Eccentricity, Spectatorial Desire, and *The L Word*: Toward a Theory of Identification

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ABSTRACT

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Katerina Symes

This thesis introduces the concept of "eccentric spectatorship" in order to explore the ways in which Showtime's *The L Word* – a fictional program about lesbian women – may address heterosexual spectators, and how the specificity of one's spectatorial position can *exceed* this address at the level of identification and desire. Using Teresa de Lauretis' formative theory of the "eccentric subject," this thesis will discuss how the effects of one's *excessive* spectatorial position may extend beyond the immediate viewing process; the occupation of an *excessive* spectatorial position is a transformative subjective experience, altering the ways in which spectators make sense of themselves and interact with their social and material reality. To make this argument, this thesis will include a brief case study of *The L Word* in order to explore how the camera work, narrative, and visual images offer heterosexual spectators specific positionalities of identification and desire. This thesis will conclude that an eccentric viewing position not only accounts for spectators' multiple interpretative possibilities, but also acknowledges differences between (and even within) spectators; representations engage viewers differently based on the social, cultural, and subjective (conscious and unconscious) positions within which they are situated. As a result, spectatorial identifications are revealed to be as equally unstable as identity itself.

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For Rose and Wayne

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Table 1.1 – *The L Word* "Pool Scene" Shot Analysis (Pilot Episode)

	Duration (seconds)	Framing	Camera Angle	Camera Movement	Editing	Significant Sound	Other
Shot 1	20	Medium shot of Jenny, profile to frontal view	Straight-on angle; Eye-level height	Pan left, track backwards	Straight cut	Door closing, Dialogue (asynchronous, external diegetic)	Natural lighting, naturalistic mise-en-scène
Shot 2	6	Close-up shot of Jenny (back of head); Medium-long shot of Shane and unknown woman	Straight-on angle; Eye-level height	Handheld; Track right, track down to accommodate Jenny's movement	Straight cut	Dialogue (synchronous, external diegetic)	Natural lighting, naturalistic mise-en-scène
Shot 3	2	Close-up shot of Jenny (hiding behind fence), obstructed frontal view	Straight-on angle; Eye-level height	None	Straight cut	None	Natural lighting, naturalistic mise-en-scène
Shot 4	7	Jenny POV; Internal frame (fence); Medium-long shot of Shane and unknown woman	Jenny POV; Straight-on angle; Eye-level height	Handheld; tilt left and up, tilt right and down	Straight cut	Shane jumping into pool (synchronous, external diegetic)	Natural lighting, naturalistic mise-en-scène
Shot 5	5	Long shot of Shane swimming	Crane shot (high angle; high height)	Tilt down and left to accommodate Shane's movement	Straight cut	Shane jumping into pool (synchronous, external diegetic)	Natural lighting, naturalistic mise-en-scène
Shot 6	2	Close-up shot of Jenny, profile view	Straight-on angle; Eye-level height	Slight tilt left to accommodate Jenny's movement	Straight cut	Shane swimming (asynchronous, external diegetic)	Natural lighting, naturalistic mise-en-scène
Shot 7	4	Jenny POV; Internal	Jenny POV;	Handheld; Tilt	Straight	Unknown woman	Natural

		frame (fence); Medium-long shot of unknown woman	Straight-on to slight high angle; Eye-level height	down, tilt right to accommodate unknown woman's movement	cut	entering pool (synchronous, external diegetic)	lighting, naturalistic mise-en-scène
Shot 8	9	Medium- shot of Shane and unknown woman	Over head crane shot (high height; angle directly down)	Slight tilt up to center Shane and unknown woman in frame	Straight cut	Women swimming and kissing (synchronous, external diegetic)	Natural lighting, naturalistic mise-en-scène
Shot 9	3	Close-up shot of Jenny, profile view	Straight-on angle; Eye-level	Slight tilt left to accommodate Jenny's movement	Straight cut	Women swimming and kissing (asynchronous, external diegetic)	Natural lighting, naturalistic mise-en-scène
Shot 10	8	Jenny POV; Internal frame (fence); Medium-long shot of Shane and unknown woman	Jenny POV; Slight high angle; Eye-level height	Handheld; Track left to accommodate Shane and unknown woman's movement	Straight cut	Women swimming and kissing (synchronous, external diegetic)	Natural lighting, naturalistic mise-en-scène
Shot 11	2	Close-up shot of Jenny, profile view	Straight-on angle; Eye-level height	None	Straight cut	Women having sex (asynchronous, external diegetic)	Natural lighting, naturalistic mise-en-scène
Shot 12	6	Jenny POV; Internal frame (fence); Medium-long shot of Shane and unknown woman	Jenny POV; Straight-on to slight high angle; Eye-level height	Handheld; tilt right, tilt left and down to center Jenny's POV	Straight cut	Women, having sex (synchronous, external diegetic)	Natural lighting, naturalistic mise-en-scène

Shot 13	5	Close-up shot of Jenny, profile to frontal view	Straight-on to slight high angle; eye-level height	Tilt left and down to accommodate Jenny's movement	Straight cut	Women having sex (asynchronous, external diegetic)	Natural lighting, naturalistic mise-en-scène

Table 1.2 – *The L Word* "Jenny and Marina Sex Scene" Shot Analysis (Pilot Episode)

	Duration (seconds)	Framing	Camera Angle	Camera Movement	Editing	Significant Sound	Other
Shot 1	10	Medium long shot of Jenny and Marina kissing, profile/frontal view	High angle	Track right	Straight cut	Non-diegetic music; Kissing (synchronous, external diegetic)	Hard quality, low key lighting; Naturalistic mise-en-scène
Shot 2	7	Medium shot of Jenny and Marina kissing, profile view	Straight-on angle, eye-level height	Handheld	Straight cut	Non-diegetic music; Kissing (synchronous, external diegetic)	Hard quality, low key lighting; Naturalistic mise-en-scène
Shot 3	7	Medium close-up shot of Marina undressing Jenny, frontal view	Straight-on angle, eye-level height	Handheld; Tilt down, then tilt up	Straight cut	Non-diegetic music; Kissing (synchronous, external diegetic)	Hard quality, low key lighting; Naturalistic mise-en-scène
Shot 4	4	Medium close-up shot of Jenny's back, frontal view	Straight-on angle, eye-level height	Handheld; Tilt up and slightly to the left and right to accommodate movement	Straight cut	Non-diegetic music	Hard quality, low key lighting; Naturalistic mise-en-scène
Shot 5	6	Medium close-up shot of Jenny and Marina kissing, profile view	Straight-on angle, eye-level height	Handheld; Tilt slightly to the left and right to accommodate movement	Straight cut	Non-diegetic music; Kissing (synchronous, external diegetic)	Hard quality, low key lighting; Naturalistic mise-en-scène
Shot 6	6	Medium close-up shot of Jenny and Marina kissing,	Straight-on angle, eye-level height	Handheld; Tilt slightly to the left to accommodate	Straight cut	Non-diegetic music; Kissing (synchronous,	Hard quality, low key lighting;

		profile view		movement; Track left		external diegetic)	Naturalistic mise-en-scène
Shot 7	9	Medium close-up shot of Marina removing Jenny's pants, profile/frontal view	High angle to straight-on angle, eye-level height, to high angle	Handheld; Tilt up and to the right, then tilt down and to the left	Straight cut	Non-diegetic music	Hard quality, low key lighting; Naturalistic mise-en-scène
Shot 8	3	Medium close-up of Marina, frontal view	High angle	Handheld	Straight cut	Non-diegetic music	Hard quality, low key lighting; Naturalistic mise-en-scène
Shot 9	7	Medium close-up shot of Jenny touching Marina's lips (profile view)	Straight-on angle, eye-level height	Handheld; Track down and to the left	Straight cut	Non-diegetic music	Hard quality, low key lighting; Naturalistic mise-en-scène
Shot 10	5	Medium close-up shot of Jenny and Marina kissing, straight on view	Straight-on angle, eye-level height	Handheld; Track down	Straight cut	Non-diegetic music	Hard quality, low key lighting; Naturalistic mise-en-scène
Shot 11	8	Medium close-up shot of Jenny and Marina kissing, profile view	Straight-on angle, eye-level height	Handheld	Straight cut	Non-diegetic music; Kissing (synchronous, external diegetic)	Hard quality, low key lighting; Naturalistic mise-en-scène
Shot 12	14	Medium close-up shot of Jenny and Marina kissing and having sex,	High angle	Handheld	Straight cut	Non-diegetic music; Kissing and Jenny moaning	Hard quality, low key lighting; Naturalistic

		profile/frontal view				(synchronous, external diegetic)	mise-en-scène
Shot 13	7	Medium close-up shot of Jenny and Marina kissing and having sex, profile/frontal view	High angle	Handheld; Tilt down to accommodate movement	Straight cut	Non-diegetic music; Kissing and Jenny moaning (synchronous, external diegetic)	Hard quality, low key lighting; Naturalistic mise-en-scène
Shot 14	3	Medium close-up shot of Marina's head between Jenny's legs, profile view	Straight-on angle, eye-level height	Handheld; Tilt down and to the left	Straight cut	Non-diegetic music; Kissing and Jenny moaning/crying (synchronous, external diegetic)	Hard quality, low key lighting; Naturalistic mise-en-scène
Shot 15	3	Medium close-up shot of Jenny and Marina's legs and body, profile/frontal view	High angle	Handheld; Tilt up and to the left	Straight cut	Non-diegetic music Kissing and Jenny moaning/crying (synchronous, external diegetic)	Hard quality, low key lighting; Naturalistic mise-en-scène
Shot 16	6	Medium close-up shot of Jenny crying, profile/frontal view	High angle	Handheld; tilt up and to the left	Straight cut	Non-diegetic music Kissing and Jenny crying (synchronous, external diegetic)	Hard quality, low key lighting; Naturalistic mise-en-scène
Shot 17	5	Medium close-up of Jenny crying, frontal view	High angle	Handheld	Straight cut	Non-diegetic music Kissing and Jenny crying (synchronous, external diegetic)	Hard quality, low key lighting; Naturalistic mise-en-scène

Table 1.3 – *The L Word* "Bette and Tina Sex Scene" Shot Analysis (Pilot Episode)

	Duration (seconds)	Framing	Camera Angle	Camera Movement	Editing	Significant Sound	Other
Shot 1	9	Extreme close-up shot of Bette and Tina kissing, profile view	Straight-on angle, eye-level height	Handheld; Track slightly right	Straight cut	Non-diegetic music; Kissing (synchronous, external diegetic)	Hard quality, low key lighting; Naturalistic mise-en-scène
Shot 2	13	Medium close-up shot of Bette and Tina kissing, profile view	Straight-on angle, eye-level height	Handheld; Tilt down, then tilt up and to the right, then tilt down and to the left	Straight cut	Non-diegetic music; Kissing (synchronous, external diegetic)	Hard quality, low key lighting; Naturalistic mise-en-scène
Shot 3	24	Close-up shot of Bette and Tina kissing, profile view	Straight-on angle, eye-level height	Handheld; Tilt up and slightly to the left	Straight cut	Non-diegetic music; Kissing and dialogue (synchronous, external diegetic)	Hard quality, low key lighting; Naturalistic mise-en-scène
Shot 4	7	Medium close-up shot of Bette and Tina kissing, profile view	Straight-on angle, eye-level height	Handheld; Tilt slightly to the left and right to accommodate movement	Straight cut	Non-diegetic music; Kissing (synchronous, external diegetic)	Hard quality, low key lighting; Naturalistic mise-en-scène
Shot 5	3	Close-up shot of Bette and Tina kissing, profile view	Straight-on angle, eye-level height	Handheld; Tilt to the right	Straight cut	Non-diegetic music; Kissing (synchronous, external diegetic)	Hard quality, low key lighting; Naturalistic mise-en-scène
Shot 6	2	Medium close-up shot of Bette and Tina kissing, profile	Straight-on angle, eye-level height	Handheld; Tilt to the right	Straight cut	Non-diegetic music	Hard quality, low key lighting;

		view					Naturalistic mise-en-scène
Shot 7	2	Close-up shot of Bette and Tina kissing, profile view	Straight-on angle, eye-level height	Handheld; Tilt to the right	Straight cut	Non-diegetic music	Hard quality, low key lighting; Naturalistic mise-en-scène
Shot 8	14	Medium close-up shot of Tina, profile view	Straight-on angle, eye-level height	Handheld; Tilt slightly to the left	Straight cut	Non-diegetic music; Tina moaning and dialogue (synchronous, external diegetic)	Hard quality, low key lighting; Naturalistic mise-en-scène
Shot 9	37	Close-up shot of Bette and Tina kissing and having sex, profile view	Straight-on angle, eye-level height	Handheld; Tilt slight to the left and right to accommodate movement	Straight cut	Non-diegetic music; Tina and Better kissing and moaning (synchronous, external diegetic)	Hard quality, low key lighting; Naturalistic mise-en-scène

Televisual Spectatorship: Between Agency and the Unconscious

It has been four years since its series finale, and academics and fans alike are still talking about *The L Word* – a fictional television program following the lives of a group of lesbian friends living in Los Angeles. The Showtime series began its six-season run in January 2004, and has acquired a broad-based viewership. *The L Word* remains an influential piece of television programming for both popular and queer culture, as it was the first and only show in television history to include lesbian characters as part of the series' primary narrative.

The L Word's marketability to a populous viewing audience[1] has been met with polarizing opinions from fans and scholars within the academy and without[2]. However, much of the attention paid to the show continues to be centered on how the figure of the lesbian is represented. On the one hand, *The L Word* has been celebrated for its representational diversity, offering audiences "positive" portrayals of lesbian characters. On the other hand, the show has been simultaneously condemned as a means by which

[1] The two-hour series premiere of episodes one and two of *The L Word* was watched by approximately 936,000 viewers (http://www.tv.com/shows/the-l-word/pilot-279730/), while the series' finale was the third most-watched episode, drawing 756,000 viewers (http://www.broadcastingcable.com/article/189728_L_Word_Series_Finale_Delivers_For_Showtime.php). Although the viewer ratings for the duration of the series was lower than either the pilot or the series finale, the ratings "spike" for the final episode ostensibly indicates that viewers had been watching all along, albeit not necessarily during the live premiere of each episode.

[2] The academic attention *The L Word* has received indicates that the series is culturally relevant, warranting further analysis. As a result, I have grouped these two categories of viewers together in order to acknowledge the possibility that fans and academics are not mutually exclusive. This grouping is an indication of my own political commitment to not only maintain the study of popular culture as culturally significant, but also challenge the power differentials between academic researcher and fans by suggesting that it *is* possible for academics to be fans of *The L Word*. It was certainly my own adoration of the series that drove me to conduct research on *The L Word*.

the television industry has "cashed-in" on the burgeoning lesbian market. For some, then, the increased visibility of lesbian characters on *The L Word* does not necessarily translate into representational diversity; stereotypical portrayals of "the lesbian" continue to permeate televisual discourse.

Whether the *L Word* is championed or condemned for its representational content, the argument that television programs fail to represent a diversity of lesbianisms is hardly new, or frankly, very interesting. The crude distinction that there are, in fact, qualitatively "good" and "bad" ways to represent the figure of the lesbian unintentionally imagines these normative categories as absolute: that there are widely accepted "good" and "bad" representations. Such theoretical dualisms are predicated on the assumption that the figure of the lesbian is intrinsically meaningful to spectators; there is no consideration of the extent to which differences in spectatorial positioning may affect what "good" and "bad" representations do for certain spectators. While it is not my intention to undercut the political importance of lesbian visibility, such binarized discussions of representational diversity as a matter of who is and is not represented potentially reaffirm normative grounds for recognition; that is to say, it is precisely because lesbian characters are represented within the confines of hegemonic femininity that they are in fact *too* normative, and are therefore not disruptive enough of normative gender categories. As such, this mode of theorizing does not necessarily account for the figure of the lesbian as an object of fantasy or desire for spectators. Rather, the figure of the lesbian is largely discussed as an object of identification, emphasizing the spectator's search for an "accurate" representation of herself; if the spectator does not see herself represented

accurately, she is thus foreclosed from the normative representations of the figure of the lesbian on screen.

This project will attempt to displace the opposition between "positive" and "negative" representations by reintroducing the spectatorial subject as the primary object of inquiry. To accomplish this task, I wish to suspend normative judgments about lesbian representations, especially in relation to the "accuracy" of the representations on *The L Word*. This suspension will provide me with the opportunity to address the ways in which *The L Word* appeals to different audiences, and what the effects of this appeal are for spectators. What is important for my research, then, is to discuss what possibilities for identification *The L Word* offers spectators, and *how* spectators make their identifications meaningful. While I am certainly not the first individual who has made it my aim to explore how spectators engage in processes of identification (as mentioned previously, *The L Word* has garnered much academic attention, with numerous books and articles published on this topic), this task becomes even more complicated when an analysis of how *The L Word* may address female heterosexual spectators is considered the object of this study. It is necessary then for me to begin with a discussion of how spectatorial identifications are currently considered in relation to *The L Word*. In doing so, I will be able to explore how the current literature convinces of the ways in which *The L Word* addresses female heterosexual viewers as spectatorial subjects, offering them specific possibilities for identification and desire.

Much of the literature examining the possibilities for identification *The L Word* offers spectators is couched in the language of "learning." For many television scholars, the televisual medium is considered a form of "travel"; the episodic nature of regularly

scheduled programming encourages spectators to "tune in" once a week, "[introducing] us to people we might otherwise never meet, and [introducing] us to lives and ideas foreign to us" (Gray 55). As Kristen Crites argues in her article "*The L Word*," "we learn what alternative family structures look like, how they function, and how normal they really are… there are people just like us within this world" (125). While Crites does not explicitly use the term identification in her article, her argument touts the supposed "relatability" of homosexual interpersonal relationships by appealing to a humanist discourse; spectators may not share the same sexual orientation as the lesbian characters depicted on *The L Word*, but they are able to relate to the ways in which these fictional characters structure their relationships with one another (124). For Crites, then, *The L Word* offers spectators a glimpse into the lives of lesbian women – a sight with which they may be initially unfamiliar.

Paula Graham makes an argument similar to Crites in her article "*The L Word* Under-Whelms the UK?" emphasizing the universality of emotional experiences. According to Graham the emotional dilemmas facing *The L Word* characters are experiences with which all spectators, regardless of sexual orientation, can identify (19). Graham's argument departs from Crites as she specifically addresses how heterosexual spectators come to identify with and experience lesbian emotional dilemmas. As Graham argues "straight women can also participate in lesbian dilemmas more immediately though identification with straight character Kit Porter's perspective" (19).

While Graham offers a compelling analysis, her use of the term identification lacks conceptual clarity: it is unclear *what*, exactly, spectators are identifying with in Kit. Since Kit is one of the few straight characters on *The L Word,* I can only speculate that

Graham considers her to be an ideal proxy because Kit, like the heterosexual spectator, is a straight woman; that is to say, for Graham, gender is bound to sexuality, excluding female heterosexual spectators from the possibility of identifying with and desiring the lesbian characters (de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender* 2). What is at issue for me, then, is the extent to which Kit's sexual orientation is assumed to be the primary vector through which straight spectators ought to identify. As a result, Graham's theory of spectatorial identification is limited to the spectator's search for herself on screen; spectators identify with Kit because she narrowly approximates the straight viewer's own gendered and sexual identity.

While it may not have been within the scope of Graham's article to introduce an analysis of how Kit's race structures spectatorial identification, this omission forecloses any discussion as to how Kit's racialized identity as a voluptuous black woman (amongst a cast full of thin, white characters) may structure the possibilities for identification offered to spectators differently. As Teresa de Lauretis notes, "the female subject is en-gendered, constructed and defined in gender across multiple representations of class, race, language, and social relations; and that, therefore, differences among women are differences *within* women" (*Technologies of Gender* 139). In other words, it is because each female spectatorial subject is engendered across multiple social relations that she is subjectively engaged by representations differently; not all spectators will identify with the character of Kit in the same way. Thus, one vector or social identity (be it race, gender, class, or sexuality) cannot provide the foundation for a complex theory of spectatorial identification (de Lauretis citing Lorde, *Figures of Resistance* 59). By failing

to account for this difference both between and within spectatorial subjects, Graham unintentionally massifies spectators into an undifferentiated viewing audience.

Several scholars have attempted to overcome this limitation in the literature by acknowledging the possibility for spectators to identify with lesbian characters. In the article "Understand the Queer World of the L-esbian Body: Using *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* to Address the Construction of the Lesbian Body" Daniel Farr and Nathalie Degroult (citing Ciasullo) argue that only a certain "type" of woman embodies "the lesbian" identity on *The L Word*: thin, white, middle-class, feminine, and able-bodied (426). More specifically, the characters' costumes and props serve to de-lesbianize the figure of the lesbian; high heels are a staple in most of *The L Word* characters' stylish wardrobes, and almost all of the women are depicted with perfectly coiffed hair and a full face of make-up (Farr and Degroult 424). This "lipstick" lesbian stereotype renders the masculine "butch" lesbian invisible, constructing the figure of the lesbian as "not a lesbian, but a woman first and foremost" (Farr and Degroult 436).

While Farr and Degroult do not explicitly deploy the term identification, their argument suggests that the creation of a "consumable lesbian" is a way for lesbian characters to become more "palatable" to spectators. More specifically, the spectator is able to visually "consume" the figure of the lesbian because she, like this figure, is first and foremost a woman. Although the spectator and lesbian character may not share the same desire for other women, this figure narrowly approximates the spectator's gendered identity.

Michele Aaron makes an argument similar to Farr and Degroult's in her article "New Queer Cable?: *The L Word*, the Small Screen and the Bigger Picture." According

to Aaron, *The L Word*'s hegemonically feminine characters invite spectators to identify with the figure of the lesbian because this figure narrowly approximates the spectator's own gendered identity. Building on Farr and Degroult's assertion, however, Aaron suggests that this possibility for identification provides spectators with an opportunity to experience "empathy as well as voyeurism" (35).

Although Aaron's as well as Farr and Degroult's theory of the "consumable" lesbian may depart from Graham's analysis by offering an explanation as to how spectators can, in fact, identify with the figure of the lesbian, each theorist's preoccupation with gender identity forecloses the very object that makes *The L Word* different from other shows centering on a cast of women: that is, lesbian sexuality. This focus on gendered identity in academic discourse does not account for the possibility for spectators to experience same-sex desires when watching *The L Word*; it is assumed that the spectator cannot engage in same-sex desires precisely because she would experience an internal contradiction that challenges her identity as a normative heterosexual subject external to the viewing process.

What contributes to this elision is the extent to which the visual image – rather than the spectatorial subject – is given primacy in televisual analyses of *The L Word*. (As mentioned previously, much of the academic literature on *The L Word* is characterized by binary debates between "realistic" and "non-realistic" lesbian representations). As in the cases of Aaron, and Farr and Degroult, analyses of televisual spectatorial identification are limited to a discussion of how gendered identity is visually articulated. Many of Aaron's as well as Farr and Degroult's examples explore how the figure of the lesbian is represented within the confines of hegemonic femininity, unintentionally conflating a

character's gender identity with her sexuality. As a result, there is no discussion of the ways in which the other formal devices such as the camera work and narrative (in addition to the visual images) encourage spectatorial identifications.

Since this emphasis on the visual articulation of gender cannot account for the possibility that heterosexual spectators may experience same-sex desire (or any other form of queer desire, for that matter), processes of identification can only be defined in literal terms as the spectator's search for herself on screen; the spectator is only able to identify with a character who narrowly approximates her own gendered or sexual identity (Mayne 26). In Aaron's analysis specifically, spectators may only adopt an empathetic and distant, voyeuristic viewing position since they cannot identify with a lesbian character's desire for other women. What is at issue for me is the extent to which Aaron's as well as Farr and Degroult's analyses presume that *The L Word* only addresses a particular "type" of heterosexual spectator. This spectator is incapable of viewing *The L Word* with anything but voyeuristic curiosity because it is assumed that *The L Word* can only address her as a normative sexual subject: one who has been inscribed in the current heteronormative structure of identification and desire. For Aaron, and Farr and Degroult, spectatorial identifications require a stable and essential notion of identity (Mayne 27; Minh-ha 215); it is a complete and totalizing process whereby a viewer either engages in processes of identification, or not at all, thus occupying the position of a distanced voyeur.

Aaron's as well as Farr and Degroult's analyses not only foreclose any discussion of how *The L Word* addresses viewers differently based on the social, cultural, and subjective positions within which they are situated, but also undermine the very identity

politics that support *The L Word*: that seeing positive representations of lesbian characters may have transformative effects on cultural norms. Surely, this cannot be the viewing position through which heterosexual women watch *The L Word*. Without the possibility for heterosexual spectators to engage in processes of identification that *exceed* the search for oneself on screen by experiencing same-sex desire, viewing *The L Word* would be disappointing and unsatisfying: in a word, dull. As a result, such theories cannot explain what, exactly, drives heterosexual women to watch *The L Word*; that is, a show about lesbian sexuality.

Although much of the literature discussing spectatorial identification excludes the possibility for spectators to desire lesbian characters, there have been several attempts to develop a more nuanced theory of identification inclusive of spectatorial desire. In the article "Becoming the Homovoyeur: Consuming Homosexual Representations in *Queer as Folk*" Sheri Manuel specifically addresses how spectators identify with and desire homosexual characters. (While Manuel's essay provides a detailed case study of Showtime's *Queer as Folk* – a fictional television program about a group of homosexual men – she asserts that her analysis can be applied to other programs, such as *The L Word*.) According to Manuel, spectators are invited to adopt the position of the "homovoyeur" whereby the spectator "may identify along intersecting lines of sexual orientation, gender, social constraints/privileges, or class… [or] may escape into a fantasy role, imagining themselves as the [gay or lesbian character] to who they have no identification whatsoever" (281).

Unlike much of the literature I addressed previously, Manuel's concept of "homovoyeurism" offers a theory to explain how spectators may come to experience

same-sex desire. For Manuel, spectators are offered a multitude of viewing positions from which they can choose to view *The L Word.* As such, spectators may imagine a lesbian character's desire for other women as their own by adopting a fantasmic viewing position.

Despite this affordance, however, Manuel's concept of homovoyeurism is predicated on the assumption that spectatorship is a largely conscious process; the homovoyeur is able to appropriate cultural texts for her own individual purposes. Manuel overemphasizes the supremacy of the spectator's role in processes of identification. The spectator possesses the capacity to privilege one vector or social identity (i.e., race, gender, class, sexuality) over another in order to identify with any character that approximates the viewer's own identity (Heller 64). As a result, Manuel fails to consider the extent to which the image is already overdetermined with meaning for the spectator; the very possibility (or impossibility) of viewing *The L Word* is dependent on the historical, social, and subjective positions (conscious and unconscious) within which the spectator is situated (de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't* 149).

Candace Moore attempts to provide a more detailed explanation of how spectators can experience same-sex desire. In her articles "Having It All Ways: The Tourist, the Traveler, and the Local in *The L Word*" and "Getting Wet: The Heteroflexibility of Showtime's *The L Word*" Moore suggests that the primary means by which spectators view *The L Word* is through a "tourist's gaze" ("Having It All Ways" 5). Borrowing this concept from Ellen Strain's notion of the "touristic gaze," Moore argues that:

> Media technologies share with tourism the fetishization of the experience of 'being there,' while they simultaneously distance the viewer from the

> 'viewed.' Particularly, characteristics of this 'touristic gaze' are dual positions of *immersion* (the viewer in the drama and *mise-en-scène*) and *distance* (the remove implied by voyeurism). The latter element of the touristic gaze exoticizes the 'other,' and attempts to obtain totalizing knowledges of a people or a place. ("Having It All Ways" 6)

For Moore, then, spectators are invited to adopt a voyeuristic and "touristic" viewing position from which they can safely observe the unfamiliar "*L World*" at a distance. (It must be noted that Moore continues to adopt the language of "learning" and "travel" that has characterized televisual analyses of spectatorial identification). However, Moore maintains that once the voyeur has adopted a "touristic gaze" they are able to engage in fantasy and role-play opportunities through "heteroflexible" spectatorship; the spectator no longer views *The L Word* as a distant and voyeuristic "tourist" but adopts the position of a temporary "traveller" within the "*L World*" ("Having It All Ways" 6). Thus, "through heteroflexibility, straight viewers gain access to the 'local' imaginary, sharing in the queer sensibility" (Moore, "Having It All Ways" 20).

Moore suggests that spectators can develop this "insider" understanding of the "*L Word*" through the subjective entry point of Jenny Schecter (played by Mia Kirshner): a heterosexual character proxy for the straight spectator ("Having It All Ways" 11). Moore maintains that the spectator is introduced to the "*L World*" through the character of Jenny, who is initially, like the heterosexual spectator, a "straight" voyeur. Like most of the characters depicted in the show, Jenny is also a hegemonically feminine woman,

which makes her more "relatable" to the heterosexual spectator; Jenny approximates the straight viewer's own gendered and sexual identity (Moore, "Getting Wet" 124).

In addition to this supposed "relatability" of Jenny's gendered and sexual identity, Moore argues that the camera work invites spectators to adopt Jenny's "look" as their own. Citing the infamous pool scene in the pilot episode, Moore recounts the moment at which Jenny (along with the spectator) is introduced to the "local" imaginary of the "*L World.*" According to Moore:

> Jenny approaches the bamboo fence bordering the neighbor's pool to glimpse mop-haired Shane (Katherine Moennig) unbuttoning her white shirt and throwing it carelessly to the side. Another woman pulls her blue floral-print dress over her head. Embarrassed, Jenny ducks, and the camera cuts to a shot of empty slats between the bamboo stalks, her voyeuristic gaze. The subsequent reverse shot, from Jenny's point of view, sutures the spectator's gaze to hers and frames the naked women in the fence's vertical structure. ("Having It All Ways" 3)

As indicated by Moore, this shot-reverse-shot technique "invites new potential heterosexual fans to take touristic pleasure in lesbian sex from the 'straight' perspective to which they are accustomed" ("Having It All Ways" 10). In other words, since Jenny, like the heterosexual spectator, is also a "'straight' tourist," the camera work encourages spectators to adopt Jenny's mode of looking as their own (Moore, "Having It All Ways" 8). For Moore, then, the straight viewer is able to watch this lesbian sex scene safely from Jenny's own distant and voyeuristic viewing position.

As the first season unfolds, however, Jenny's sexuality is revealed to be more "flexible"; Jenny struggles with her sexual identity as she is forced to choose between her fiancée, Tim, and her new lesbian lover, Marina. For Moore, this "queering" of Jenny's "straight" perspective subsequently "queers" the spectator's mode of viewing; since spectators have gained entry into the "*L World*" through the character of Jenny, initially accepting her eye line as their own, Jenny's character now offers straight viewers a "safely ambiguous place" from which to experiment ("Having It All Ways" 10). In other words, heterosexual spectators are presented with the opportunity to adopt Jenny's desire for other women as their own (Moore, "Having It All Ways" 8). Moore maintains that this heteroflexible viewing position challenges heteronormative models of deriving pleasure from seeing that has characterized televisual analyses of spectatorial identification; heteroflexible spectatorship not only recognizes that spectators can, indeed, experience same-sex desire, but also reveals "viewers' identities, if only at the level of imagination, [as] a great deal more fluid" ("Having It All Ways" 20).

Unlike many of the theorists discussed previously, Moore acknowledges the potential for spectators to experience same-sex desire through heteroflexibility. It must be noted, however, that Moore's concept of heteroflexibility articulates a specific stage set of fantasy. More specifically, Moore argues that Jenny's voyeuristic and "touristic gaze" from behind the fence is the primary means through which the spectator gains entry into this unfamiliar "*L World*." While this heteroflexibility *does* offer spectators one viewing position within the "*L World*," Moore unintentionally confines spectators' experiences of same-sex desire to their interaction with the screen; it is precisely because Moore refers to this voyeuristic gaze as "touristic" that limits her ability to address the ways in which

spectators' experiences of same-sex desire may extending beyond the immediate viewing process. For Moore, the "tourist" can always return "home." However, as I will argue, the heterosexual spectator may in fact find her original "home" inhospitable after watching and *enjoying* a show about lesbian sexuality, which is to say that the spectator's experiences of same-sex desire may influence how she makes sense of herself outside of her engagement with *The L Word.*

Although Moore's theory does not account for the ways in which a heteroflexible viewing position may affect the spectator's own subjectivity, the literature indicates that this shortcoming partly stems from the fact that many of *The L Word's* lesbian characters are played by heterosexual actresses. As Rebecca Beirne (citing Inness) notes, the characters' desire for other women is "titillation without threat as there is an implicit understanding that these are not 'real' lesbians" (12). In other words, the same-sex desires articulated on *The L Word* are both fictional and performative; the actresses are merely playing the role of a lesbian who desires other women (Chung 100). The implication for spectators is that they are able to return to a completely "heterosexual" state outside of the fiction "*L World*." Consequently, this fantasmic mode of viewing offered to spectators through heteroflexibility not only presumes spectators' desires as static and unchanging, but also conceptualizes spectatorial identification as a complete and totalizing process; a viewer either engages in processes of identification fully, or not at all, thus occupying the position of an ultimately unaffected "dreamer."

I also question the extent to which spectators are only able to experience same-sex desire through the subjective entry point of another "straight" tourist (who is, according to Moore, the only appropriate "stand-in" for the heterosexual spectator) ("Having It All

Ways" 8). More specifically, Moore's assertion that Jenny is an ideal proxy by which spectators gain entry into the "*L World*" unravels when a discussion of fans' reception to the character is considered; although Jenny may approximate the spectator's own gendered and sexual identity, she is one of the most despised characters on the show. (One needs only to conduct a quick Google search to find numerous blog posts and discussion forums expressing contempt for Jenny; she is the "bitch" *The L Word* fans – heterosexual and homosexual – "love to hate"). Is it really so conclusive that Jenny is the most appropriate means by which heterosexual spectators gain entry into the "*L World*"?

Similarly, Moore's theory of heteroflexible spectatorship does not provide a satisfactory response to spectators' fascination with Shane McCutcheon (played by Katherine Moennig) – *The L Word's* fan favourite lesbian. Unlike Jenny, Shane is an androgynous, womanizing nymphomaniac; she does not necessarily approximate the "straight" viewer's own gendered and sexual identity. Yet, Shane's iconic status amongst *The L Word* fans (specifically, heterosexual spectators) has spawned a devout following and a plethora of Shane-themed merchandise, including a t-shirt with the pertinent slogan: "I'd go Gay for Shane." This fan phenomenon reveals that spectatorial identifications are not solely determined by the ways in which *The L Word* addresses heterosexual spectators; it *is* possible for spectatorial identifications to *exceed* the search for oneself on screen.

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The goal of this project is twofold. First, this thesis will explore the ways in which *The L Word* may address heterosexual spectators, and how the specificity of one's spectatorial position can *exceed* this address at the level of identification and desire.

Second, this thesis will discuss how the effects of one's *excessive* spectatorial position may extend beyond the immediate viewing process. As I will suggest, the occupation of an *excessive* spectatorial position is a transformative subjective experience, altering the ways in which spectators make sense of themselves and interact with their social and material reality. As a result, this thesis will begin where Moore's concludes: that voyeurism not only provides spectators with a "heteroflexible" viewing position within the "*L World*," but also has constitutive effects on the spectator's subjectivity both during and after the immediate viewing process (de Lauretis, *Practice of Love* 125).

This thesis seeks to emphasize the contradictions in heterosexual identity in order to decenter normativity and the very category of heterosexuality. I will attempt to account for a feminist subject that is not only attentive to the processual nature of subject formation, but also reflexive of difference and contradiction. While reintroducing the heterosexual spectatorial subject as my primary object of inquiry is a conscious attempt to avoid the trappings of discussing lesbian representations as either "good" or "bad," the challenge of this project will be to define what I mean by spectatorial identification, making clear who, exactly, the spectatorial subject *is*.

Toward a Theory of Televisual Spectatorial Identification

The term "identification" is a widely used concept deployed in televisual analyses of spectatorship. However, as indicated above, this term often lacks conceptual clarity: it is unclear with what, exactly, spectators are identifying, and how this process of identification takes place. Much of this conceptual imprecision stems from how the spectatorial subject is defined. According to Judith Mayne, theories of spectatorship

center on complicated negotiations between defining the spectator as either the "viewer" or "subject" of a film whereby the "viewer" is "the real person who watches" and the "subject" is "the position supposedly assigned to the film viewer by the institutions of the cinema" (8).

Current televisual models for theorizing spectatorship are indebted to Cultural Studies contributions on the "active" spectator. More specifically, Cultural Studies theorists have attempted to challenge the idea that the spectator is merely a "passive" subject positioned by the cinematic apparatus (Mayne 8). With the development of more empirically-based audience research and reception studies, televisual models of spectatorship emphasize the importance of what spectators are actively *doing* with a cultural text by observing spectators' responses to viewing a particular program; the spectator is a *real* viewer, rather than a "passive" subject who is assigned a singular viewing position by the institutions of the cinema (Mayne 54; 62). As spectatorial agents, televisual viewers are able to "read against the grain" and resist being interpellated by dominant ideology, appropriating cultural texts for their own individual purposes; there is an understanding that viewers are able to engage in processes of identification differently based on the specific gendered, racial, class, and sexual positions within which they are situated (Chauduri 42-43).

As Cultural Studies theorists attempted to address what was perceived as an emphasis on processes of interpellation and inscription in psychoanalytic film theory, the spectator, rather than the cinematic institution, became the primary object of study. However, the capacity for spectators to "choose" how they identify with and appropriate cultural texts assumes that spectatorial identification is a largely conscious process,

overemphasizing the supremacy of spectators' roles in meaning production (Stacey 38-39). According to Judith Mayne "the notion of the unconscious seems to have become purely instrumental, referring to how individuals unconsciously assume the attributes of subjectivity and ideology in a given culture" (61). For Cultural Studies' theorists, then, psychoanalytic theories of spectatorship are merely extensions of early apparatus film theory, which conceptualizes the spectator as a monolithic and homogeneous subject. Thus, the unconscious is assumed to be synonymous with dominant ideology, erecting a misconceived dichotomy between external events as something "real," and internal, unconscious events as "unreal" (de Lauretis citing Rose, *Figures of Resistance* 161). It is this rejection of the unconscious in Cultural Studies accounts of spectatorship that unintentionally privileges the "rational" status associated with conscious thought.

This elision of the unconscious has several implications for exploring the complicated ways in which heterosexual spectators watch a show like *The L Word*. More specifically, Cultural Studies theories of spectatorship and ethnographic methodologies are unable to account for the relationship between the unconscious and heterosexual spectators' experiences of same-sex desire. *The L Word*'s appeal (that is, lesbian sexuality) may be largely unconscious for spectators who identify as "straight" as this contradictory experience of same-sex desire may be repressed or displaced during conscious modes of viewing.

The rejection of the unconscious in current televisual analyses of spectatorship cannot account for the complexities of the spectator's subjectivity at the level of gender and sexuality; the spectator's gendered or sexual identity are not the sole determinants of her possibilities for identification and desire. While Moore's analysis suggests that *The L*

Word provides avenues for heterosexual identification (i.e., through the heterosexual proxy of Jenny during the "pool scene"), spectators may also watch in very different ways that are unanticipated not only by the modes of address in the show, but also by heterosexual spectators themselves. A show like *The L Word* presumes, at the very least, a spectatorial subject that is interested in a show about lesbian women. However, without an analysis of spectatorial desire as a psychic and unconscious mechanism, processes of identification can only be defined in literal terms as the search for oneself on screen.

Psychoanalytic theories of spectatorship have much to contribute to the development of a more nuanced understanding of televisual spectatorial identifications as something *other* than the search for oneself. In their book *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, Jean Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis define identification as a "[p]sychological process whereby the subject assimilates an aspect, property or attribute of the other and is transformed, wholly or partially, after the model the other provides. It is by means of a series of identifications that the personality is constituted and specified" (205). As indicated by Laplanche and Pontalis, spectators are not necessarily conscious of the ways in which they are engaging in processes of identification during their immediate viewing of a film or television program. Instead of a complete and totalizing search for oneself on screen, Laplanche and Pontalis' theory of spectatorial identification is processual and incomplete; identification is not predicated on the spectator's ability to identify her total "self" in another character on screen. Rather, there can be partial identifications, such as the identification with particular attributes (be they a mode of dress, a behavioural attribute, a part of the body, or even a gesture or an expression), or there can also be identification with the camera and the spectator's own position of "looking" (Metz 56).

This partial and incomplete nature of identification outlined by Laplanche and Pontalis serves as a critical departure from popular televisual definitions of identification as the search for oneself on screen. As such, spectatorial identifications can be conceptualized as a series of shifting and contradictory positions, revealing this process to be as equally unstable as identify itself (Mayne 27).

While televisual analyses of spectatorial identification often exclude an examination of the unconscious, it is challenging to analyze the psychic mechanisms at work through ethnographic methodologies; spectators are not necessarily conscious of the process by which they engage in spectatorial identifications. Thus, it is the work of theorizing the specificity of one's own spectatorial position that will not only account for this methodological shortcoming, but also reconceptualize televisual spectatorial identification as something that may *exceed* the search for oneself onscreen. As Mayne notes:

> [The] notion of a subject position is crucial to the rethinking of cinematic identification – the notion, that is, that when I enter the movie theatre and take my seat, I have already, on several levels (conscious as well as unconscious), engaged in an identificatory process. I have assumed a place within the cinematic apparatus, I have accepted its fictions, whether self-consciously or not. The cinematic institution positions me long before I have "identified" with a favorite actor or character. (26-27)

For heterosexual spectators, then, coming to watch *The L Word* always already involves a process of identification. This acquisition of a specific viewing position by the spectatorial subject not only accounts for spectators' multiple interpretive possibilities,

but also challenges the supposed supremacy of the "active" (and largely conscious) Cultural Studies viewer during meaning production (Stacey 38-39). The viewing process is not a neutral one; each spectator brings her own social, cultural, and subjective experiences with which to interpret the events on screen, offering spectators different affordances and constraints in terms of identification and desire. Consequently, ethnographic methodologies may not necessarily reveal the complicated manner in which female heterosexual spectators may view a show like *The L Word*.

Television: A Social Technology and Signifying Practice

If spectators are neither passive subjects, nor "free" acting viewers, what are the ways in which the television apparatus addresses them as social subjects? How does this process of spectatorial positioning influence spectators' subjective formations? In order to explore how television, like the cinema, engages viewers subjectively, I will turn to de Lauretis formative theory of the cinema as both a social technology – "a working of the codes (a machine, institution, apparatus producing images and meanings for, and together with, a subject's vision)" – and a signifying practice – "a work of semiosis, which engages desire and positions the subject in the very process of vision, looking, and seeing" (*Alice Doesn't* 59). Since I have made it my task to recognize spectatorship as the intersection between "viewers" and "subjects," I have excluded the term "audience(s)" from my proceeding discussion; this term tends to massify spectators into an undifferentiated viewing population, failing to account for difference between, and even within, spectators' possibilities for identification.

In her seminal text *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* de Lauretis describes the cinema as a semiotic and material apparatus through which the individual is not only addressed as subject, but also formed by her provisional encounter with historical formations and codes. According to de Lauretis, "the social being is constructed day by day as the point of articulation of ideological formations, an always provisional encounter of subject and codes at the historical (therefore changing) intersection of social formations and her or his personal history" (*Alice Doesn't* 14). For de Lauretis, the extent to which spectators engage in processes of subjective formation through viewing is influenced by how they are positioned in relation to ideology; that is to say, images are not neutral objects of pure perception, but rather *significant* images. As de Lauretis argues, "each person goes to the movies with a semiotic history, personal and social, a series of previous identifications by which she and he are historical subjects, continuously engaged in a multiplicity of signifying practices" (*Alice Doesn't* 145). Thus, the image is already overdetermined for the spectator, affording her a specific viewing position from which to "look," interpret, and identify with that which is represented on screen.

While the spectator is not a "free" agent who can simply "choose" how representations address and engage her personally and subjectively, the process by which the spectator attributes meaning to images is neither fixed, nor entirely conscious. Rather, this process of meaning attribution is both continuous and provisional; although the codes and social formations of the cinema may define positions of meaning for the spectator, she is able to rework those positions into a personal and subjective construction (de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't* 14). In other words, through the spectator's engagement with the

cinema "one places oneself or is placed in social reality, and so perceives and comprehends as subjective (referring to, even originating in, oneself) those relations – material, economic, and interpersonal – which are in fact social and, in larger perspective, historical" (de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't* 159). This "placement" engenders the spectator in a series of social relations, providing the spectator with the opportunity to attribute particular meanings, values, and affective significance to the image. It is during this process of meaning attribution that the spectator experiences the creation of a sense of "self" that is formed in relation to the world external to the viewing process and the images on screen. Thus, the spectator's personal and subjective experiences both inform and are informed by her engagement with the image on screen; the complex nexus of effects between the social, historical, and subjective (conscious and unconscious) experiences offers the spectator particular viewing positions and self-images (de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't* 37).

Although there are differences between television and the cinema (the space within which viewing occurs, and the episodic and serialized nature of television programming, offers television and cinema spectators different modes of engagement) both forms of spectatorship can be viewed as processes of subjectification. Like the cinema, the televisual apparatus offers a particular vantage point from which spectators can view the images on screen (one that often fits within the current ideological framework). However, each individual spectator is able to engage with images differently based on the social, historical, and subjective (conscious and unconscious) positions within which they are situated. This difference provides the spectator with the opportunity to interpret the image through the lens of her own experience; the image is

interpreted as subjective (whereby the spectator appears to attributes what appears to be her own meaning, values, and affective significance to the image), but it is, at the same time, profoundly social and historical. It is during this process of meaning attribution that the spectator not only experiences the creation of a sense of "self" but also assists in this process of her self-creation.

Eccentric Spectatorship

While the televisual apparatus may define positions of meaning for the spectator, de Lauretis' theory of the cinema as a social technology and a signifying practice acknowledges the possibility for the spectator to rework those positions through the particularity of her own personal and subjective experience; what the spectator experiences intimately as her own is also a social and historical construction. How, then, does *The L Word* address heterosexual spectators? What possibilities for identification does this process of spectatorial positioning offer spectators, and what do spectatorial identifications *say* about the ways in which spectators come to understand their sense of "self" and the world around them? In order to answer this question, it is necessary for me to consider the extent to which spectatorial identifications are binding forces, revealing the ways in which spectators are always already implicated in the ideology of heterosexuality.

Before I begin, it must be noted that the language used in the literature to discuss spectatorship is limited; the categories of "heterosexual spectator" and "the lesbian" are often deployed as self-evident concepts. For the purpose of my argument, I will continue to use this terminology when critically engaging with the literature. However, when I am

using the term "heterosexual spectator" or "the lesbian," I will be referring to an operation of power where by the spectator is positioned in a totalizing manner through an ideological address; the spectatorial subject is assumed to be a stable and undifferentiated figure. I have attempted to make this important distinction through the use of scare quotes.

As referenced above, much of the current literature discussing the ways in which *The L Word* addresses heterosexual spectators is divided into two general modes of analysis. The first camp conceptualizes heterosexual modes of viewing *The L Word* as entirely normative, discussing women's consumption of fashion, glamour, and beauty in their "identification" with the hegemonically feminine characters on the show. Consequently, this mode of analysis assumes that *The L Word* only addresses the spectator as a normative heterosexual subject, constructing the spectator as one who is incapable of experiencing same-sex desire.

Addressed as a normative heterosexual subject, the spectator is offered positionalities of identification and desire that are bound to sexual difference; she may only adopt a distant, voyeuristic viewing position because it is assumed that she cannot identify with a lesbian character's desire for other women. Here, identification is defined in literal terms; the spectator must identify with a character that approximates her own gendered or sexual identity. The most appropriate way for "heterosexual spectators" to engage in processes of identification then is through the show's heterosexual characters: specifically, Jenny and Kit. (It must be noted both Jenny and Kit are initially introduced as heterosexual women. As the series develops, however, Kit remains the only primary heterosexual character on *The L Word,* while Jenny ultimately identifies as a lesbian). As

a result, the spectator can only identify with the figure of the lesbian insofar as she can "see" a part of her *gendered* "self" in that character, be it the character's clothing, hair, make-up, etc. This process unintentionally conflates a character's sexuality with her gendered identity, and *The L Word* ultimately fails to "queer" the very content of normative gender ideology.

This ability to see her "self" represented affords the spectator specific pleasures and privileges; she is addressed as a coherent social subject, and is able to take comfort in that recognition. In other words, the spectator has been successfully interpellated into the heteronormative structure of identification and desire; she has been inscribed by the ideology of heterosexuality, which has completely determined her spectatorial viewing position. Addressed in this way, the spectator is free from experiencing an internal contradiction between her identifications and sexual identity external to the viewing process.

The second mode of analysis *does* recognize the possibility for spectators to experience same-sex desire. By adopting a fantasmic mode of viewing, the "heterosexual spectator" is drawn into the narrative and is able to identify with queer subject positions. More specifically, the spectator is able to imagine a "lesbian" character's desires as her own. However, this notion of fantasy often confines the spectator's experience of same-sex desire to the immediate viewing process; any same-sex desire the spectator experiences (if at all) has no bearing on her subjectivity. This desire is temporary, and it does not affect how the spectator makes sense of her "self" as a heterosexual subject. The assumption, then, is that the spectator is able to temper the internal contradiction that

arises between her fantasmic experiences of same-sex desire and her avowed sexual identity.

Although the academic attention exploring the ways in which *The L Word* addresses heterosexual spectators has been largely normative, I question the extent to which this is the only means by which *The L Word* may address heterosexual spectators. I am convinced that there is something *else* at work: that there exists a spectatorial subject who is both inside and outside the ideology of heterosexuality – one who is not only able to experience same-sex desire, but who is also conscious of this twofold pull, this "double vision" (de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender* 10). But what does it mean, then, to identify as a heterosexual woman and to engage in processes of identification and desire that *exceed* the limits of heterosexuality itself? To what extent does a spectator's position in relation to the ideology of heterosexuality allow her to *exceed* the ways in which *The L Word* addresses her as a heterosexual subject? In order to posit the existence of this *other* spectatorial position, I will turn to de Lauretis' theory of the "eccentric subject."

In her essay "Eccentric Subjects" de Lauretis asserts that an *eccentric* subjectivity is a theory of the unconscious as excess (*Figures of Resistance* 162). According to de Lauretis, "to understand the unconscious 'as a point of resistance' and to take into account its specific ability to *exceed* the mechanisms of social determination can lead to the realization of another crucial aspect of agency" (*Figures of Resistance* 162). For de Lauretis, then, this *eccentric* subjectivity is a point of psychic resistance; it is "a point of view, or an eccentric discursive position outside the male (hetero)sexual monopoly of power/knowledge – which is to say, a point of view *excessive* to, or not contained by, the sociocultural institution of heterosexuality" (*Figures of Resistance* 163). It is in this

moment the individual recognizes that her "self" does not align with the dominant ideology by which she (as a social subject) is being "hailed" or addressed. This *eccentric* subject position is thus also a site of consciousness; the ideological message fails to completely determine the individual's subjective formation.

This interstitial space both inside and outside the ideology of heterosexuality is riddled with contradiction and anxiety for the spectator; there is significant *dis*pleasure in failing to see oneself represented. Despite these alienating effects, this *eccentric* position *does* offer the spectator a different kind of pleasure, one that occurs through the acquisition of a critical and reflexive consciousness of *not* being "recognized." Here the spectatorial subject must come to terms with the knowledge that she is not the spoken subject; although she has been shaped by the ideology of heterosexuality, she does not fit within its current normative structure of identification and desire.

This rejection of the institution of heterosexuality and the spectator's refusal to center herself within in it is as much a moment of potentiality as it is a moment of contradiction and anxiety. The agential efficacy of this *eccentric* subject position requires the capacity to move beyond the conceptual constraints associated with the binary terms "heterosexuality" and "homosexuality" (de Lauretis, *Figures of Resistance* 162). Rather than an "incomplete" or "unachieved" heterosexuality, then, this *eccentric* subjectivity is *excessive*; it is something *other* than the category of heterosexuality itself (de Lauretis, *Figures of Resistance* 180). As such, the spectator is offered the possibility to "re-anchor" her "self" in a multitude of discursive positions; she is at once heterosexual, and *not quite* heterosexual (de Lauretis, *Figures of Resistance* 172). The contradictory and uneasy existence of the spectator's "self" in multiple locations undermines any notion of her

avowed sexual identity external to the viewing process as one that is singular, coherent, or completely determined (de Lauretis, *Figures of Resistance* 172). This *eccentric* subject position is one that is shifting; it is always already in a state of flux.

In this moment of *eccentric* recognition, the spectator realizes that her experience of same-sex desire does not align with her sense of "self" as a normative heterosexual subject. She recognizes her "self" as a distinct subject, one that does not fit within the confines of the current heteronormative structure of identification and desire. She is at the same time both inside and outside the ideology of heterosexuality, *feeling* the effects of this twofold ideological "pull." This self-displacement, this continual dislocation is accompanied by an epistemological shift, one that involves both the corporeal and psychic "self"; it is a shift in consciousness (de Lauretis, *Figures of Resistance* 74). It is in this contradictory moment that the spectator not only experiences the creation of an *eccentric* sense of "self," but also assists in this process of her self-creation. As a result, spectatorial identifications are revealed to be as equally unstable as identity itself (Mayne 27).

Spectatorial identifications perform a crucial role in the formation of a spectator's *eccentric* subjectivity. Although the spectator may be addressed as a normative heterosexual subject, this address does not solely determine the spectator's possibilities for identification and desire. The address "speaks" to each individual spectator differently based on the social, cultural, and subjective (conscious and unconscious) positions within which she is situated, offering her a specific spectatorial position. The specificity of this spectatorial positioning offers the spectator the possibility to engage in processes of identification and desire that *exceed* the current heteronormative structure – a structure

that is predicated on the maintenance of sexual difference. As such, the spectator is able to not only engage in spectatorial identifications that *exceed* the search for her "self" of screen, but also experience same-sex desire. It is this experience of same-sex desire that transforms the spectator's subjectivity (consciously and unconsciously), re-orienting her relationship to her past and present viewing experiences (White 197). This shift in the spectator's subjectivity points to the existence of another spectatorial position that is *excessive* to the limits of heterosexuality. The spectator's subjectivity is complex at the level of gender and sexuality, constructing her spectatorial position as one that is eccentric to her interpellation. Thus, the specificity of one's spectatorial positioning has the potential to *exceed* the ways in which *The L Word* may address the spectator as a normative heterosexual subject; sexuality is no longer solely constitutive of identity, but is inextricably linked to gender.

In order to distinguish this process as something *other*, something that *exceeds* the category of heterosexuality, I have borrowed de Lauretis' terminology and termed it "*eccentric*." This concept of *eccentricity* serves as a critical departure from popular televisual definitions of identification as seeing a part of oneself in a character. Rather than a complete and totalizing search for oneself on screen, *eccentric* identifications are processual and incomplete; they are binding forces, revealing the ways in which we are positioned in relation to ideology. This theory of *eccentricity*, then, is one of potentiality; it is an investigation of the process by which spectators become *eccentric* subjects – a subject that is always *becoming*.

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My preoccupation with eccentricity, then, is to address the fissures and moments of *excess* in the visual and narrative dimensions of *The L Word* in order to acknowledge the existence of a contradictory spectatorial subject that is unaccounted for by current televisual analyses of spectatorship. As I will continue to argue, there is a specific "type" of heterosexual subject that watches and enjoys *The L Word* at the outset – one who is able to experience same-sex desire precisely because she is always already *excessive* to the category of heterosexuality itself. Perhaps, then, it is a condition of possibility of the show that one steps outside of the normative heterosexuality, if only at the level of fantasy. As such, this spectator is not solely determined by the institution of heterosexuality, but is rather, at the same time, both inside and outside of it. In a word, she is *eccentric*.

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In the following pages, this thesis will develop a theory of eccentric potentiality in order to explore how the specificity of one's spectatorial positioning may *exceed* the ways in which one is addressed by *The L Word* as a heterosexual subject, revealing the instability of both identity, and processes of identification and desire. This research will engage with feminist film theories of spectatorship alongside Cultural Studies' contributions on the "active" viewer by acknowledging spectators as both social and psychic subjects. More specifically, I will explore the ways in which the internal, psychic mechanisms and unconscious processes (i.e., desire and fantasy) at work in the spectator influence and are influenced by the external, social and cultural positions (i.e., race, gender, class, sexuality) within which the spectator is situated, ultimately structuring spectators' possibilities for identification. By reintroducing questions of the unconscious,

this research seeks to not only challenge the privileged and "rational" status associated with conscious thought, but also address the complex process by which spectators, as gendered and sexual subjects, make sense of and articulate their identifications beyond their immediate engagement with *The L Word* (Mayne 37).

Incorporating this interdisciplinary approach, chapter one will begin with my own *eccentric* account of the infamous "pool scene" from season one of *The L Word.* By retroactively outlining the specificity of my own spectatorial position, I will work through the ways in which individual spectators may respond to the different ideological modes of address in the show. This case study will include a formal analysis of the ways in which the camera work, narrative, and visual images engage viewers subjectively, offering spectators eccentric positionalities of identification and desire.

Chapter two will focus on the multiple ways in which spectators respond to the experience of eccentric spectatorship when watching *The L Word*. As I will suggest, eccentric identifications and desires have material and psychic effects that extend beyond the immediate viewing process. To make my argument, this chapter will include a case study of *The L Word*'s fan-favourite, androgynous lesbian Shane McCutcheon (played by Katherine Moennig). This section will not only analyze how the figure of Shane is depicted on screen, but also discuss the ways in which straight-identified spectators have received this character external to the viewing process. I will argue that it is through the ways in which spectators articulate their identifications with and desires for the figure of Shane that they are able to make sense of and articulate their experience of eccentricity to themselves and others.

The final chapter, chapter three, will situate this research in relation to feminist and queer theories of spectatorship. More specifically, I will address how this theory of eccentric spectatorship and excessive subjectivity offers something *else* that is not necessarily accounted for by the terms queer, bisexuality, and other forms of woman-identification (both sexual and non-sexual). This section will conclude with a brief discussion of how psychoanalytic theories of the unconscious can be useful to the study of contemporary televisual analyses of spectatorship. The aim of this research is to acknowledge television spectatorship as a process of subjectification; the spectator not only experiences the creation of a sense of "self" but also assists in this process of her self-creation.

She walks over to the fence.
Curious.
Jenny.
She heard the two women talking.
They're talking about swimming.
Walking towards the pool.
One woman takes off her shirt. Her pants. Then her boyish underwear.
Full bush.
The other woman pulls her blue floral-print dress over her head.
Revealing red panties.
She ducks behind the fence, peering through the wooden slats.
Everyone says she hides because she's embarrassed.
No. I don't think so.
It's the look in her eyes. It's the way she parts her lips.
I *know*.
She *wants* to watch. But she doesn't want to be seen.
The two women get wet.
It's hot. *Very* hot.
They kiss.
They fuck.
One woman moans, already close to coming.
She watches.
Curious.
I watch her.
Curious.
The sound of fucking in the background.
She looks away.
Looks down and closes her eyes.
Smiles. (I think).
I can't believe they're showing this on TV.

***

How can the specificity of one's own spectatorial positioning *exceed* the ways in which *The L Word* addresses her as a heterosexual subject? What are the ways in which *The L Word* offers spectators the possibility to engage in processes of *eccentric* identifications? To begin answering these questions, this chapter will include a close formal analysis in order to examine the ways in which *The L Word* may address a

heterosexual spectator, and how processes of spectatorial positioning may *exceed* this mode of address.

"Same Sex. Different City."

The L Word's attempt to appeal to a broad-based viewership could not be more evident than in the show's initial marketing campaign: "Same sex. Different city." While this marketing slogan attempted to draw comparisons between *The L Word* and HBO's (mostly heterosexual) hit show *Sex and the City*, (our long-time friends from Manhattan share with our Los Angeles lesbians an equally glamorous life of partying, sex, and relationship woes), there is one facet of *The L Word* that separates *this* show from all the rest: lesbian sexuality. As the first show in television history to center on the lives of a group of (mostly) lesbian women, *The L Word* has been tasked with introducing the world of lesbian sexuality (or at least a version of this world) to spectators. And it is precisely because season one must introduce spectators to the "*L World*" that this series becomes of interest to my account of eccentric spectatorship.

While historically the figure of the lesbian on television has been confined to de-sexualized narratives surrounding parenting or "coming out," *The L Word* sought to distance itself from these "predictable" storylines at the outset (Warn 5). To use Sarah Warn's terms, *The L Word* "explores the ups and downs of the personal and professional lives of several women who are *already* (my emphasis) comfortable with their sexuality" (6). In the pilot episode, we are first introduced to long-term lesbian couple Bette Porter – who is a strong and successful half African American and half Caucasian woman – and her soft-spoken partner Tina Kennard. The monogamous pair is attempting to start a

family through artificial insemination, and Tina has recently left her job to prepare herself and her shared house with Bette for the arrival of their future baby. Then there is aspiring writer Jenny Schecter. At the beginning of the first season, Jenny is constructed as naïve, timid, and unsure about herself; she has recently moved to Los Angeles to be with her long-term boyfriend (and eventually fiancée) Tim Haspel. As the first season develops, however, Jenny is depicted struggling with her sexual identity. After being seduced by Marina Ferrer – the sexy and statuesque owner of the local lesbian watering hole "The Planet" – Jenny is conflicted about her feelings for Tim (although Jenny eventually identifies as a lesbian in season two of the series).

While Jenny is subject to a "coming out" storyline in season one and two, her struggle to understand her sexuality is the primary narrative arc through which the spectator is introduced to the "*L World*." The remaining cast of characters in season one include: Bette's previously estranged half sister Kit (who is the *only* African American woman in the series, and who also just happens to be the *only* primary heterosexual character); capricious bisexual Alice Pieszecki (who is obsessed with charting her friends' sexual escapades); the closeted tennis star Dana Fairbanks, and finally; *The L Word*'s fan favourite androgynous lesbian Shane McCutcheon.

Imaging, Narrativity, Camera Work

With a range of characters and multiple seasons, how does *The L Word* address spectators? What are the ways in which this process of spectatorial positioning offers spectators specific positionalities of identification and desire? As mentioned previously, current televisual analyses of *The L Word* are often limited to representational

discussions. The visual image is given primacy over all other film techniques, limiting discussions of spectatorship to the search for oneself on screen. That is not to say that analyses of the narrative and camera work have been completely ignored. However, such analyses are often introduced to describe how the figure of the lesbian is represented on screen; there is very little discussion of how the narrative and camera work function in relation to spectatorial identifications. This overemphasis on the visual image of "the lesbian" neglects how the complex nexus of effects between the narrative and camera work, in addition to the visual images, offer spectators multiple (and even contradictory) possibilities for identification and desire.

The ways in which spectators not only interpret, but also attribute meaning and affective significance to the image of "the lesbian" is a complex process. According to de Lauretis, "perception and signification are neither direct or simple reproduction (copy, mimesis, reflection) nor inevitably predetermined by biology, anatomy, or destiny" (*Alice Doesn't* 55). For de Lauretis, relations of vision and meaning are produced through the effects of "imaging," which de Lauretis defines as "the processes of the articulation of meaning to images, the engagement of subjectivity in that process, and thus the mapping of a social vision into subjectivity" (*Alice Doesn't* 39). In other words, images do not carry any intrinsic meaning for spectators; the figure of the lesbian is neither inherently "good" nor "bad." It is precisely because images do not carry any intrinsic meaning that they must be analyzed in conjunction with narrativity; it is only through the work of

narrativity [3] that the spectator is able to not only "see," but also attribute meaning and affective significance to images.

Narrativity is thus a condition of possibility for spectatorial identification; it is a mechanism of coherence that has the capacity to "direct, sustain, or undercut identification" (de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender* 108-109). According to de Lauretis, "the very work of narrativity is the engagement of the subject in certain positionalities of meaning and desire" (*Alice Doesn't* 106). In other words, the spectator's subjectivity is engaged through the work of narrativity and is subsequently constituted in relation to narrative, meaning, and desire. As a result, there can be no earlier "primitive, primary, or purely imagistic identification" (de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't* 80). For de Lauretis, then, positions of identification and visual pleasure are the "after-effects of an engagement of subjectivity in the relations of meaning; relations which involve and mutually bind image and narrative" (*Alice Doesn't* 80). That is to say, both meaning and vision depend on the engagement of a historically and socially constituted subjectivity – a subjectivity that exists prior to the spectator's encounter with the televisual text (de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't* 149). Each spectator's location in social relations of gender, race, class, sexuality, etc. may either be in contradiction or unison with their "internal" configurations. This difference between (and even within) spectators affects the extent to which filmic conventions engage spectators subjectively; thus, the work of these filmic conventions "speak" to spectators differently, offering them specific positions from which to view a televisual text (de Lauretis, *Practice of Love* 129).

[3] It must be noted that there is an important distinction between narrative and narrativity. Unlike narrative, which focuses on the structure of the story itself, narrativity is concerned with the work and discursive effects of narrative in producing a specific subject of vision.

The work of imaging and narrativity are necessary components of spectatorial identifications; images are always already implicated with narrativity and overdetermined by its inscription of positionalities of meaning and desire (de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't* 149). However, the way in which the camera frames the events on screen for the spectator can serve to either support or contradict the effects of imaging and narrativity. Thus, it is the complex nexus of effects between imaging, narrativity, and camera work that constitute the terms and positionalities of identification and desire for spectators (de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't* 137).

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The proceeding discussion will attempt to work through the ways in which individual spectators respond to different modes of address used within *The L Word* by offering my own account of *eccentric* spectatorial positioning. It must be noted, however, that my analysis of *The L Word* is not a self-evident observation; it is experienced (consciously and unconsciously) though a multitude of discursive formations that exist prior to my encounter with the text (Stacey 74). As such, the specificity of spectatorial positioning necessitates a discussion of my own subject position. This articulation of my own social, historical, and subjective experiences is central to my account of *eccentricity* and feminist accounts of spectatorship.

***

I am a bi-racial woman who grew up in a working-class, conservative family in Edmonton, Alberta. My father was a welder from Port aux Basques, Newfoundland, and my mother immigrated to Canada from Malaysia when she was in her early twenties. Since my mother only completed an equivalent of grade eight schooling, my father was

the sole economic provider for our family. Money was tight when I was growing up, although I did not know this at the time. However, it was precisely *because* money was scarce that I developed a love for television. All of our family time was spent watching the tube. You could turn off your brain, watch, and relax. The stress of the workday would melt away.

I never thought to question whether or not I *was* like everyone else when I was growing up. "We're middle-class," my mother would tell me. "But if anyone asks what your father does, tell them it's none of their business!" My mother was not embarrassed by our family. She truly believed that we *were* just like everyone else. But in some ways, she *knew*. She knew that telling other people what my father did for a living would risk revealing the middle-class façade that both of my parents had spent so much time and money to create.

Eventually, the familial pressure for me to become a "professional" drove me to the academy. (My parents wanted me to have a *career* with a "stable" income so that I would not have to worry about money like they did). It was during my time as an undergraduate that I came to feminism. I gravitated toward studying theories of sexuality since my parents refrained from discussing anything related to sex when I was growing up. I never felt as though the term "heterosexual" encapsulated the complexity of my own subjective experiences with sexuality, and for the first time I was given a language to talk about it. It was refreshing to read well-articulated formulations of my own jumbled thoughts that I had had for years. This opportunity to *speak* about sexuality with others in a way that I could never have done before excited me. I knew that if I *had* to become a "professional," I wanted to do something that *I* liked: watch television and talk about sex.

Although feminism had given me this new perspective from which to think about the world around me, I never imagined that I would ever become the subject of this mode of theorizing. While I thrived academically in university, it was the first time in my life that I *felt* working-class. This recognition, this newfound consciousness was neither "liberating" nor a moment of possibility; it was paralyzing (and still continues to be). How, then, does one begin to articulate a personal history of the everyday, intangible effects of class when one exists in a space that treats (or at least attempts to treat) all students as equals? For now I am neither that blue-collar kid from years ago, nor will I ever be the intellectual who can share her ideas without having to fear that her words will reveal her "secret" – that she really isn't one of *them*. In the professional academy, I will always be somewhere in-between, forever residing in this interstitial space riddled with contradiction and anxiety.

I will always *feel* out of place.

It is *this* feeling of displacement and dislocation that has greatly informed my own spectatorial subject position. The everyday effects of *experiencing* difference at the level of gender, race, class, and sexuality has drove me to search for that ephemeral spectatorial position somewhere inside and outside the ideology of heterosexuality. It is precisely because I no longer *feel* at home when I am addressed as a normative heterosexual subject that I *know* (either consciously or unconsciously) I cannot be the only one.

***

Although *The L Word* offers a plethora of scenes from which one can choose to explore the complex ways in which spectators view the series, the best way for me to

situate myself within the current academic discussion is to offer my own analysis of *the* most talked-about scene in the series: the first pool scene from the pilot episode.

The pool scene opens with a medium shot of Jenny (see Table 1.1). In this shot, Jenny is depicted setting up her writing studio in a converted garage behind the house that she shares with her boyfriend Tim. (At this point in the narrative, Jenny has recently arrived in Los Angeles to live with Tim, and she has yet to encounter the lesbian characters who are a part of the series' cast). Jenny soon hears the sound of her neighbors' backdoor close and overhears two women talking. She stops her work and leaves her studio to investigate (the camera tracking her movement). As Jenny approaches the fence, there is a straight cut to a close-up shot of the back of Jenny's head. We can see that she is looking over the fence at the two women talking (one of which the spectator knows is Shane), making their way towards the outdoor pool. (The women are framed by a medium-shot). The two women, having discussed the prospect of swimming, begin to undress. Jenny ducks behind the fence (again, the camera tracking her movement), and the shot cuts to another close-up of Jenny. This time, we see Jenny peering out from the opposite side of the fence, her face barely visible behind the wooden slats. There is another straight cut to a medium-long shot of the two naked women. Unlike the previous shots, this one is filmed with a handheld camera and is internally framed; there are vertical lines blocking our vision. Because the previous shot depicted Jenny peering out from behind the fence, it can be assumed that this current shot is from Jenny's point of view. This shot-reverse-shot technique sutures the spectator's gaze; we are now privileged with Jenny's line of vision, seeing what she sees. From this point-of-view shot, the handheld camera shakes ever so slightly as it tilts left to right, tracking the

movement of the two women undressing by the pool. The subsequent shots depict Jenny watching the two women begin to have sex from behind the fence.

Much of the current literature analyzing this pool scene assumes that the events depicted on screen are easily observable and self-evident. If we recount Moore's analysis of the pool scene (referenced in the introductory section of this thesis), Moore indicates that Jenny "ducks" behind the fence out of embarrassment after catching a glimpse of Shane and the unknown woman undressing for a swim. For Moore, Jenny's embarrassment is what drives her to watch the two women from a distant, voyeuristic viewing position. At this isolated moment in the narrative development, Jenny is heterosexual and is only able to experience voyeuristic pleasure rather than same-sex desire.

Since Jenny approximates the heterosexual spectator's own gender and sexual identity, Moore contends that the heterosexual spectator is able to adopt Jenny's eye-line as her own; like Jenny in this particular scene, the heterosexual spectator is a "'straight' tourist" within this new and unfamiliar "*L World*" ("Having It All Ways" 8).

While Moore's analysis suggests that the camera work and narrative plot primarily function to provide the heterosexual spectator with an entry point into the world of lesbian desire (unlike the "queer" spectator, the heterosexual spectator is not in "the know"), "heteroflexibility" is only one possible mode by which spectators may view *The L Word*. In fact, the work of the filmic conventions that both Moore and I describe in this particular scene actually function to offer *all* spectators a voyeuristic position. If we recall, the spectator's gaze has been successfully sutured through the use of a shot-reverse-shot. Privileged with Jenny's point-of-view from behind the fence, the spectator

sees what she sees, which is in effect what the camera sees. This voyeuristic viewing position from behind the fence is distanced; it does not necessitate identification with the lesbian couple in the pool. Rather, in this moment pleasure is experienced through the act of looking without being "seen."

For straight-identified spectators, this voyeurism provides *exactly* what *The L Word* promises: a glimpse into the world of lesbian desire. For the queer spectator, however, the distancing effect of the camera produces a contradiction: a desire to be "in" the pool and not behind the fence. The desire for the queer-identified woman to be "in" the pool may result in her refusal of the distancing effect of the camera. Instead of identifying with the "look" of the camera, which has been successfully sutured to Jenny's "gaze," the queer spectator may in fact identify with the lesbian couple in the pool – a longing to participate. Unlike the heterosexual spectator, this queer-identified spectator needs no introduction to the world of lesbian sexuality and same-sex desire. In fact, it is her familiarity with this "*L World*" depicted on screen that constitutes her as a subject that is more willing to "jump in" the pool at the outset. For example, both shot five and shot eight of the pool scene are overhead crane shots depicting the lesbian couple in the pool (see Table 1.1). Although these two shots are cut in montage with Jenny's point-of-view, they are an unobstructed vantage point to which Jenny could not possibly be privy. While these crane shots are not close-ups, they offer the queer-identified spectator a position that is unsutured to Jenny's look: it is a position that is already "in the pool." In this moment, *The L Word* renders lesbian sexuality visible, opening queer spectators' identity to the types of voyeurism the show promises to straight-identified viewers. For the queer spectator, then, seeing oneself on screen is also an exposure of oneself. As a

result, *The L Word* successfully invites spectators to "have it all ways," to use Moore's term ("Having it All Ways" 3).

Although the heterosexual spectator may enter the "*L World*" voyeuristically through the character of Jenny, the spectator is not necessarily bound to this specific viewing position through the duration of the series. In addition to this voyeuristic viewing position, there are also alterative avenues through which straight-identified women can view this scene differently; voyeurism may provide heterosexual spectators with an entry point into this world of lesbian sexuality, but something *else* happens to the spectator once she is "in" this "*L World.*"

To return to Moore's analysis of the pool scene, Jenny's "crossing the fence" in future episodes subsequently "queers" the straight spectator's mode of viewing since she has initially accepted Jenny's eye line as her own ("Having It All Ways" 10). This "queering" constitutes Jenny as a "safely ambiguous place" from which straight-identified spectators can experiment (Moore, "Having It All Ways" 10). More specifically, this heteroflexible viewing position provides straight-identified spectators access to the "local" imaginary of the "*L World*," presenting them with the opportunity to share in the same "queer sensibility" with which queer-identified spectators are already familiar (Moore, "Having It All Ways" 20). Rather than maintain a distant and voyeuristic viewing position behind the fence, the heterosexual spectator may now be more willing to jump "in" the pool and adopt Jenny's desires as her own; the straight spectator is encouraged to "cross the fence" along with Jenny, if only at the level of fantasy. As a result, Jenny's gaze from behind the fence is now reflected as an act of

curious contemplation for her character and for the straight spectator: one can either stay behind the fence and watch from a distance, or jump "in" the pool.

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While the filmic conventions used in the pool scene may encourage straight-identified spectators to engage in either voyeuristic or fantasmic modes of viewing, what happens to the spectator's viewing position in subsequent sex scenes when Jenny is either involved in the same-sex encounter depicted on screen or completely absent from the scene itself?

The second same-sex sex scene in the series is very different from the first; this time, Jenny is no longer a distant observer, but is rather an active participant. The scene opens with a tracking shot (see Table 1.2). Tracking out from behind a curtain, the camera reveals a medium long shot of Jenny and Marina kissing on a bed. The shot immediately cuts to a medium close-up of the two women kissing. What is particularly interesting about this shot (and the others that follow in this scene) is that they are all filmed close up with a handheld camera. There is a noticeable unsteadying effect as the camera tilts to follow the women's movement. As the scene progresses, we see Marina pleasuring Jenny who appears to be close to coming; she is moaning, breathing heavily, and gasping for air. However, in the final two shots, we realize that Jenny is crying. While Jenny's tears make it unclear as to whether or not she was in fact close to coming, we know from the previous shots that she was an active participant (and enjoying it).

Unlike the first pool scene, the "look" of the camera is not sutured with any one of the characters in this second scene; the spectator's gaze is, in fact, the camera's. This identification with the camera is neither distant, nor voyeuristic; our view is not

obstructed as we are with Jenny and Marina in the bedroom, watching them. Without the distancing effect of a voyeuristic viewing position, the straight-identified spectator is encouraged to participate by "jumping in" to this scene. As Moore would perhaps argue, seeing Jenny enjoy her same-sex encounter provides the heterosexual spectator with the opportunity to engage in heteroflexibility. (Jenny is, after all, the straight viewer's entry point into the "*L World*" and primary site of identification). Through Jenny's heteroflexible character, then, the straight-identified spectator may fantasize about Jenny's same-sex encounter, adopting Jenny's pleasures as her own.

While the straight-identified spectator is able to experience same-sex desire through her fantasmic participation in this scene, Jenny's presence has several implications for the ways in which this contradictory desire is experienced. More specifically, the straight-identified spectator's fantasmic heteroflexible viewing position (adopted through Jenny) enables her to reconcile her experience of same-sex desire with her avowed heterosexual identity. Narratively, the spectator can continue to assume that Jenny is "straight"; Jenny has yet to completely "cross the fence," and her tears indicate that she is remorseful (or at least troubled) by her same-sex encounter. (Although it is ambiguous as to whether or not Jenny is crying over her act of infidelity or her sexual activities with a woman). It is precisely because Jenny can continue to be read as "straight" by the heterosexual spectator that the spectator's own feelings of same-sex desire are disavowed. Because the spectator herself is straight and thus, according to Moore, identifies with the "straight" character Jenny, the spectator's fantasmic experience of same-sex desire is mitigated; it is not experienced as an internal contradiction.

Like Jenny in this scene, the straight-identified spectator is merely "experimenting." Jenny stands in for an incapacity to render her own sexuality intelligible; she represents an unsymbolizable moment of same-sex desire for the "straight" spectator as Jenny herself is somewhere in between her heterosexual relationship with Tim and her experience of same-sex desire with Marina. Through this act of fetishism, then, the straight-identified viewer is able to maintain two contradictory positions; she is a heterosexual woman who experiences same-sex desire, but only at the level of fantasy. Thus, this contradiction is *not* experienced as subjectively transformative.

While Jenny's presence in the second same-sex sex scene makes this act of disavowal possible for the straight-identified viewer, there is one final scene near the end of the pilot episode that complicates this process of fetishism and disavowal. The scene opens with an extreme close-up of two women kissing (see Table 1.3); the sound of kissing is audible to the viewers as the women's tongues intertwine. Narratively, the spectator is able to assume that the two women are most likely Bette and Tina. (When we last encountered the couple, they were depicted in bed as Bette was climbing on top of Tina, presumably to "get it on"). This scene is almost identical to the sex scene with Jenny and Marina: it consists of a series of medium close-up and close-up shots that have been filmed straight-on at eye level height by a handheld camera. Most importantly, the "look" of the camera remains unsutured to either character's perspective. Again, the camera's perspective locates the spectator in Bette and Tina's bedroom as we are watching them. Unlike the scene with Jenny and Marina, this scene finishes with a lengthy thirty-seven second close-up shot where both women unmistakably climax.

What makes *this* (and subsequent) same-sex scene(s) different from the previous two is the contradiction that it produces in the straight-identified spectator. In this scene, Jenny, the heterosexual spectator's "safely ambiguous" site of identification, is absent. With Jenny's absence, there is no tenable site of identification that allows the straight-identified spectator to explicitly disavow her experiences of same-sex desire. Here, the straight-identified spectator experiences an internal contradiction between her avowed sexual identity and her experience of same-sex desire. This contradiction, though largely unconscious, is *excessive*; it is a *felt* perturbation that occurs from the confrontation between avowed and disavowed; that is, the straight-identified spectator's sexual identity external to the viewing process and her experience of same sex-desire, respectively.

Although Jenny's absence may be at first disconcerting for the straight-identified spectator, I maintain that her presence is no longer needed. From this point forward, the straight-identified spectator has become implicated in the "*L World*"; she may have gained entry through a voyeuristic viewing position, but the spectator can now access this "queer sensibility," to use Moore's term, on her own ("Having It All Ways" 20). In effect, the heterosexual is able to experience same-sex desire through multiple points of identification. This specific viewing position locates the spectator both inside and outside the ideology of heterosexuality. It is a space where the spectator may not only *exceed* the ways in which *The L Word* addresses her as a heterosexual subject, but also experience different positionalities of identification and desire. In other words, this viewing position is an *eccentric* one; its occupation necessitates the very decentering of normative heterosexuality.

The spectator's experience of this *excessive* subjectivity is not confined to the immediate viewing process. The straight-identified spectator is able to *exceed* the limits of heterosexuality because she is an *eccentric* subject external to her engagement with *The L Word*: and it is precisely *because* her *eccentric* subjectivity extends beyond the viewing process that she is offered the possibility to experience a desire that is not bound to sexual difference. However, for the female heterosexual spectator who is perhaps less "heteroflexible," entry into the "*L World*" may simply extend the voyeurism of the first scene; the spectator may either refuse or repress (or even simply not *feel*) any feelings of same-sex desire. Thus, it is this specificity of the appeal to "flexibility" in *The L Word* that not only upsets normative categories of gender and sexuality, but also constitutes the transformative effect of the show for spectators who experience same-sex desire, perhaps for the very first time.

This felt perturbation constitutes an epistemological shift: a shift in consciousness. Here, the term consciousness does not necessarily refer to the immediacy of *knowing* for the spectator may come to understand that her spectatorial position is *excessive* only in retrospect. It is possible, however, for the spectator to experience the effects of this subjective transformation without necessarily being conscious of what, exactly, is happening in that specific moment. As a result, this subjective transformation alters the ways in which the spectator makes sense of herself and engages with her social and material reality. Thus, the acquisition of this *eccentric* viewing position is a dynamic process; the specificity of one's spectatorial position is always shifting as one is transformed and inscribed (consciously and unconsciously) by a multitude of contradictory discursive formations.

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If the straight-identified spectator is able to acquire this *eccentric* viewing position through her engagement with *The L Word*, it may be possible for some heterosexual spectators to position themselves outside of the initial voyeuristic position (in regards to lesbian desire) at the outset; which is to say, the heterosexual spectator may enter this world of lesbian desire through a viewing position that differs from the initial voyeuristic entry point of Jenny.

To return to the pool scene with this newfound *eccentric* "sensibility," we can see that Jenny's voyeuristic position is under erasure at the outset. While the "invisible" and unobtrusive camera work functions to maintain the narrative and spatio-temporal continuity within this scene by orienting the spectator's line of vision (see Table 1.1) (the editing transitions are made with straights cuts and continuous diegetic sound connects consecutive shots, all of which contribute to a smooth sequence), the unsteadying effect of the handheld camera now contradicts the narrative assumption that Jenny is in fact "straight." For example, in shot twelve of the pool scene (see Table 1.1) there is a medium-long shot of Shane and the unknown woman having sex in the pool. Vertical lines internally frame this reverse shot; the spectator can assume that this shot is from Jenny's point of view behind the fence. In this moment, the handheld camera produces an unsteadying effect as it tilts rapidly from right to left, tracking the movement of the two naked women having sex in the pool. Equipped with the knowledge of Jenny's "crossing over" in future episodes, I am now able to interpret and experiencing something *else* in this scene – something that was not within my line of vision during my first screening of the series. For me, the camera movement (and subsequently Jenny's point-of-view) is

deliberate and intentional; she is searching for an unobstructed position from which to view the two naked women from behind the fence. As a result, Jenny's decision to hide behind the fence is no longer interpreted as one that stems from feelings of embarrassment. Rather, her concealed gaze becomes something more than a distant voyeurism; it reveals that her sexuality may not necessarily be as stable as it is often interpreted in this scene, albeit retroactively.

It is because of Jenny's "crossing over" in future episodes that the voyeurism promised in this scene is rendered untenable as a site of identification for the heterosexual spectator. This viewing position is one that no longer fits within the current heteronormative structure of desire as Jenny's voyeurism becomes too implicated, her pleasure too visible: and yet, the straight-identified woman continues to watch. Although Jenny may inoculate a specific mode of viewership – namely, to provide a narrative entry point for the heterosexual spectator into the "*L World*" – her own shifting identifications provides a critical space within which the straight-identified spectator may experience a complex and transformative shift in subjectivity.

For the straight-identified spectator who watches *The L Word*, she is implicated in multiple ways. Perhaps, then, it is merely a condition of possibility that one steps outside of normative heterosexuality when viewing *The L Word*. After all, does it not take a certain "type" of heterosexual spectator to watch a show like *The L Word* at the outset? Perhaps one who understands (either conscious or unconsciously) that she is tuning in to watch a show about lesbian women and lesbian desire? It is this decentering of normativity that is the generative power of this specific spectatorial position: it is something *else*; it is *excessive* and *other.* In a word, it is *eccentric*.

Eccentricity and the Specificity of Spectatorial Positioning

An *eccentric* spectatorial position may (or may not) necessarily be one that is readily available to the spectator during her first screening of the *L Word*. That is not to say that the spectator *must* be a repeated viewer in order to acquire this *eccentric* mode of viewing. Certainly, the narrative cohesiveness the spectator will possess after she has completed the entire series may offer her a different perspective from which to re-watch *The L Word*. However, it is with each successive viewing that the specific modes of address may "speak" to the spectator in a different way, offering her the possibility to "see" something *else* – something that was not within her line of vision before. More specifically, each successive viewing of *The L Word* engages the spectator's subjectivity differently, contributing to an "internal" shift in consciousness that transforms her memory of and past viewing experiences with *The L Word* (White 197). This psychic transformation alters the ways in which the spectator now experiences (consciously and unconsciously) the social, cultural, and subjective positions (i.e., gender, race, class, sexuality) from which she both identifies with and interprets the events on screen (White 197). Thus, the spectator is offered a different line of vision from which to view *The L Word* (or any other program). This experience of difference continually transforms the spectator's subjectivity (consciously and unconsciously), constituting a new subject position from which to view *The L Word*. As a result, the specificity of one's spectatorial position is always changing.

While an *eccentric* spectatorial position accounts for the possibility that spectators experience same-sex desire, it acknowledges that this desire may not necessarily be experienced in the same way (if at all) between (and even within) spectators. The extent

to which spectators engage in processes of *eccentric* identifications is not completely independent; the spectator cannot simply "choose" how *The L Word* addresses them as a spectatorial subject, or how they respond to that particular mode of address. As mentioned previously, the viewing process is not a neutral one; each individual spectator brings her own social, cultural, and subjective (conscious and unconscious) experiences with which to interpret the events on screen. As such, the complex nexus of effects between imaging, narrativity, and camera work engages spectators differently, offering each individual viewer specific possibilities for identification and desire. This *eccentric* viewing position, then, is only one mode by which spectators can view *The L Word*.

Because this theory of *eccentric* spectatorship is predicated on the recognition of difference between (and within) spectators, it must be noted that the preceding analysis of *The L Word* is my own – it is an interpretation that has been made possible by the ways in which television, as a social technology and a signifying practice, addresses me as a social subject. It is the complex interaction between my own "internal" fantasmic configuration and my location in social relations of gender, race, class, sexuality, etc. that allows the filmic conventions in *The L Word* to "speak" to me in a specific way, engaging my subjectivity and providing me with specific possibilities for identification and desire.

My research and disciplinary formations as an academic researcher have certainly influenced my viewing of *The L Word*. For the purpose of this thesis, I have been privileged with the opportunity to not only re-watch *The L Word* from a critical position, but also reflect on my initial viewing experiences as a fan. This retroactive reflection has changed my relationship to my initial screening of *The L Word*; certain elements are consciously perceived only in retrospect, transforming my relationship to the viewing

process (White 197). It is impossible, then, for me to distance myself completely as an academic researcher from my *eccentric* interpretation of the series. Although I cannot quantify the extent to which my disciplinary formations and social, cultural, and subjective experiences (conscious and unconscious) have influenced my analysis, I can only acknowledge that it has.

Although this analysis may not necessarily be one that all women experience, the specificity of my own *eccentric* spectatorial positioning points to the existence of another means by which spectators can view *The L Word* – one that is not solely determined by the institution of heterosexuality, but is rather, at the same time, both inside and outside of it. That is not to say that my *eccentric* viewing of *The L Word* is qualitatively "better" than one that exists within the normative structure of identification and desire. This *eccentric* interpretation claims to be neither "objective" nor the only position from which all spectators ought to view *The L Word.* As mentioned previously, there are specific pleasures and privileges afforded to the spectator who is not only addressed as a coherent social subject, but also able to see their "self" represented. Rather, the specificity of my own spectatorial position acknowledges the possibility that other spectators may also engage in their own *eccentric* viewings of *The L Word.*

Extending Eccentricity Beyond the Immediate Viewing Process

I have attempted to articulate a theory of eccentric potentiality in order to explore how the specificity of one's own spectatorial position offers each individual spectator positionalities of identification and desire; the filmic conventions (i.e., imaging, narrativity camera work) used in *The L Word* engage each individual spectator subjectively based on the social, historical, and subjective (conscious and unconscious) positions within which she is situated. As I have argued, this acquisition of an eccentric spectatorial position is a process of subjectification; a spectator's subjectivity is transformed both consciously and unconsciously during the viewing process, forever altering the ways in which she makes sense of her "self."

While I have discussed how this processual subjective transformation occurs within the spectator at the level of the psychic imaginary, it is important to extend this concept of eccentric spectatorial positioning and excessive subjectivity beyond the immediate viewing process. How, exactly, does this eccentric sense of "self" affect the ways in which spectators interact with the social and material world around them? What are the ways in which spectators articulate their eccentric identifications and desires to others, and how does the public articulation of one's own eccentric spectatorial position further transform a spectator's subjective formation? Is it possible for this public articulation to undermine heteronormativity in mass culture? In this section, I will discuss the ways in which spectators' eccentric identifications and desires may extend beyond the viewing process.

Experiencing Eccentricity: Case Study Shane McCutcheon

Spectatorial identifications and desires are not experienced at the level of the psychic imaginary exclusively; they also occur at the level of cultural activity (Stacey 171). According to Jonathan Gray, spectators negotiate and make sense of their "selves" by performing them to others (58). While this experience of eccentricity is not necessarily one that is consciously apprehended by all spectators in the present, that is not to say that spectators are incapable of experiencing this contradiction; the spectator may either *feel* the effects of her sense of "self" as one that no longer aligns with the ways in which she is addressed as a normative heterosexual subject, or recognize that her position is eccentric in retrospect.

The discomfort and anxiety produced by this contradictory experience of excessive subjectivity is neither constraining nor negative. As Sara Ahmed argues, discomfort is "not about assimilation or resistance, *but about inhabiting norms differently.* The inhabitance is generative or productive insofar as it does not end with the failure of norms to be secured, but with possibilities of living that do not 'follow' those norms through" (*Cultural Politics of Emotion* 155). In order to explore how the articulation of one's eccentric spectatorial position encourages spectators to inhabit norms differently, this section will focus on the multiple ways in which viewers respond to the experience of eccentric spectatorship when watching *The L Word*. To accomplish this task, the following discussion will include a case study of the figure of Shane (played by Katherine Moennig) both in the show and off-screen in order to theorize how spectators receive and interpret this character: specifically, straight-identified viewers.

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The character of Shane is introduced in season one of *The L Word* as a womanizing lesbian. What makes Shane distinct from the other lesbian characters on the show is her androgynous appeal, which serves a typified role in relation to televisual lesbian representability; there are specific codes of dress and behaviour in gay subcultures that are intelligible in popular culture (White 145). More specifically, it is Shane's masculine qualities that render her lesbianism intelligible to spectators. As de Lauretis argues, "signs of masculinity are the most visually explicit and strongly coded by dominant discourses to signify sexual desire toward women, and hence their greater visibility in cultural representations of lesbianism, which correlates to their greater effectivity" (*Practice of Love* 264). For de Lauretis, then, spectators retroactively construct Shane as a figure of lesbian representability; "the [spectator] makes use of the very categories, male/female and masculinity/femininity, by which sexuality is socially constructed and subjectively apprehended" (*Practice of Love* 264). In other words, the figure of Shane becomes a lesbian fetish "object" representative of same-sex desire through a kind of "reverse discourse" – a discourse that is predicated on the conflation of gender and sexuality (de Lauretis, *Practice of Love* 264).

This reverse discourse constitutes Shane as *the* figure of lesbian representability on *The L Word*; the signs of masculinity associated with her character are presumed to be direct indications of Shane's sexual desire toward women. This signification of desire through the signs of masculinity not only increases the very visibility of these signs, but also contributes to the efficacy of this reverse discourse. In other words, the figure of Shane *as* a figure of lesbian representability accretes affective value through her

circulation and production as a significant, lesbian fetish object[4] (Ahmed, "Affective Economies" 120). Thus, Shane, as a figure of lesbian representability, appears to possess intrinsic meaning; the conditions of lesbian representability appear to reside *in* Shane herself through the erasure of the social historical circumstances that have led her to become this object of same-sex desire for both queer *and* straight-identified women. As a result, Shane is constituted as a significant object that articulates spectators' experiences of same-sex desire precisely because others have publicly witnessed a collective shared orientation toward this object.

What is particularly significant about Shane is the extent to which this character has become a popular figure amongst heterosexual spectators. While Shane at first appears to be a highly sedimented figure of lesbian representability, the narrative and representational complexities her character experiences constructs Shane as a contradictory figure – a figure that embodies a (potentially) disruptive "force"; that is, the decentering of normativity (Ghosh 22). In fact, it is through the process of becoming this lesbian fetish object that Shane is transformed into a figure through which the straight-identified spectator's eccentric identifications and desires can be articulated.

Narratively, Shane's womanizing corroborates with the very "reverse discourse" that constitutes her as a lesbian fetish object; her promiscuity is conflated with the signs of masculinity, which further signifies her sexual desire toward women. As an avid practitioner of polyamory, Shane is narratively constructed as a predatory character; other women fall "victim" to her boyish charms, knowing full well that Shane will "love-'em-and-leave-'em." As the series develops, however, Shane's character development

[4] Here, the designation of Shane as an "object" does not hold any negative or derogatory connotations associated with "objectification."

complicates her "predatory" ways. Shane's supposed inability to commit is revealed to be a product of her emotional vulnerability; she is withdrawn precisely because she is afraid of being hurt (even though Shane seemingly falls for "unavailable" women).

Despite Shane's narrative introduction as a "predatory" lesbian, the camera work used in the show further complicates this characterization, positioning Shane's sexuality as one that is desirable. Like many of the other same-sex sex scenes on *The L Word*, Shane's sex scenes are filmed using similar cinematic techniques, such as the use of medium close-up and close-up shots filmed by a handheld camera. While Shane is often depicted as the "instigator" of these sexual advances, the "look" of the camera remains unsutured to either one of the characters in these scenes; the spectator's gaze is thus the "look" of the camera as we are placed in close proximity to Shane's sexual escapades. This viewing position is neither removed nor voyeuristic. Shane may be a predator, but she cannot escape the spectator's "look" (which is, in fact, the "look" of the camera) even in these intimate moments.

The spectator's position as an all-perceiving subject invites the viewer to take part in this intimate moment with Shane. By the time the straight-identified spectator sees Shane have sex with another woman for the first time, the viewer has already been inculcated into the "*L World*." Readily accessing this "queer sensibility," to use Moore's term, the straight-identified spectator is able to experience same-sex desire through multiple points of identification, whether that is with the camera or with one of the figures of screen ("Having It All Ways" 20).

The work of Shane's sex scenes confirms that which the spectator already knows: Shane's desire for women. As a result, Shane is further sedimented as a lesbian fetish

object, both visually (i.e., dress, behaviour, camera work) and narratively; and it is precisely because Shane signifies desire for other women that she is constituted as an object of same-sex desire for the spectator – an object through which straight-identified spectators may articulate this eccentric experience.

Eccentric Spectatorship: The De-centering of Normativity

The straight-identified spectator's desire for Shane extends beyond the visual consumption of this figure; the public articulation of one's eccentric subjective configuration is rendered intelligible through a multitude of cultural practices. There are numerous fans sites and message boards dedicated to the public adoration of the figure of Shane. While both queer and heterosexual spectators profess their "love" for the character on these sites by commenting on Shane's "hotness" or sex appeal, there are moments when straight-identified spectators articulate an eccentric experience of same-sex desire. In these specific posts, the straight-identified spectator expresses a desire to have Shane "ravish" her, or, if given the opportunity, the spectator would kiss and make love to Shane herself. The straight-identified spectator's articulation of *wanting* Shane bears a contradiction that is neither addressed nor reconciled publicly in these online spaces; that is, this declaration of same-sex desire for Shane contradicts the "straight" spectator's avowed sexual identity.

While some straight-identified spectators *want* Shane, others articulate a desire to *be* her. On these websites, Shane is identified with particular "masculine" cultural commodities (i.e., men's dress shirts, ties, motorcycle boots) that reproduce her fashionably androgynous identity – an identity that signifies lesbian representability

(Stacey 169). As it is suggested by these "Wanna Look Like Shane?" websites, the spectator is able to transform her appearance into one that resembles Shane through the work of purchasing and wearing these "masculine" cultural objects. In this moment, the spectator's fantasy – that is, to look like Shane – becomes a concrete practice, one that is articulated through the material body by processes of *copying* (Stacey 167). As Jackie Stacey argues, copying is "a practice which transforms the spectators' physical appearance… This process involves an intersection of self and other, subject and object… the spectator attempts to close the gap between her own image and her ideal image, by trying to produce a new image, more like her ideal" (167). In other words, copying is the desire to look like a particular star or iconic figure through the spectator's attempted replication of appearance (Stacey 167).

These cultural objects associated with Shane do not bear any intrinsic meaning in and of themselves. Rather, the "masculine" articles of clothing accrete affective value through their circulation and production as significant objects – which is to say, objects of lesbian representability that publicly articulate one's desire to *be* Shane (Ahmed, "Affective Economies" 120). Thus, it is precisely because others have witnessed a collective shared orientation toward these objects that meaning and affective significance appear to reside in both the object and the figure of Shane; these associations begin to "stick" (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion* 90).

Although this practice of commodity consumption is located within the current capitalist structure, the articulation of one's desires for Shane cannot be reduced to a commodity identity (White 34). Rather, there are moments at which the use and consumption of cultural objects produces something *excessive* to the current

heteronormative structure of identification and desire (Stacey 223). The spectator's desire to *look* and *be* like Shane is a desire that is articulated through *identifying* with Shane. Although the spectator may be "straight," she desires to *look* and *be* like Shane by attaining her wardrobe – a wardrobe that, through its "masculine" qualities, signifies lesbian representability. In this specific moment, there is a separation of gender from sexuality. Shane – as the figure of lesbian representability – becomes an identity rather than an orientation. In other words, the spectator who buys Shane's "look" does not necessarily buy her sexual object choices; it is a citation of gender, rather that sexuality.

This desire to *look* and *be* like Shane also bears an unaddressed contradiction: that is, wanting to *look* and *be* like Shane may articulate a desire of wanting to be *wanted* as Shane is, which is very different from simply wanting to be "ravaged" by Shane. Thus, this specific desire to *look* and *be* like Shane – who is a lesbian fetish object – contradicts the straight-identified spectator's avowed heterosexual identity; and it is precisely because this internal contradiction is unaddressed that constitutes it as an eccentric moment of possibility.

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Both the unqualified adoration of Shane and practices of copying are performative articulations that are rendered intelligible through current discursive formations. According to Ahmed (paraphrasing Butler) "a performative utterance can only 'succeed' if it repeats a coded or iterable utterance: it works precisely by citing norms and conventions that already exist" (*Cultural Politics of Emotion* 93). Through these specific performatives, then, the spectator attempts to render intelligible an *un*intelligible,

eccentric moment – a moment that was *felt* during her viewing of *The L Word*; that is, her experience of same-sex desire.

These performatives are declarations that involve something more than the individual spectator; they are relational, involving an act of shared witnessing. More specifically, this public articulation is *spoken* to others at the same time it is rendered intelligible to the very spectator uttering the performative (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion* 94). This shared witnessing invites others to engage with the performative, encouraging them to address whether they *do* or *do not want* Shane, or even want to *be* her. Thus, these performatives generate a collection of individuals who are bound together by their shared orientation; the individual spectators come into this collectivity by articulating that they, too, either *want* Shane or want to *be* her (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion* 94).

It is through the relationality of this shared witnessing that the spectator's own feelings and personal investments are intensified (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion* 130). The spectator's public articulation not only aligns her with others who share this same orientation, but also provides the spectator with the opportunity to recognize that she is not the only one who has articulated this experience of same-sex desire. This shared witnessing constitutes the figure of Shane as an object that is both meaningful and affectively significant to the spectator and others who share this orientation; the figure of Shane begins to publicly "circulate" as a significant object that articulates one's eccentric experiences of same-sex desire (Ahmed, "Affective Economies" 119).

While the individual spectator's performative articulations of same-sex desire bind her with others who share this orientation, not all spectators necessarily share the

same relationship to this public declaration; each individual spectator experiences this performative in different ways (Gorton 61). Although it is possible for spectators to *share* subjective experiences, this is not to say that a shared experience and interpretation is either a generalizable or an intrinsic property of *The L Word*, the figure of Shane, or the object itself (de Lauretis, *Practice of Love* 130). The extent to which spectators make sense of and articulate their identifications and desires to others through this public articulation is influenced by the specificity of each individual spectator's spectatorial positioning (Stacey 217). As de Lauretis argues:

> [W]hen it comes to engaging the spectator's fantasy and identification, a film's effects are neither structural (if structural is equated with universal) nor totally structured by the film (by its fantasy, narration or form); rather, they are contingent on the spectator's subjectivity and subjecthood (which are themselves, to some extent, already structured but also open to restructuration). (*Practice of Love* 130)

In other words, although practices of copying and unqualified adoration for Shane are public and collective articulations of one's eccentric identifications and desires, not all spectators will experience this articulation in the same way. While spectators may have viewed the same program, each individual spectator is subjectivity constituted in a multitude of ways; the specificities of one's social, cultural, and subjective (conscious and unconscious) experiences influence the ways in which each spectator makes sense of and negotiates her public articulation of her desire for Shane (de Lauretis, *Figures of Resistance* 142).

Since these performatives require the citation of existing norms and conventions to render intelligible an unsymbolizable eccentric moment, it is not always possible to encapsulate the specificities of one's identifications and desires through the spectator's collective orientation toward the figure of Shane. However, that is not to say that this subjective experience is not eccentric. This performative citation ultimately fails to capture the *felt* contradiction between the "straight" spectator's avowed sexual identity and her desire for Shane (whether that is her desire to *want* Shane or want to *be* her).

It is precisely because this contradiction is not reconciled by the performative that it remains *excessive* to its very citation. Although the spectator's experience of same-sex desire may be eccentric to the categories of heterosexuality and homosexuality, she is not completely outside of the discursive formations that render her public articulation intelligible to others; the performative works within the current normative structure in order to *exceed* it. In this eccentric moment, then, the *im*possible is happening: the spectator is positioned as *excessive* to the ideology of heterosexuality. Thus, through public practices of adoration and copying, eccentric spectatorship becomes something else: it is a decentering of normative heterosexuality through the articulation of a collective identity.

This public articulation of one's eccentric subjective configuration is experienced as a transformative shift in subjectivity. Through the act of declaring one's adoration for Shane (whether it is commenting on her supposed "hotness," expressing a desire to kiss and make love to her, or copying her wardrobe), the referent (in this case, the individual spectator as the "I") is transformed upon the delivery of this performative (Reddy 331). In other words, the public articulation of one's identifications with and desires for the

figure of Shane may either intensify or diffuse the spectator's internal subjective configuration; this performative is both influenced by and changes what it refers to after it has been immediately delivered. As a result, this public articulation of one's eccentric identifications and desires for Shane alters the spectator's subjective experiences of desire itself; it is through the spectator's public articulation of same-sex desire that her *initial* internal subjective configuration is transformed into one that is eccentric.

While the spectator does not necessarily experience this subjective transformation consciously in the present, the effects of this change are either *felt* immediately or made conscious to the spectator only in retrospect. Thus, the performative serves to publicly rework each individual spectator's internal subjective configuration. This public articulation aligns the individual spectator with others who share this same orientation; it is through this alignment process whereby the spectator makes sense of her own subjective experiences in relation to the collective articulation, subsequently altering the spectator's own internal subjective configuration. As a result, the articulation of one's eccentric identifications and desires through practices of public adoration or coping have material and psychic effects; this performative works concretely to transform the ways in which the spectator makes sense of and articulates her excessive subjectivity to others.

It is in this moment where the *un*symoblizable becomes symbolizable that this articulation is no longer eccentric; it becomes performative, grounded by an identifiable *thing.* In other words, the channels for expressing eccentricity opens a position in public culture that was previously unacknowledged. Thus, eccentricity is transformed into something *else*: it becomes a position that one can take up in culture, render visible, and

even comfortably occupy. The eccentric moment is "lost," until the next eccentric experience.

"I'd Go Gay for Shane": The Tempering of Eccentricity and a Collective Identity Re-centered

Although Shane's mass popularity has given rise to a plethora of fan merchandise associated with the character and *The L Word* at large, straight-identified spectators maintain a tenuous relationship with this character; one need only comb through the various online discussion forums and message boards for fans of *The L Word* to see how spectators often preface their public adoration for Shane with the following statement: "I'm not gay, but…" According to Ahmed "the 'orientation' of the pleasure economy is bound up with heterosexuality" (*Cultural Politics of Emotion* 163). For Ahmed, the current structure of identification and desire is bound to sexual difference whereby "pleasure is 'good' only if it is oriented towards some objects, not others" (*Cultural Politics of Emotion* 163). The "I'd Go Gay for Shane" t-shirt references this supposed *need* for spectators to publicly qualify their adoration and attachment to this character.

If we consider the t-shirt's material conditions of production, the fact that this cultural object was not affiliated with the official Showtime network emphasizes the desire for straight-identified spectators to articulate this position of compromise: which is to say, a position for straight-identified spectators to express their experiences of same-sex desire, albeit through commodity structures. While the phrase "I'd Go Gay for Shane" is not necessarily a direct articulation of one's erotic object choice, there is an element of homoeroticism to this declaration – a homoeroticism that serves a potential

means through which spectators can make sense of and publicly articulate their desire for Shane to themselves and others (Stacey 172-173).

Like practices of copying and other public displays of adoration, this declaration "I'd Go Gay for Shane" functions as a relational performative utterance that is rendered intelligible through current discursive formations. In other words, it is through this public articulation that the spectator not only attempts to render intelligible an unsymbolizable moment (that is, her eccentric experience of same-sex desire), but also aligns herself with a collectivity that shares this specific orientation. However, unlike the previous cultural practices discussed above, this specific declaration "I'd Go Gay for Shane" serves to temper one's eccentric experience of same-sex desire through fetishism and disavowal; it is an attempt on behalf of the spectator to account for her experience of same-sex desire within normative heterosexuality.

The ambiguity of this slogan "I'd Go Gay for Shane" offers spectators the opportunity to articulate their fetishistic identifications and desires to others through their consumption and wearing of this cultural commodity. Here, the word "I'd" is a contraction for the two words "I would," altering the phrase from "I'd Go Gay for Shane" to "I *Would* Go Gay for Shane." Here the words "I *Would* Go" construct this utterance as a futural one, suggesting that the spectator is *not* gay in the present moment. However, since the spectator *would* consider "going gay" for Shane, it can be assumed, then, that the spectator is heterosexual (or at least self-identifies as a heterosexual).

This public articulation that one would "go gay" for Shane alludes to the spectator's own contradictory internal subjective configuration. Although the declaration "I'd Go Gay for Shane" makes reference to the spectator's desire for the figure of Shane,

the spectator recognizes (either conscious or unconsciously) that this articulation of same-sex desire does not align with the way in which she is addressed as a normative heterosexual subject. As a result, the spectator's public articulation that she would "go gay" for Shane is an attempt to not only navigate this experience of a contradictory sense of self, but also inoculate against identifying as a lesbian or bisexual woman. In effect, it is the very fixity of the categories "heterosexuality" and "homosexuality" that offer the spectator the very possibility of "going gay" for Shane; this spectator cannot *be* heterosexual (or at least a normative heterosexual subject) because she experiences same-sex desire for Shane. Thus, the spectator must "go gay."

However, the very idea that the spectator could simply "go gay" in order to accommodate her experiences of same-sex desire undoes the supposed impermeability of these categories. On the one hand, the spectator's experience of same-sex desire does not necessarily transform her into a homosexual; although the spectator would consider "going gay" for Shane, she recognizes (either consciously or unconsciously) that the term "homosexual" does not align with her sense of "self," otherwise the declaration would be something closer to "I *Am* Gay for Shane" or "I have *Gone* Gay for Shane (or "I'm Gay for Shane" and "I've Gone Gay for Shane" if we are keeping with the stylistic and informal nature of the original slogan by using the contraction "I'm" for "I am"), rather than "I'd *Go* Gay for Shane." On the other hand, the spectator's experiences of same-sex desire do not align with her sense of "self" as a normative heterosexual subject, hence her consideration to "go gay" and become something *other* than heterosexual in order to accommodate this experience of same-sex desire. This articulation to "go gay" is an expression of the very kinds of sexuality "tourism" Moore describes. Although the

heterosexual spectator may experience same-sex desire through touristically "going gay," she can always return "home" to the comfort and coherence of normative heterosexuality; this experience of same-sex desire has no bearing on the spectator's subjectivity.

The use of the word "*go*" in this declaration is of particular importance as it is deployed as a futural utterance. Here, the word "*go*" suggests that the transformative process by which the spectator "*goes* gay" for Shane is one that is processual and incomplete; there is neither a clear distinction that this transformative process of "*going* gay" has even begun, nor a temporal indication of when this "transformation" will be complete. As a result, Shane is constructed as a fetishistic, "compromise" object; although the spectator may "go gay" for Shane, this declaration need not necessarily mean that she would "go gay" for *all* women.

The phrase "I'd Go Gay for Shane" secures identity and expresses desire; the future tense emphasizes the heterosexual spectator's "straight" identity as it simultaneously expresses the spectator's desire for Shane, if only at the level of fantasy. In other words, the performative utterance "I'd Go Gay for Shane" serves to secure the heterosexual positioning of the spectator and her own voyeurism with respect to *The L* Word. As such, the ambiguity of this declaration provides the spectator with the opportunity to reconcile her contradictory sense of self by continuing to self-identify as heterosexual; although the spectator would "go gay" for Shane, she is able to maintain that she in fact *not* gay.

While "I'd Go Gay for Shane" functions like *all* performatives in that it requires the citation of existing norms and conventions to render one's experience of same-sex desire intelligible, it is precisely because this utterance explicitly disavows one's

experience of same-sex desire that makes it *im*possible for the spectator to articulate the specificities of her eccentric identifications and desires. In other words, this performative utterance binds, unifies, and creates a subject position that is inscribed in ideology; even though "going gay" may mean something different between, and even within, spectators, the eccentric potentiality of the straight-identified spectator's experience of same-sex desire has been tempered by the collective identity "I'd Go Gay for Shane." Through this shared public declaration of fetishism and disavowal, then, eccentric spectatorship becomes something else: a collective identity re-centered.

"I'd Go Gay for Shane" is about not only expressing desire (if only at the level of fantasy), but also *dis*identifying from the character herself. This process of fetishism and disavowal not only sustains the spectator's contradictory identifications and desires, but also prevents the spectator from *feeling* the transformative effects of this internal contradiction (de Lauretis, *Figures of Resistance* 139). This t-shirt, then, provides the straight-identified spectator with the possibility to maintain her avowed sexual identity while publicly articulating her experience of same-sex desire. In fact, the spectator's experience of same-sex desire is one that is longer seen as "inappropriate" given the collective public orientation toward this object; there are others who are *not* gay, but would also consider "*going* gay" for Shane. Consequently, this performative utterance functions as a re-affirmation of the very normative categories of heterosexuality and homosexuality that confine the spectator's experiences of same-sex desire, while simultaneously revealing these categories to be as equally unstable as identity itself. In other words, "I'd Go Gay for Shane" confirms the specific ideologies of gender that enable one to *fantasize* same-sex desire while keeping these very categories intact.

The Materiality of Eccentric Identifications and Desires

The preceding analysis has attempted to explore the ways in which spectators can articulate their eccentric identifications and desires beyond the immediate viewing process. Whereas the articulation of *wanting* Shane expresses an eccentric desire (if only at the level of fantasy), wanting to *be* like Shane differs in that it is an eccentric desire articulated through *identifying* with this figure. Despite these material articulations of eccentricity, there are also performative utterances that serve to temper the straight-identified spectator's contradictory experiences of identification and same-sex desire. Unlike the other two performative utterances, "I'd Go Gay for Shane" is an explicit *dis*identification with the character of Shane; it is an articulation of desire through fetishism, which enables the straight-identified spectator to account for her experience of same-sex desire within normative heterosexuality. At the same time, Shane's female masculinity, framed through a "reverse discourse" whereby female masculinity signifies lesbian representability, constitutes Shane's masculine traits as desirable. In other words, Shane's female masculinity is paradoxical; she embodies a masculine role that is intelligible within the confines of heteronormativity. However, these same masculine qualities are precisely the signs that signify lesbian representability. This "reverse discourse" allows the straight-identified spectator to desire to feel *wanted* by Shane, making Shane's female masculinity the object of desire: Shane's sex (female) and sexuality (lesbian) are understood as secondary to her gender performance (masculinity). Thus, spectators' public articulations of *wanting* Shane, wanting to *be* Shane (whether that is wanting to *look* like Shane or wanting to be desired as this character is), and "going gay" for Shane contributes to the further entrenchment of this "reverse discourse";

each performative emphasizes the very signs of masculinity that signify lesbian representability, further sedimenting this problematic conflation between sexuality and gender.

Although I have focused on cultural practices that occur external to the viewing process, it must be noted that there are different levels of spectatorial engagement that do not necessarily involve one's participation in a collective fan community (Gorton 41). What this analysis has attempted to show, then, is how a spectator's eccentric identifications and desires are not only experienced at the individual and psychic level of the unconscious, but also map onto the *real* world beyond the fictional "*L World*" depicted onscreen; spectatorial identifications and desires are material and embodied experiences, as well as psychic processes (de Lauretis, *Practice of Love* 285-286).

While the spectator's performative articulations of eccentricity are experienced as a shift in subjectivity, the spectator may not necessarily be conscious of this transformation during its inception. Rather, the spectator may either *feel* the effects of this subjective transformation or come to retroactively recognize the eccentricity of her experience. This subjective shift subsequently transforms the spectator's memories and past viewing experiences, forever altering the ways in which the individual spectator will view *The L Word* (or any other program, for that matter) in the future. The filmic conventions used in *The L Word* will now engage the spectator subjectively on different terms, transforming the very conditions of possibility for identification and desire by offering each individual spectator a new line of vision from which to "see" something *else.*

Theorizing Eccentricity

At the beginning stages of this project, I was required to present an excerpt of my thesis to the first-year Master's students in my program. The night before the presentation, I sat at the dinner table with my partner discussing my theoretical framework of eccentricity, to which he responded (jokingly, of course): "So you're basically coming up with a theory that explains how everyone is bisexual?"

An interesting provocation.

The following morning, I delivered my presentation at the research symposium. During the question period, one student responded to my discussion of eccentricity by articulating his appreciation for theories of sexuality that acknowledged the fluidity of desire. For this student, eccentricity seemed to encapsulate sexuality as more of a *continuum* – one that was always in a state of "flux."

Another interesting provocation.

While I made it through the question period relatively unscathed, I was approached by another student during the lunch break with yet, *another* interesting provocation. She asked: "I like the term eccentricity, but why did you choose *that* particular term and not something, like, 'queer'? It seems like you're discussing something very similar. You're just going about it in a different way."

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Is eccentricity just another term for queer, bisexuality, and/or other forms (sexual and non-sexual) of woman-identification? What does this theory of eccentric spectatorial positioning and excessive subjectivity offer that is different from other theories of sexuality? These provocations are the ones that have been guiding my research from the

outset. In this final section, I will discuss what, exactly, a theory of eccentric spectatorship has the offer to the study of sexuality, locating *eccentricity* as something *other* than "queer," "bisexual," or simply another "point" on the "lesbian continuum" (Rich 648).

Locating Eccentricity as Something Else

While eccentricity acknowledges the possibility for heterosexual spectators to experience same-sex desire, this concept may appear to be closer to "queer" insofar as it reveals the very norms and conventions that make this experience of same-sex desire "queer" or "eccentric" at the outset. However, unlike queer – which risks being collapsed into gender identity – eccentricity is *excessive*; it works to disrupt (rather than maintain) continuity (or any notion of a lesbian continuum, for that matter) through its emphasis on contradiction. It is this preoccupation with *excess* that makes eccentricity different from other theories of sexuality; the unconscious is a point of resistance precisely because it is *excessive* to ideology (de Lauretis, *Figures of Resistance* 162).

The reintroduction of questions of the unconscious into this thesis has provided me with the opportunity to map the space between film theories of spectatorship and the Cultural Studies approach to reception that characterizes contemporary televisual analyses of spectatorship. In an attempt to challenge the notion of the "passive" spectator from early apparatus film theory, current televisual analyses of spectatorship have overemphasized the supremacy of the spectator's role as the sole producer of meaning; spectators can interpret and appropriate cultural texts for their own individual purposes (Stacey 38-39). This "populism" constructs spectatorship as a largely conscious process,

equating pleasure with a necessarily resistant notion of activity (Stacey 38-39; 40). Consequently, this populism fails to account for difference between (and even within) spectators. Instead, spectators are massified into an undifferentiated audience, which unintentionally presumes that *all* spectators are not only addressed, but also engaged by representations in the same way.

The conflation of pleasure and activity in current televisual analyses of spectatorship is thus positioned in opposition to passivity as collusion, which is often associated with psychoanalytic theories of spectatorship (Stacey 40). More specifically, the use of psychoanalysis in studying the unconscious and psychic mechanisms at work in the spectator has been critiqued for maintaining differential power relations between the researcher and those who are being researched. As Jackie Stacey argues:

> To analyze [spectators'] response in terms of their unconscious psychic structures which the researcher, but not the researched, can identify is to impose the greatest degree of power difference between the two parties. The assumption behind such a method of interpretation is that audiences have offered information, but that the researcher can read between the lines for latent meanings which reveal unconscious responses that are more significant than those apparently offered by the respondents. (77)

For Stacey, then, the use of psychoanalytic theory exacerbates the problems associated with the power afforded the researcher to interpret spectators' responses. While I acknowledge Stacey's assertion that I, as a researcher, am unable to account for *all* spectators' reception of *The L Word*, this is not to say that it is impossible for this

theory of eccentric spectatorship to account for the specificities of spectatorial positioning.

As I have argued elsewhere in this thesis, the ways in which spectators experience and engage with television programs is neither a self-evident, nor an easily observable phenomenon; spectatorship is a social *and* psychic process. As such, I have attempted to account for this epistemological challenge by retroactively situating my analysis of *The L Word* with my own subjective experiences. Although this methodological consideration may limit my ability to articulate the specificities of *all* spectators' reception to *The L Word*, this theory of eccentric spectatorship can account for how the show may address spectators and the manner in which spectatorial positioning may exceed that very address.

The unconscious, then, ought not to be conflated with either passivity or collusion. Processes of spectatorial identification and desire are "active" ones, relying on the engagement of a socially constituted subjectivity (de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't* 149). This psychic process of engagement provides each individual spectator with specific positionalities of identifications and desire. While the spectator may not necessarily be conscious during this process of subjective engagement, she is able to *feel* the transformative effects of this shift in subjectivity: the ways in which the spectator makes sense of and interacts with her material and social reality has been forever altered. Thus, it is the spectator's experience of this transformative shift that offers her the possibility to understand that her spectatorial position may be eccentric, albeit only in retrospect.

Although such retroactive reflection will never encapsulate what, exactly, one is *feeling* or thinking during the immediate viewing process, this is a challenge that *all*

spectatorship studies must consider; it is difficult, if not impossible, to account for everything the spectator may be thinking during her immediate viewing of a particular program. Thus, it is through the study of the unconscious that one is offered the possibility to begin challenging the privileged and rational status associated with conscious thought.

To study the unconscious and psychic structures at work in the spectator is to acknowledge that we can no longer articulate with absolute certainty that "this" *is* what is happening in the present. Rather, to acknowledge that there are *some* things one cannot know or understand in the present is to provide oneself with the opportunity to think through the *multiple* possibilities of what *could* be happening in that immediate moment. Although this mode of theorizing forces us to forgo the ability to say with absolute certainty that "this" *is* what is happening, this contradiction is the paradox of studying the unconscious; one can only begin to *know* only after one recognizes that they are unable to know everything.

While some would characterize this model of analysis as "speculative," I prefer the term generative. The eccentric account of *The L Word* given in this thesis may not necessarily be one that *all* spectators share; however, this concept of eccentricity acknowledges the possibility for *other* eccentric interpretations of the same television program. Thus, this theory of eccentric spectatorship is a theory of possibility and potentiality.

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This project was initially conceived as a political economy analysis of how the production apparatus of the television industry structures lesbian representational content,

offering spectators different possibilities for identification. As I began to explore how, exactly, processes of identification were conceived in the literature, I discovered that this term lacked conceptual clarity. As a result, my thesis became less concerned with the macro structural analysis of the television industry that I had initially proposed, and shifted toward a theoretical discussion of the televisual spectatorial subject.

The goal of this research has been to acknowledge spectatorship as a dynamic process. I have attempted to develop a theory of eccentric spectatorship in order to account for the process by which the specificity of one's spectatorial positioning and experience of excessive subjectivity may exceed the ways in which the spectator is addressed as a heterosexual subject. More specifically, this eccentric viewing position not only accounts for spectators' multiple interpretative possibilities, but also acknowledges differences between (and even within) spectators; the complex nexus of effects between imaging, narrativity, and camera work used in *The L Word* engage spectators subjectively based on the social, historical, and subjective (conscious and unconscious) positions within which they are situated. This process of spectatorial positioning offers each individual spectator specific possibilities for identification and desire, which may be *excessive* to the current heteronormative structure. Thus, the specificity of one's spectatorial position may be located both inside and outside the ideology of heterosexuality; it is *eccentric* to the category of heterosexuality itself, providing spectators with the opportunity to experience same-sex desire and engage in processes of identification that may exceed the search for oneself on screen.

This eccentric spectatorial position is experienced by the spectator as a transformative shift in subjectivity, forever altering the spectator's memory and past

viewing experiences (White 197). Although the spectator may not necessarily be conscious of this subjective transformation during its inception, she may either *feel* the effects or this change or come to retroactively experience her spectatorial position as one that is eccentric. As a result, this subjective transformation not only offers the spectator a new line of vision from which to view *The L Word* (or any other program), but also changes the ways in which the spectator will experience the social and material world around her.

Eccentric spectatorship, then, is not only experienced by the spectator as a psychic and internal shift in subjectivity, but also extends beyond the immediate viewing process; it is a social and material, as well as a psychic and individual process. As I have argued, spectators make sense of and articulate their eccentric identifications and desires to themselves and others through various cultural activities, which include the consumption of cultural commodities associated with *The L Word*. This public articulation of one's eccentric spectatorial position is not only perceptible to others, but also requires the participation of other spectators; it is through the process of articulating one's eccentric spectatorial position that the individual spectator is aligned with others who share this similar orientation.

This public articulation of one's eccentric spectatorial position has the potential to decenter normativity in mass culture; the straight-identified spectator may experience an internal contradiction between her avowed sexual identity and her experience of same-sex desire, leading to a transformative shift in subjectivity. This shift transforms the spectator's internal subjective configuration and her initial relationship to *The L Word*.

Despite the disruptive potential of this public articulation, however, eccentricity can also be tempered through processes of fetishism and disavowal. In other words, the spectator may experience same-sex desire, but disavow any notion that this experience contradicts her "straight" sexual identity external to the viewing process. As a result, the spectator is able to hold two contradictory beliefs, maintaining the idea that she is still "heterosexual" despite her feelings of same-sex desire, even if it is only at the level of fantasy.

An eccentric spectatorial position is not solely about the spectator's ability to "subvert" or "resist" her interpellation into the ideology of heterosexuality. Rather, this eccentric subject position is *excessive* to this ideological address; it is at the same time inside and outside of the current heteronormative structure of identification and desire, and can never be completely outside of it. While I have developed this theory of eccentric potentiality in relation to *The L Word,* my hope is that this notion of excessive subjectivity may extend beyond the show itself. This theory of eccentricity acknowledges that there are other ways of thinking about and engaging with the social and material reality around us: it is an epistemological shift that makes possible the existence of a space that is at the same time inside and outside of the ideology of heterosexuality. As a result, eccentric spectatorship reveals the unrelenting norms and ideological formations that constitute the straight-identified spectator's experience of same-sex desire as one that is *eccentric* in the first place. In other words, *eccentricity* is the very *de*centering of normativity.

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