Tina's love to be the same as theirs, heterosexual viewers allow love to become a way that 'women identify with each other as women despite myriad economic, social, and political forces that create difference and antagonisms among them' (Berlant 2008a, 170). These processes of identification justify the omission of sexuality from the universal intimacy of (straight, neoliberal) love. Given that the Western history of sexuality is a history of heterosexuality's Other—that heterosexuality is not imagined as such, whereas homosexuals are imagined to possess sexuality—negating sexuality disproportionately negates homosexual difference.

Hence, in this context, sexless love re-establishes heterosexuality as an invisible norm.

[14] Whereas love is considered to be ostensibly free from the limits of identity, the homo / hetero sexual binary attributes qualities like fixity and rigidity to lesbian and gay experience. In contrast with the putative fixity of lesbian and gay signification, heterosexuality retains its dominance through the 'heteroflexible' (Blackman 2008, 124) incorporation of gay experience. That is, heteronormative discourses increasingly incorporate the plurality of experiences that arise through sexual difference. Hence, the universality of love works to resolve the contradiction between the Western epistemology of (homo)sexual difference that produces homosexual Otherness, and contemporary discourses of equality that deny a history of subordination. This resolution conceals heterosexuality's colonisation of intimacy.

[15] The characterisation of marginal identities as fixed is analogised through the depiction of race. In one scene (101, 'Pilot') from *The L Word*, Bette turns to her sister Kit (Pam Grier) for moral support. Kit reassures Bette: 'love is the bridge between all our differences.'^[18] Here, love bridges the difference of race. Bette (like Beals) is mixed race, and unlike her character's sister can visibly 'pass' as white. This scene belongs to a storyline in which Tina is attempting to become pregnant through artificial insemination. The audience is led to believe that hitherto Tina, as a white woman, has not thought through the possibility of using a black donor. Tina's shock and uncertainty about the idea of mothering a mixed race child leads to Bette feeling hurt. Tina explains that she wouldn't know how to raise a mixed raced child, but this justification only leaves Bette feeling further rejected.^[19] Seeking to ameliorate Bette's hurt, Kit tells her: 'When she [Tina] looks at you, she's not looking at a black woman or a white woman. She's looking at the woman she loves.'

[16] Love does more than bridge 'all our differences'. Appearing as an intermediary term, love is both that which allows connection across sexual and racial difference, and that which comes to erase the significance of those differences, which are crossed. The idea that anyone can love anyone places a semiotic premium on the differences that are overcome by love. Love's overcoming of sexual, racial or other forms of difference also invites responsibility: the subject of love is responsible for overcoming obstacles to love, rendering identity an obstacle to love. Metaphors of overcoming, like 'getting beyond' and 'getting over', individualise social difference while simultaneously turning difference into that which must be overcome. Sexual difference, as that which we must get over, is an obstacle and an impingement on love's generosity. Failing to take up love's generosity 'is read as a refusal to reproduce and therefore as a threat to the social ordering of life itself' (Ahmed 2006, 91). This refusal is wedded to the idea that love can ameliorate social antagonism.

[17] As I have begun to suggest, the Universal Love Discourse pursues sameness by reconfiguring two interlocking sets of distinction—gay / straight and sexuality / love—through a neoliberal rhetoric of choice. The emergence of modern gay subjectivity in conjunction with perversion institutionalises normal love as specifically heterosexual and familial (Butler 1997; Foucault 1976). Only heterosexual love achieves society-founding status (Berlant and Warner 1998). In contrast, homosexuality is detached from the originary status of heterosexual love—except as love's Other, shameful and unnatural (Bersani and Phillips 2008). Hence, the association of sexuality with *homosexuality* and the juxtaposition of love and

(homo)sexuality qualify love as essentially something other than gay. It is this logic that operates in the viewers' distinction between love and sexual orientation; between sexuality *as gay or straight* and love *as intimacy without identity*.

[18] We know that sexuality passes through gender and is intelligible as long as its subjects are forced into either / or positions; that is, via gender sexual subjects are oppositionally, hierarchically and exclusively defined (Butler 1990). Hence, the socio-cultural legacy of homosexuality is that the whole life should be incorporated into one's sex (Foucault 1976). In this epistemology of gay / straight (and its distinction of sexuality from love), homosexual choices are understood as *limited* choices that deny the full potential of love. Gay / straight and love are entangled by a consumer logic such that neoliberal homosexuality becomes a self-elected limitation of one's field of choice—a limitation that prefigures the rightness of heterosexuality to resolve homosexual (bad) choice. Love is valorised by a neo-liberal capitalist heterosexuality as a mode of intimacy springing from the greatest range of choice, even though this emphasis on the significance of choice operates as a vehicle for securing identitarian sameness. Consumerism is a purging of differences fuelled by a fantasy of individualising choice. As such, the putative aim of the Universal Love Discourse is not for us to become equally subjects of love, but for us to love according to the purview of nationalised sexuality.

[19] The model of gay friendship encouraged by Foucault (1997) sought to 'invent relations that no longer imitate the dominant heterosexual model of a gender-based and fundamentally hierarchical relationality' (Bersani, in Bersani and Phillips 2008, 44). The relations that pass through the Universal Love Discourse reproduce as well as fail to observe the limits of a 'gender-based and fundamentally hierarchical relationality'. This failure allows the energy, creativity and emotional labour of lesbian life to be either disregarded or assimilated into heterolove. Moreover, the forms of relationality imagined through Universal Love detach love from its historical conditions of possibility.

[20] A critique of the 'compulsory heterosexuality' (Rich 1986) of love is essential to recognising the emotional labour of lesbian subjectivity. The demand to change the heterosexual imaginary of love positions lesbian difference as a form of social antagonism. Such a demand is negated by the Universal Love Discourse: if love is universal, the cultural and emotional labour of lesbian difference is not only superfluous but undertaken voluntarily. However, part of the action of lesbian identity is to allow this emotional work to be expressed and in so doing to create new possibilities for love. The relations that pass through lesbian love come into contact with something that is not determined by heterosexuality's capacity to 'shape one's own body *as a congealed history of past approaches*' (Ahmed 2006, 91, italics in original). There is another approach, a fragment of intimacy, both inside and outside of heterosexuality's contact. This approach is the potential of the world you come into contact with, through the contact of the other person—their look, their smell, their touch.^[20] A world that does not fulfil a congealed history but is what they make possible, in you. The 'universal' potential for love might exist, but not as the ground of sexual politics. Not-yet.

Laughter between us

[21] In that lesbian and gay studies archive the energy, creativity and emotional labour that make gay life (im)possible, there has always been a relationship between the archiving function of lesbian and gay studies and lesbian and gay culture. The cable transmission of *The L Word* from 2004 to 2009 occurred alongside the development of Web 2.0 in which new modes of lesbian and gay images and sociality are formed in an on going manner. The coincidence of the first mainstream lesbian TV production with the proliferation of new forms of lesbian media, cultural engagement and social contact, opened new experiences of lesbian ways of relating. The formation of gay community that had historically engaged in the highly localised production of space (e.g. Munt 1998) suddenly took hold of multiple avenues of internet communication: 'the internet creates an effectively infinite *reserve* for human action whose existence changes the possibilities of social organization in space everywhere' (Couldry 2012, 2, italics in original). Online lesbian intertextuality punctures and punctuates dominant, straightening, representations.

[22] In 2007, founder and editor-in-chief of popular lesbian media site *After Ellen* (www.afterellen.com) Sarah Warn (2007), picked up on Showtime's attempt to market *The L Word* as a post-identity show about 'people.' According to the copy placed by Showtime in *Variety* magazine, *The L Word* is 'no longer "a show about lesbians," [because] this series has evolved into a show about people.' 'Good thinking, that'll fool 'em!,' responds Warn. 'And it won't piss off your lesbian audience at all.' Warn illustrates her critique by mimicking Showtime's 'brilliant attempt to woo Emmy voters,' applying Showtime's hetero PR to a series of analogous, hypothetical representations. Warn says of *Grey's Anatomy*: 'No longer a show "about doctors," this series has evolved into a show about people with high sex drives and advanced degrees who all happen to work at the same hospital.' About *The Sopranos*, Warn says: 'No longer "a show about mobsters," this series has evolved into a show about people trying to maintain a healthy personal life while running a large criminal enterprise in New Jersey.'

[23] Responding to Warn's provocation, readers of *After Ellen* post comments:^[21]

Cagney & Lacey: no longer 'a show about 2 female cops,' this series has evolved into a show about 2 women coping with the fact their washroom at work looks like a crack den.

Alias: no longer 'a show about spies,' this series has evolved into a show about people with a tendency to have at least a double life and a propensity for curiosity.

Lost: no longer 'a show about heterosexuals', this series has evolved into ... No, wait, it's still a show about heterosexuals.

Fifty or so responses are interspersed with laughter—comments such as 'LOL' (laugh out loud), 'too busy laughing!', and 'this is too funny.' The collective reproduction of statements bearing nonsensical claims reveals humour's source. The embedding of a homophobic attitude within nonsense is crystallised by this viewer's slightly more sober take:

'This movie isn't about homosexuality! It's about love! Ah, thanks for explaining that. I'd hate to get the two muddled up.'

Recalling media discourse around *Brokeback Mountain* (2005)—tagline 'Love is a Force of Nature'—this viewer succinctly points to what I claim is the specific annexing of (homo)sexuality from love that is

performed by the Universal Love Discourse as part of its claim to love's equality. Showtime's use of the term 'people' is a negation of the very lesbian culture that makes the show possible. Warn's readers' laughter is an affective response to the underlying violence of this negation, and their laughter momentarily deterritorialises its straightening of lesbian affect. The readers' laughter is a line of flight.

[24] Laughter affects other affects. Lesbian readers could respond to Showtime's heterosexism with irritation, annoyance, anger, frustration, depression, sadness, shame, hopelessness and disappointment. The embodying of these straightening emotions by the lesbian viewer would be an effect of her objectification, even if these affective responses attest to a critical viewing position. Laughing forms a temporal lag that assuages these possible affects, disrupting the smooth passage of straight emotion. Laughter introduces a bodily dynamic outside of that which is already under control.

[25] It is through the collective experience of lesbian culture that readers find humour in Showtime's heterosexism. Readers' laughter draws on lesbian and queer subjects' emotional and cultural labour that allows for the emergence of a queer sense of humour that challenges straight culture. The collective experience that results in the laughter intervenes in the erosion of the difference sexual difference makes. Laughter also then emerges in the *potential* of *The L Word* to engender relations of lesbian desire and becoming.

[26] Although lesbian culture (including lesbian media such as *After Ellen*) is the condition of possibility for this particular instance of humour, this laughter is open to be laughed by those whose affective responses are not prefigured by an experience of lesbian identity. Identification is involved in laughter as the basis of an empathetic understanding of a lesbian position, but shared experience is not a prerequisite. Rather, the affective response of laughter can be understood as an effect of the angle opened up by the queer experience of identity. The momentum of humour draws a line of flight without reinscribing lesbian on an identitarian ground, as a container or a conclusion.

[27] There are a number of ways in which the act of laughing subverts Showtime's straightening of lesbian love. Laughter is an unintended affect that brings into question Showtime's representation of lesbians' evolving into 'people', questioning Showtime's partaking in a Universal Love discourse that assimilates gay love to straight love. Furthermore, laughter articulates a lesbian viewing of the show, and therefore reconsolidates a lesbian viewing position (that is the one being denied) as the condition of possibility for the subversion of straightening discourses. Laughter buffers certain affects, such as shame, that are the punitive consequence of heterosexual subjectivity being privileged as the universal, *a priori* ground of intimacy. This laughter momentarily counteracts the resolution of heteronormative anxiety into consumer subjectivity.

[28] However, the response of one viewer calls laughter's subversion into question:

If you look at the *Cosby Show*, they worked hard to show that there were people who were Drs. and lawyers and college kids and 'normal', not at all like those 'crazy pimps' and 'hoes' those other TV shows portrayed us as. Here was a family who was successful and loving who happened to be Black. It wasn't ever about their 'Blackness'.

Understandably, this viewer's frustration suggests a desire for the depiction of racial and sexual

difference as incidental rather than stratified. In *The Cosby Show* analogy, difference is related through a self-referential national identity that neither accommodates nor specifies what is black about being black, or what is lesbian about being lesbian—other than a *negation* of dominant racial and sexual definitions. The desire to erase sexual or racial specificities is the direct outcome of their negative social connotations. However, as Berlant (2008a, 9) observes: 'no population has ever erased the history of its social negativity from its ongoing social meaning'. The unsuccessful erasure of the social negativity wrought in histories of marginalisation sustains the desire for images of lesbian difference to transcend pain so as to allow us to get over that which has made us become our socially negative selves.

[29] 'Wow, way to TOTALLY miss the point and bring a totally fun article down', one viewer responds to the analogy with *The Cosby Show*. This viewer's sense that the fun is brought 'down' reveals the reversible nature of power. Humour is on the cusp of power's subversion and interest. The desire for representations that transcend specific identities interrupts the refrain of laughter, exposing its subjects to the relations of affect that were deflected through laughing—exposing the limits of lesbian cultural resistance. The request for transcendent, 'positive' (through class mobility) representation, allows anxiety back on the scene: lesbians should be transcending what?

[30] Laughter pries *The L Word* from the discourse of universal love, but this also 'generates *relief from the political*' (Berlant 2008a, 10). The subversion of heteronormativity is unable to withstand critique that threatens 'the *sense in consensus*' (11). Consensus refers to the 'sense that there is a common emotional world available' (11). While espousing a liberal view of multicultural difference, the fan of *The Cosby Show* creates the 'active antagonism' (11) required for politics. By criticising and overriding this antagonism, viewers reveal their investment in circumscribing a territorialised intensity—the common emotional world held by a refrain of feeling.

The lesbian refrain of feeling in love

[31] The audio-visual content of video uploaded on YouTube is both typical of fan vidders' uses of software to edit a range of television texts in general (see Jenkins 2006), and particular to audience engagement with *The L Word*. In contrast to the Universal Love Discourse that denies the articulation of homosexuality, Bette and Tina's refrain of feeling specifies love as lesbian but not through the production of lesbian signification. Rather, the fragment of (lesbian) intimacy takes form through audio-visual affects that compose a refrain of feeling in love. By adjusting colours and exposure, slowing down the playback speed, zooming, reframing, multiplying, overlaying images and adding text, fans create new qualities of expression (e.g. see Shaviro 2009). These qualities of expression allow images of Bette and Tina to become the site of a field of intensities of 'pure lived experience,' two 'pure silhouette(s), pure colour and pure sound' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 305) beyond molar identities, yet sexually specific and embodied.

[32] As TV characters, Bette and Tina's emotional temporality is figurative. Fan vidding modifies the surfaces of their figural emotion into an aural-affective block. In their '1837: Of the Refrain' (310-350), Deleuze and Guattari describe three aspects of the refrain: the creation of a centre, the drawing of a

circle around the centre, and the opening of the circle. Organised into a refrain, feeling acts on the way that the subject encounters the world by territorialising its chaos, creating a centre, a limited space, and an opening onto a future. The narrative temporality of Bette and Tina's intimacy and the bodily temporality of the viewer's affective relation to Bette and Tina enter into a mutual becoming-in-time, giving feeling a temporal form of expression. Viewers' practices of watching and rewatching, returning over and over again to the same scenes, mimic the repetitive form generated by fan vidders. Bette and Tina are always in the motion of moving forward and back, (mis)communicating, out of love only to be in love (again). The temporality of the refrain involves figurative and non-figurative expression.

[33] 'Over and Over Again' is centrally composed through the repetition of a kiss. During the opening sequence, three shots—from a three-quarter length body shot to a head shot—move the viewer closer to the kiss. A black frame gives way to florescent pink and yellow text: 'Illicit Kiss' beats back and forth with increasing speed like an excited heart. Accentuating the temporality of the kiss, the playback speed of the kiss is slowed down, dragging time through affection. The temporal drag of the stolen kiss is extracted from the characters' everyday scenario: Bette is in a monogamous relationship with Jodi (Marlee Matlin) and Tina is romantically adrift following her surprise heterosexuality. Their kiss must be swift, fleeting, caught and catching. Cuts of the kiss are sutured together, playing in a continuous motion that is interrupted by fleeting images of celebration played at unedited speed. Tina dances at a party with her friends; Bette happily walks into her house with a dance in her stride; Jenny smiles and says 'awesome'. Set to Gilbert O'Sullivan's tuneful 'What's in a Kiss?', the visual display is accompanied by the lyrics: 'What's in a kiss? / Have you ever wondered just what it is?'. At the end of the two and a half minute video, the black screen fills up with kisses, repeating at different speeds.

[34] Creator and executive producer of the show Ilene Chaiken has repeatedly invoked her life experience as the basis for storylines, particularly for the central protagonists Bette and Jenny. During 11 and a half hours of viewing in Season 1, Bette and Jenny undergo a series of life-changing events including: the end of romantic relationships and the formation of new ones, the loss of a pregnancy, and a change in sexual orientation. The ensemble drama genre packs together multiple experiences, compressing the time of intimate life into digestible segments.

[35] Collating images from a 6 year period, fan vidders further compresses the temporality of Chaiken's life and the biographical lives of others. The compression of biographical time allows a concentration on emotional expression. For instance, slowing down time and viewing images in greyscale can pair back the affective noise of the image: 'It's fantastic, amazing, the best! We can see all the touches in "slow motion". We could feel their feelings; and in "black and white" it's wonderful!',^[22] remarks one viewer. By extracting Bette and Tina from *The L Word*, viewers are extracting an affective temporality from a narrative, generating images that contain an element of the temporality of the narrative, while they simultaneously produce their own temporal plane. Videos single out moments of exchange, magnifying every already heightened sensitivity and drawing out every fragment of intimacy. These moments of affirmation are those described by viewers as 'TiBette moments'. An example of just such a scene is when Tina observes Bette talking with Candace (Ion Overman). In this moment, Tina realises Bette is having an affair—she sees that Bette is being unfaithful. In a later episode, Alice explains: 'she [Tina]

guessed, because she saw them touching hands, and then, she knew everything' (201, 'Life, Loss, Leaving'). Viewers pick up on the moments in which Bette and Tina 'communicate with the sparsest of signs and gestures', with 'the quality of eloquence and brevity' (Berlant 1998, 281).

[36] Intimate moments can be those in which emotional intensities pass thresholds of bodily currents that activate a kiss, a touch, a glance. The gestures of the body are immediate and all-encompassing. 'Over and Over Again' is one of many videos that considers the kiss and what it senses—its multiplicity. The kiss imagines intimacy as the dissipation of separate living; the magnitude of swallowing one another's breath, magnified and magnetising. 'The moment of the kiss brings us together in a proximity of loss and revival, in discontinuity and endurance. The moment is the temporality of love' (Nigianni 2014, 153). The density of the moment, the kiss, is an arching and aching of bodies that folds them into the time of timelessness, cumulating what has come before into love's aporia of an escaping present.

[37] Theatre 'extracts real movement from all the art it employs' (Deleuze 2004, 11). To the speculative extent that Nietzsche's theatre can be found in the *The L Word*, Beals and Holloman 'fill the inner emptiness of the mask within a theatrical space'. The actors do not mimic or copy but play 'a role which plays other roles', creating movement, weaving their repetition 'from one distinctive point to another'. Through 'signs and masks' they extract the expression of feeling from the world they encounter and what this makes available in their lives. The 'repetition' of love is not in the actors' mimetic acting of 'the part' (11), but an extraction of a singularity of feeling from a multitude of affective expressions.

[38] Affected by Beals and Holloman's extraction of movement, viewers enter into a relation of becoming not with the image per se, but with the experience of feeling that the image draws out from the body. Viewers are expressly attentive to their senses becoming expressive: 'Gosh, I had a lump in my throat when I saw this';^[23] 'Watching it made me smile way down in my soul';^[24] 'this made me horny as hell!'^[25] Comments such as these cascade in response to (one another's responses to) the videos. Related to the body is the discussion of the chemistry between the actors: 'There is too much chemistry between those two, it just can't all be acting';^[26] 'You can see and feel the love between them, the chemistry & the connection are so awesome.'^[27] Visceral exclamations express their sensorium: love composes bodies through their affective interaction and emotional synergy, through feelings of excitement or melancholia. Commenting on their own experiences of feeling in response to the videos on YouTube, viewers consistently engage with Bette and Tina as a mode of expression. The screen itself is not an affective replica or copy of what is real but a technology of 'mediation [that] amplifies the affective basis of reality' (Kavka 2008, 28). Hence, characters' relationships '*feel real*' precisely 'because of the affect transmitted to our responsive bodies across a screen' (28). But the transmission of affect also relies on the melodramatic genre that communicates feeling through the stories told by the feelings of others.

[39] Deleuze and Guattari (1987) cite the example of the lost child, walking alone at night and listening to a song that comforts him; 'the song is like a rough sketch of a calming and stabilizing, calm and stable, center in the heart of chaos' (311). In Bette and Tina fan vidding the centre is the expression of feeling through a story and bodily becoming—to get to that centre, viewers have to enter a refrain of feeling that

is created as an autonomous node within heteronormative culture. Feelings become expressive through the generic form of melodramatic inflation (e.g. see Gledhill 1987, Williams 1998), whose cultural, historical and ethico-aesthetic coordinates are found in 'our unconscious investments in social libidinal flows' (Protevi 2002, 188). Melodramatic intensity unfolds a territory in motion, a territorialisation conducive to the possibility of place.

[40] Once the child is at home, home must be created: 'it was necessary to draw a circle around that uncertain and fragile centre, to organize a limited space' (311). Components, such as the song, can be used for 'organizing a space' (311), not just a 'momentary centre' (311). The 'activity of selection, elimination and extraction' (311) allows 'something from chaos across the filter or sieve of the space that has been drawn' (311). 'Sonorous or vocal components are very important' among the 'very diverse, components' that have a part in organising the space. The territorialising properties of the refrain of feeling in love are highlighted in the show's reoccurring motif of 'coming home'. 'Home' denotes a spatiality and the formation of spaciness through feeling but is not coterminous with the possession of a place: 'For me, it feels like I'm coming home' (509, 'Liquid Heat'), Bette tells Tina. Holloman later discusses this scene: 'right after the take I just started weeping, and it was just so much that Tina had to be sorry for, and er, I love the line [looks to Beals], "it feels like coming home"' [applause from audience].

[28]

[41] The visual register of eye contact draws a circle around the feeling of home. YouTube videos are replete with exchanges of looks. All this looking could recall a Western view of recognition, such as Simone de Beauvoir's ([1949] 1997) observation that the 'supreme goal of human love, as of mystical love, is identification with the loved one' (663). But identification has always entailed a dialectical relation of objectification. In Bette and Tina fan vidding suggest the contrary; identification gives way to a form of recognition that is an affirmative expression in which 'affirming one's own becoming is maximized in the affirmation of the becoming of others' (Colebrook 2008, 88). Bette and Tina's regard for one another emerges through their affirmative expression of feeling, in which their 'respective multiplicities may intermingle and form a new multiplicity' (Buchanan 2004, 10).

[42] The sonorous envelope of the love song's lyrics, melody and voice draws an acoustic circle to express Bette and Tina love. The sonorous blocks of music put the viewer in an expressive zone of contact with the permeable membrane between the orders of movement that belong respectively to the character and the actor. The rhythm of the skin of feeling organises the 'limited space' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 311) amplified by viewers' screens. The dramatic emotion of leaving and being left, coming together and falling apart, is expressed by the accents of the rhythms and melodies of the love song. Songs from the lesbian music scene^[29] amplify the expression of intimacy as lesbian. The love song 'territorializes via seizing hold of milieu—radio waves and other media milieu for one thing—and transforming them into new qualities of expression' (Bertelsen and Murphie 2013). Digital 'flows wrap around the monads and from their meeting a refrain comes out, an act of subjectivization, that moves towards the meeting of other refrains in the network (polyphonic composition)' (Lazzarato quoted in Campanelli 2010, 21).

[43] Finally, the drawing of the circle is opened, '[a]s though the circle tended on its own to open onto a future, as a function of the working forces it shelters' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 312). '[S]onorous, gestural, motor lines ... begin to bud "lines of drift" with different loops, knots, speeds, movements, gestures, and sonorities' (311-312). The lesbian refrain of feeling in love is always interrupted by an outside. The phone rings, an email arrives, the video ends. The interruption moves the body from a lesbian-becoming to another world. The becoming of the body that is otherwise 'stolen' (Protevi 2008, 189; see Deleuze and Guattari 1984, 1987) is sustained only as an assemblage territorialisation.

[44] In writing 'L-O-V-E_L-E-S-B-I-A-N';^[30] 'Lesbian love is the best Love';^[31] 'I enjoy lesbian love';^[32] viewers accent sexual meaning with identity. The accent of sexual identity gestures towards a difference from heterosexual aesthetics. Even if that difference only takes the form of a woman's investment in a different idea of reciprocity, it is this difference in thinking and feeling that is at stake in sexual difference. Love's repetitive form is collectively reanimated by a lesbian way of relating. This minor change could open a major alteration in sexual ethics: a way of relating, a betweenness between bodies that is not intimated through men or the heterosexual body, but appears like 'a publicness that corresponds to an expanding interiority' (Berlant 2001, 443). Viewers' comments appear as traces of the affective temporalities of lesbian love that might propel further difference in the heterosexual order of intimate life.

Becoming-lesbian loving Bette and Tina

I feel that I am becoming-lesbian.
That's my victory.
— Chrysanthi Nigianni 2009, 181.

[45] Deleuze and Guattari describe the 'Lover's Refrain' as that which 'territorializes the sexuality of the loved one' (1987, 237). The refrain of loving Bette and Tina can be thought in these terms, as a refrain of feeling that makes possible a lesbian-becoming in which lesbian love deterritorialises (hetero)sexuality's territorialisation and territorialises relations between lover and loved. The territorialisation of intimacy between women is affirmative. Hence, Bette and Tina draw out the sexual specificity of love not through dialectical identification but through affirmation of the becoming between their characters.

[46] Heterosexual viewers' joke that they would 'go gay for ...'^[33] partakes in this potential movement of becoming-lesbian. It is implicit that queer and lesbian viewers are becoming-lesbian for ... For the lesbian body does not pre-exist love. The feeling body is a conjunction: always sexually specific, subjected, feeling as in relation *with*. Love is never universally *the same* between two others—particularly two women—but always an embodiment of feeling accompanied by an imaginary that is sexually specific, as well as particular to a particular person. If we can only conceptualise *this* or *that* body, what this or that body *can do* (Deleuze 1988), we might wish to think what *a body in love* can do—what this or that thought or feeling allows a body in love to do. Bodies in love, thoughts and feelings in love, open themselves to the possibility of becoming-lesbian.

[47] Bette and Tina's refrain of feeling encompasses a world with which to make love. In the heterosexist imaginary, women gain subjectivity through love's possessive properties: 'when woman gives herself

completely to her idol, she hopes that he will give her at once possession of herself and of the universe he represents' (Beauvoir 1997, 656). In *Anti-Oedipus* (1984), Deleuze and Guattari understand this acquisition of subjectivity as the provision of Oedipal love and hence appeal to a desubjectifying love, a 'schizo love: love that is material (not representational), social (not familial) and multiple (not personal)' (Protevi 2002, 188). Engagement with *The L Word* in online lesbian media is material, social and multiple. In the most (un)conventional of love's forms, tucked in the folds of the Universal Love Discourse, we find 'the memory of the body they stole from us' (184).

[48] Lost bodies are prevalent in queer theory. Discussing Butler (1997), Ahmed notes that 'heteronormativity demands that the loss of queer love must not be grieved' (2006, 91). This is because 'such loss might not even be admitted as loss, as the possibility of such love is out of reach' (91). Returning to images of feeling, over and over, entails a grieving of lesbian loss. In the lesbian refrain of feeling, we feel our way back. The feelings of viewers are less anticipatory and more retroactive, where lesbian love is always a return to what it was that came before, that was denied. A feeling of being touched by what was stolen. The lesbian refrain of feeling in love is an encounter that is more-than subjective. A world to make love with is a world of mutual becomings; 'an entire war machine through which love passes' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 278).

[49] Even where the sexuality of the loved one is territorialised as lesbian—a sexual identity that is the effect of homophobic epistemology—this territorialisation is simultaneously a deterritorialisation. Heterosexuality makes it necessary to invent 'culture to find the feelings that enable us to act, and to act differently than we have' (Henderson 2013, 166), to foster lines of flight from the heterosexual structure of affect. Fan vidding is an invention of reciprocity with the idea of a world in which women relate through their capacity to love one another. Expressing 'space for action' (Ahmed 2006, 102), loving Bette and Tina puts the 'contingent lesbian' 'in contact with others' (94). Intimate contact takes the form of the conventions of women's television, through which viewers invest psychic energy into a fantasy that soothes through its 'felt simplicity' (Berlant 2008a, 7). The temporal plane of the refrain, 'first, last, forever,' is a moment that traces what is lost and imagines the present as a projection of the future. As such, the refrain eclipses the breakdown in communication between the characters and the failure of their reciprocity that dominates the earlier seasons of the show (see Johnson 2006). This eclipse nevertheless puts viewers into contact as a sociality that blocks out the relations between bodies and images that normalise heterosexual intimacy. *The L Word's* melodramatic emotion aids the expression of other approaches, affective relations that identitarian histories produce but also repress: the forgotten body of the lesbian in love, the fragment of lesbian intimacy. It is through these and other common intensities that Bette and Tina engage one another and their viewer in becoming-love, invoking her minor-becoming, to corporealise and temporalise her potential becoming-lesbian.

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Footnotes

1. "Over and Over Again," YouTube video, 2:37, posted by "tessmovie," date unknown. No longer available on YouTube. Available from author.
2. This was the tagline of the now defunct TiBette website (<http://www.tibette.com>), used repeatedly in *The L Word* online fan culture, including on YouTube.
3. Also see discussions of Deleuze and Guattari's refrain in Ian Buchanan (1997), Claire Colebrook (2002), Grosz (2008), and Lone Bertelsen and Andrew Murphie (2011), for example.
4. On the horizon of sexual difference, see 'Sexed Difference' (in Grosz 1994): 'Sexual difference is the horizon of an entity, an identity, a subject, an other and their relations' (209).
5. See, Monique Wittig's (1992) *"The Straight Mind" and Other Essays*.
6. Maintaining identity norms involves emotional labour that is unequally felt. Hochschild's account of emotional labour is also developed by Ahmed (2010) in her concept of 'the happiness duty' (7). Also see Butler (1997).
7. I thank Ji-Suk Park for pointing me to this.
8. I thank Chrysanthi Nigianni for her discussion with me about this.
9. A note on terminology: *lesbian* is necessarily both the difference in the gendered schema of man / woman—the difference of 'woman'—and the difference in the sexual schema of heterosexual / homosexual—the difference of homosexuality. I am therefore following Teresa de Lauretis (1987) by using the term 'sexual difference' to refer to lesbian difference as gendered and sexual.

10. A number of scholarly discussions on *The L Word* situate the text in terms of its relation to heteronormative television. For an example that focuses on sexuality and perspective, see Candace Moore (2007).
11. Interview with Charlie Rose, 23rd January 2004. «<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5k2l2Pv5y64>»
12. Drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (2002), Ahmed understands 'the normative' as 'the bodily horizon, a space for action, *which puts some objects and not others in reach*' (2006, 66). Ahmed then goes on to claim that the phenomenal place of the normative, as a form of vertical extension, can be 're-described in terms of the straight body, a body that appears "in line"' (66). The vertical line is an effect of a 'process of alignment' (66). To be unaligned is to arrive at the line on an angle—'queer' (67). One is not allowed to merely remain queer but is subject to constant intervention through knowledges that bring 'queer desire back in line' (in Ahmed's example, sexology), which Ahmed calls "'straightening devices'" (71-72).
13. To an extent, in her chapter 'Sexual Orientation' (2006, 65-107), Ahmed can also be seen as developing a critique of the straightening of love. Ahmed engages with love in the traditions of Freudian psychoanalysis, sexology and feminism, particularly through Rich's concept of 'compulsory heterosexuality' (84), which is a form of compulsory loving.
14. Viewed at «<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KKVnpZWDeAk>». Ellipses and grammatical errors have been amended for ease of reading.
15. Viewed at «<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KKVnpZWDeAk>.
16. Viewed at «<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uy8VQHh9aKg>».
17. Viewed at «<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wLP54-2Hmdc>».
18. Kit's loving reassurance was later used as voiceover material to promote the show.
19. In this scene a contradictory position is also taken, as racial and sexual difference are placed on the other, incorporating difference into the marginalised position as opposed to reflecting on mainstream society's capacity to exclude. Tina's concerns about using a black donor reflect this incorporation of difference into the body of the minoritised other: 'And don't you think, on top of everything else, to also have two moms, that is a lot of otherness to put on one child?' she asks Bette. An alternative position would be to recognise the intersection of prejudices—in this sense the scene panders to its normative audience.
20. See Michel Serres (2009), for whom all the senses 'mingle' in the sense of touch.
21. All viewers' comments discussed in this section are taken from Warn (2007), available at «<http://www.afterellen.com/showtime-the-l-word-no-longer-about-lesbians-but-people/06/2007/>».
22. "Bette&tina – water," YouTube video, 5:00, posted by "tessmovie," 29 September, 2008, «<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hADB27GF-Ys&feature=related>». Comment made by eliane9089.
23. Viewed at «<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yuPx2lynSx0>».
24. Viewed at «<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uy8VQHh9aKg>».
25. Viewed at «<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uYBWirtHxSE>».
26. Viewed at «<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mWXrRyo6els>».
27. Viewed at «<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KKVnpZWDeAk>».
28. "L5 Blackpool – The elevator scene and evolving as characters," YouTube video, 3:18, posted by "tibette4ever11," 18 November, 2008, «<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RV3sN1nGYIE>».
29. For example, "No Other Love" by Heart, and "Love and Affection" by Joan Armatrading.
30. Viewed at «<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mWXrRyo6els>».
31. Viewed at «<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OpQLHktcoqA>».
32. Viewed at «<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OpQLHktcoqA>».
33. The notion of 'going gay for' is repeated on YouTube and other online media sites as a straight

expression of affection for a same-sex character. This is taken up by Molly (Clementine Ford) who explains to her mother that she's going 'To go gay for Shane' (508, 'Lay Down the Law').
