

INTRODUCTION

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In June 2023, an overzealous update of Johns Hopkins University's online guide to inclusive language defined the word *lesbian* as a “non-man attracted to non-men.”¹ The ensuing uproar, which succeeded in reversing the edit, was symptomatic of the semantic minefield that *lesbian* now occupies. The proffered definition shares a contrarian impulse with Monique Wittig's famous declaration, back in 1978, that “lesbians are not women.”² In both instances *lesbian* occupies negative space; as if to avoid trouble, the term is often being left behind in favor of others.³ Dyke athletes identify as gay women, pop stars as polysexual, and *queer* remains a catchall. The reality TV show *The Ultimatum: Queer Love* (Netflix, 2023) courts a broad audience while avoiding the L word, and *The L Word: Generation Q* (Showtime, 2019–23) euphemizes the sea change. Tussles over whether *lesbian* is dated, trans exclusionary, and/or Eurocentric are emphatically generational, but also inflected by race, place, class, and consumer capital.

The media images that might count as lesbian are just as densely layered with residual, dominant, and emergent significations. Stereotypes and subcultural signaling often share the same codes, making texts difficult to pin down. Is Cate Blanchett's spellbinding portrait of a predatory conductor in Todd Field's *Tár* (2022)—read at length for its ambivalence in what follows—good for the gays, or bad for women in classical music? Sharp differences among lesbians around that high-profile film prompted *Film Quarterly's* outgoing editor-in-chief, B. Ruby Rich, to float the idea of this dossier with the journal's editorial board in a fitting farewell gesture. The three of us were eager to take up the charge, in part as tribute to Rich's definitive role in lesbian film culture over more than four decades. Highlights include her collaboration on *Jump Cut's* 1981 special section titled “Lesbians and Film,” which featured her coauthored

introduction and her groundbreaking article on *Mädchen in Uniform*; her mid-1990s essay and lecture “Lethal Lesbians”; and her thoughts on rabble-rousing French lesbian Virginie Despentes's cameo in Paul B. Preciado's *Orlando: My Political Autobiography* (2023) in one of her last festival reports for *Film Quarterly*.⁴ For all that she contributed to a rich definition of *lesbian*, however, she eagerly embraced *queer* to name an emerging film movement, revisited in a recent anthology.⁵ In between, Rich found in *trans* a renewal of the New Queer Cinema's energy and innovation.⁶ These instincts and commitments helped her transform this journal into an antiracist, transnational, polyvocal space that put issues of gender and sexual representation and justice front and center.

In addition to honoring Rich's legacy, we were intrigued by the opportunity to unpack the stop-and-start nature of lesbian representations in recent US film, TV, and popular culture, which can be provocative and pedestrian, backward and banal. Perhaps a narrative of progress is antithetical to lesbian representation, as the viral *SNL* skit “Lesbian Period Drama” (NBC, April 10, 2021) suggests.⁷ In it, lesbian writer and actor Kate McKinnon nails the contradictory voyeurism and dismissiveness of dooming lesbians to a gray—or, more pointedly, white—past-ness, even as her own vivid media presence belies the skit's parody of the period drama as *the* lesbian genre. Humor's ability to clock and play with expectations is also evident in Emma Seligman's high school sex comedy *Bottoms* (2023), in which embracing the equation of loser and lesbian is the source of recognition and fun.

On television, the lesbian has become an ambient presence and nonevent. Long after Marilyn McGrath (Gail Strickland) appeared as the first self-identified lesbian to be a regular on a television series (*HeartBeat*, 1988–89), viewers can find lesbians on every kind of show.⁸ They can be found on teen soaps (*Pretty Little Liars*, 2010–17), superhero series (*Supergirl*, 2015–21), procedurals (*9-1-1*, 2018–), apocalyptic science-fiction shows (*The Last of Us*, 2023–), wholesome family dramas (*The Fosters*, 2013–18), and cartoons (*The Owl House*, 2020–23). *Vulture* even dubbed 2023 the year of the “lesbianification of reality TV.”⁹ Whereas a kiss

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between ostensibly straight women signified queerbaiting in the early 1990s, now more likely than not the character will enter into a lesbian relationship—and may even declare she was a lesbian all along (*Star Trek: Picard* [2020–23], *A Million Little Things* [2018–23]). Even Hallmark has joined in, producing its first lesbian Christmas movie, *Friends & Family Christmas* (Anne Wheeler, 2023). The *Sex and the City* reboot *And Just Like That* (HBO, 2021–) responds to criticisms of the original series’ heteronormativity and lack of diversity by adding Sara Ramirez’s nonbinary character, Che, but such didactic identity politics occasioned scorn and accusations of a lack of authenticity. The lesbian, in other words, can do a lot of work—or, seemingly, none at all.

Hence a question that inspired this dossier is whether or not a lesbian quotidian amounts to a specifically lesbian form of signification. Does lesbian representation signify something beyond women desiring women? *The L Word* and its reboot have been notable for their thick description of lesbian community and kinship models. But it sometimes seems that the new, broad inclusiveness eschews specificity. For example, *9-1-1* may offer the rare representation of a married Black lesbian couple, but audiences do not get a sense of Aisha Hinds’s Henrietta Wilson in a larger black queer community. Should the inclusiveness be understood as resisting overdetermined scripts about what lesbian life is like? Or does it fall short of the potential of the lesbian continuum, which, in Adrienne Rich’s early formulation, describes a range of kinship models, practices of care, non-reproduction, and various gender performances? In other words, the figure of the lesbian ideally does expansive work in media in addition to depicting women desiring other women sexually and romantically. Part of what this dossier explores is the status of visual, sonic, comedic, and

melodramatic codes—what lesbian media looks like in all its diversity, beyond inclusiveness.

In evoking both B. Ruby Rich and Adrienne Rich, we are thinking about how lesbian theory and media criticism pushed a reimagination of what existed and what could be possible. The queer temporalities in this dossier also invite a conversation about what Elizabeth Freeman has described as chrononormativity in practices of self-definition, conflicts within queer discourse about what people long for in terms of representation. Some representations of lesbian identity might still cling to people who do not deploy the term. What Jack Halberstam described years ago as “border wars” over butch and trans identity are ongoing. As in other debates around representational politics, debates about the ethics of “good” and “bad” lesbian representation can derail conversation about a work.

The term *lesbian* does tend to tarry with the past—whether Sappho’s classical antiquity, 1920s Paris modernism, 1970s lesbian separatism, or the nonfeminist behaviors predators like Patricia Highsmith bequeathed the fictional Lydia Tár. But it can also signify a taken-for-granted



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presence: while young, gender-nonconforming social-media users may feel that lesbian spaces are exclusionary, older ones ask, “What lesbian spaces remain?” This is a moment of overlapping significations: audiences found sing-along affirmation with the Indigo Girls in both the documentary *It’s Only Life after All* (Alexandria Bombach, 2023) and the superfemme blockbuster *Barbie* (Greta Gerwig, 2023), without necessarily sorting by sexual identity or generation.

We note that most of the works our authors reference hail from the United States, though work we admire considers these questions in sites around the world.¹⁰ Methodologically, however, these contributions are satisfyingly diverse: they engage texts, to be sure, with precision and with great insight. But they also raise questions about stardom, reception, casting, writing, and production alongside their trenchant readings—fitting for an issue bound to find readers at the annual conference of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies. If they stimulate debate and discussion about the future itinerary and stakes for *lesbian* media study, we will have achieved our modest goal.

The dossier opens with Clara Bradbury-Rance’s essay, “Ambivalent Masculinities in Contemporary Film and TV: On Lesbian (and) Trans Representability.” In the wake of her first book, *Lesbian Cinema after Queer Theory* (Edinburgh University Press, 2019), Bradbury-Rance continues to probe the contradictory, uneven, and discontinuous relations between gender and sexuality with a fabulous romp through popular culture, from Lena Waithe and Desiree Akhavan to *But I’m a Cheerleader* (Jamie Babbit, 1999), *Booksmart* (Olivia Wilde, 2019), and beyond. In this compilation of instances of lesbian legibility across forms of media that exceed cinema, she argues that the paradoxes of new forms of identity—especially trans and other forms of gender nonconformity—and their accompanying common senses likewise demand parsing as they ignite new modes of recognition and cultural organization between makers and audiences.

Amber Jamilla Musser’s essay, “Felt Pleasures: The Jiggle, the Lesbian, and Janelle Monáe’s ‘Lipstick Lover,’” considers a star whose queer identifications reject the label of *lesbian* in favor of the (appealing) appellation “free-ass motherfucker,” anchored in blackness. The “Lipstick Lover” video, in Musser’s reading, presents a compendium of brown *jouissance*, a horizon for black queer freedom that is elaborated through polymorphous pleasures: gazes, movements, caresses, erotics. With the intergenerational care—tarrying with the past—we have been emphasizing,

Musser follows Monáe’s referential, audio and visual landscape to the Jamaica of the 1970s, illuminated by the Caribbean-American Black lesbian thinker Audre Lorde. For Monáe as for Lorde, the erotic becomes a resource for intersectional analysis *and* pleasure, rejecting forms of respectability and normativity.

In Karen Tongson’s essay, “Narrative Plenitude in *The Ultimatum: Queer Love*,” a recent single TV series takes center stage, as its own form is, in Tongson’s pithy observation, “lesbionic.” The reality dating concept show *The Ultimatum*’s second season (2022) casts new light on the centrality of marriage to its plot by showcasing queer styles of intimacy and cohabitation that become subject to “processing,” astrological inquiries, and other lesbian epistemologies. Tongson and other lesbian viewers delighted in the show’s frank presentation of butch-femme and intercultural couples as a kind of given, everyday form, without the aversion to masc styles or identifications that mar so many lesbian worlds on TV. Retooling Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick for contemporary television, Tongson looks back to queer theory’s centrality and renews its urgency.

In her careful and insightful reading of the aforementioned, wily film *Tár*, Melissa Hardie shows just how difficult it is to parse the film’s queer politics as it hovers, entropically, between clichés, condemnations, desires, and prestige. Hardie uncovers a citational universe in the film that involves classical music, European cinema, auteurism, and, yes, lesbians, not exactly to *locate* the ethics or ideological bent of the film but instead to appreciate its interstitial nature.

Finally, Amy Villarejo interviews Academy Award-nominated screenwriter Phyllis Nagy, whose screenplay for the 2015 Todd Haynes film *Carol* adapted Patricia Highsmith’s 1952 novel *The Price of Salt*. Nagy has begun to revisit Highsmith for a limited series she is currently writing. A writer who has strongly identified as a lesbian, Nagy remembers her friendship with Highsmith but also considers the author’s fraught legacy, including Highsmith’s legendary racism and antisemitism, wondering what happens when queer foremothers are such bad objects.

The interview with Nagy throws into relief the generational differences that bring such conflictual valences to the term *lesbian*. As a supplement to the works highlighted here, a batch of recent documentaries provide counter-histories that harness the power of those differences and credit some of the elders who made it all so quotidian. Turn to *Esther Newton Made Me Gay* (Jean Carlomusto, 2022), *Jewelle: A Just Vision* (Madeline Lim, 2022), *Beyond the Aggressives: 25 Years Later* (Daniel Peddle, 2023), even

Loving Highsmith (Eva Vitija, 2022). Or check out *Dykes, Camera, Action: The Story of Queer Cinema from the Women Who Made It Happen* (Caroline Berler, 2018) to get B. Ruby Rich's on-screen hot take.

Notes

1. Matt Laviertes, "Johns Hopkins Pulls 'Lesbian' Definition after Uproar over Use of 'Non-men' instead of 'Women,'" NBC News, June 14, 2023, www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-news/johns-hopkins-pulls-lesbian-definition-uproar-use-non-men-instead-wome-rcna89307.
2. Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 34.
3. As Mairead Sullivan, in her bluntly titled *Lesbian Death*, argues: "Recognizing these ambivalent relations to lesbian, my argument is simple; lesbian disrupts." Mairead Sullivan, *Lesbian Death: Desire and Danger between Feminist and Queer* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022), 3.
4. Edith Becker, Michelle Citron, Julia Lesage, and B. Ruby Rich, introduction to the special section "Lesbians and Film," *Jump Cut*, nos. 24–25 (March 1981): 17–21; B. Ruby Rich, "Maedchen in Uniform: From Repressive Tolerance to Erotic Liberation," *Jump Cut*, nos. 24–25, (March 1981): 44–50 (for a recent reflection on the film and on that original essay, see Rich's webinar "Deep Focus: Mädchen in Uniform," www.youtube.com/watch?v=jWj8FD6n-YI); B. Ruby Rich, "Lethal Lesbians: The Cinematic Inscription of Murderous Desire," in *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 103–22; B. Ruby Rich, "Film Festivals in Winter," *Film Quarterly* 76, no. 4 (Summer 2022): 84–92.
5. B. Ruby Rich, "After the New Queer Cinema: Intersectionality v. Fascism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Queer Cinema*, ed. Ron Gregg and Amy Villarejo (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).
6. B. Ruby Rich, *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 271.
7. The 2021 skit satirizes *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (*Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, Céline Sciamma, 2019) and *Ammonite* (Francis Lee, 2020).
8. Sasha Torres, "Television/Feminism: HeartBeat and Prime Time Lesbianism," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (Hoboken, NJ: Taylor and Francis, 1993), 176–85.
9. Emily Palmer Heller, "Reality TV's Sapphic Revolution," *Vulture*, December 16, 2023, www.vulture.com/article/reality-tv-lesbian-cast-revolution-jenna-lyons.html.
10. See, for example, Bliss Cua Lim, *The Archival Afterlives of Philippine Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2024); and Rana M. Jaleel and Evren Savci, eds., "Transnational Queer Materialism," special issue, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 123, no. 1 (January 2024).