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**Queer Female Fans: A Master's Thesis**

**APPROVED BY  
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

Suzanne Scott, Supervisor

Jennifer McClearen

**Queer Female Fans: A Master's Thesis**

**by**

**Kira Mackenzie Deshler**

**Report**

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## About

Hello! My name is Kira Deshler, and this website serves as my Master's Thesis. Broadly, this thesis is about queer female fans, community and space. Each chapter looks at one (or several) examples of queer female community/space, with the intent of illustrating the various ways that queer women have created communities in and around fandom across time and space.

This thesis is academic in its depth and scope, but my aim was to write it in such a way that it is accessible to any and all audiences regardless of their level of exposure to academic writing. This focus on accessibility is also the reason I have chosen to publish this thesis on a website rather than in an academic database. I hope that this project can serve as a resource both within and outside of academia, bringing together queer women, scholars, and fans from across the globe.

This thesis could not have been completed without the encouragement and support of my friends and colleagues at UT Austin, including the incredible women on my thesis committee, Dr. Suzanne Scott and Dr. Jennifer McClearen. I also want to thank all of the people at ClexaCon who were gracious enough to take the time to speak with me, and all of the queer women and fans throughout history who have created and sustained the communities that I am now lucky enough to be researching.

Below is a table of contents. Happy reading!

A note: the final form of this thesis exists on a Wordpress site:  
<https://queerfemalefans.home.blog/>

## Abstract

### Queer Female Fans: A Master's Thesis

Kira Mackenzie Deshler, MA  
The University of Texas at Austin, 2020

Supervisor: Suzanne Scott

In the last several years the conversation around lesbian and queer female space has centered around the concept of *dissappearance*. With lesbian spaces of the past such as lesbian bars and feminist bookstores having largely disappeared, young queer women must find new ways to engage with community and create safe spaces. In order to investigate these phenomena this project poses the following question: In the absence of publicly designated spaces for queer women, or even a sense of public lesbian culture, *where do queer women turn?* Where in, 2019, is queer female community *located?* Under these circumstances, I also ask *how do queer women construct and seek out safe spaces?* In order to answer these questions I look at three moments of queer female cultural production as it relates to space and fandom. Chapter 1 looks at the 20th century, discussing the promises and problems of space such as lesbian bars and women's bookstores. Chapter 2 looks at YouTube, and the emotionally intense fandom that arises there. Chapter 3, my central case study, looks at the fan convention ClexaCon, considering how the event does and does not function as a (physical) safe space or queer women. This project, which exists as a digital scholarly project, seeks to explore the creation and maintenance of queer female space, while also encouraging discussion about how we define safe spaces and why we still need them as a community.

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## Introduction

### *A preamble to the introduction*

In her 1994 book *Lesbian Utopics*, Annamarie Jagose writes: “The lesbian then, was at once everywhere and invisible” (1). In comparing lesbianism to the concept of utopia, Jagose highlights the qualities that these two terms have in common – they both exist outside normative systems of thought, while at the same time structuring those same systems because of this exteriority. This dichotomy between invisibility and ubiquity is exemplified by Queen Victoria’s notorious inability to envision lesbian sex, leading her to apply Britain’s anti-homosexuality law only to men and simultaneously writing lesbians out of (legal) history. Jagose’s point, that lesbians are both everywhere *and* invisible, illustrates that lesbianism has always had a complex relationship to the mainstream, whether it be in Queen Victoria’s time or ours.

Of course, since Jagose wrote the book 25 years ago, and since Queen Victoria made her proclamation two centuries ago, things have changed remarkably. Anti-sodomy laws in America have been replaced by marriage equality, and there are more LGBT characters on television and more LGBT people in politics than ever before. Nonetheless, queer women’s position within mainstream cultural systems remains uncertain. Within popular culture, queer women still often exist somewhere along the spectrum between invisibility and exploitation. In terms of exploitation, many representations of lesbians in the past (and present) have been produced primarily for male pleasure, and as a result,



lesbians continue to be associated with pornography. On the other hand, many thriving lesbian spaces of the 20th century – such as lesbian bars and feminist bookstores – no longer exist, thus decreasing the centrality of actual, physical lesbian culture. With this digital scholarly project, which also serves as my master’s thesis, I hope to explore the creation and maintenance of queer female space, particularly as it relates to this paradox of visibility within popular culture.

In what follows I will define my terms, describe the structure of this project, and explore the significance of affirming spaces for queer women across history. Such spaces, what we might also call “safe spaces,” can mitigate these erasures in various ways. Spaces that exist publicly, such as ClexaCon, the focus of [Chapter 3](#), may work to bring visibility to queer women and place importance on our cultural contributions. On the other hand, places meant to be invisible to the outside world, such as early [lesbian bars](#) or rural [women’s music festivals](#), provide inhabitants with a sense of safety, while also affirming to queer women that they are not alone in the world. Online spaces, such as Tumblr or YouTube (the focus of [Chapter 2](#)), often straddle the boundary between public and private, while still providing this same sense of affirmation. Indeed, all of these spaces (in the many forms they take) interact in interesting ways with the concept of safety, and the distinctions between public/private and visibility/invisibility, and these are some of the terms I will be exploring throughout this project.

***The past and present collide***

In May of 1974, the first National Women's Music Festival was held in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois. Other similar festivals followed, most notably the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, which began two years later and ended in 2015 [amidst controversy](#) surrounding the festival's prohibitive policies concerning transgender women. These music festivals, though in name catered to *all* women, became important cultural spaces for lesbians, who previously had very few spaces, public or private, to call their own. Throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, lesbian cultural spaces continued to proliferate, leading to an influx of women's music festivals, women's bookstores and coffee houses, and lesbian bars.

To young queer women, these spaces feel almost mythical and may be difficult to imagine. Over the last decade, lesbian bars have quietly begun disappearing, with the [oldest lesbian bars](#) on [both coasts](#) having closed their doors. Queer women today are much more likely to meet one another online than at a bookstore or a bar. Instead of meeting at a Cris Williamson concert or at an Adrienne Rich poetry reading, the queer women of today might connect while looking through the Twitter discussions about popular lesbian couples on television like #Clexa or #Juliantina, or in the comments section of a Hayley Kiyoko [music video](#).

Though these two eras of lesbian culture may seem to have almost nothing in common, I see a connection, one which we can draw across both time and space. The thread I am interested in exploring here is the creation of queer female spaces, and significantly, the creation of these spaces through the practices of queer female fans.

(Queer women in the 1950s traded illicit lesbian pulp novels – now we swap comments on lesbian fanfictions on [Archive of Our Own](#)). As both a queer woman and as a fan of lesbian media, I am interested in exploring how queer women of today cope with, and even thrive in these conditions.

For queer women who did not grow up with access to these physical lesbian spaces, the internet, and more specifically online fandom, has been a place to find community, friendship, and even romantic love. As Susan Driver notes in her groundbreaking book *Queer Girls and Popular Culture* (2007), young queer women use popular culture to “creatively imagine possibilities, forge connections, make meanings, and articulate relations” (14). With this project I hope to build off of Driver’s work and illustrate the contemporary state of queer women’s relationship to popular media, which I will argue is defined by the maintenance of queer fandom and the continued conversations surrounding LGBT representation. Two years ago, these conversations resulted in the first-ever multi-fandom fan convention specifically for queer women, a convention called ClexaCon. ClexaCon began in 2016, following the widely [criticized](#) death of a lesbian character named Lexa on a series called *The 100* (The CW, 2014-). This event will serve as the starting point for my research.

In order to investigate these phenomena I pose the following question: In the absence of publicly designated spaces for queer women, or even a sense of public lesbian culture, *where do queer women turn?* Where in, 2019, is queer female community *located?* Under these circumstances, I also ask *how do queer women construct and seek*

*out safe spaces?* Additionally, I hope to investigate how present-day spaces created for and by queer women both relate to and differ from lesbian spaces of the past.

Cross-generational communication between queer women is something I believe we severely lack, and I hope at the very least this project will encourage discussion.

### ***Terminology***

In order to continue this exploration of queer women, fandom, and space, some definitional work is in order. To begin, let us consider the concept of **fandom**. The word “fandom,” of course, comes from the word “fan,” which in turn is an abbreviation of the word “fanatic,” which stems from the Latin “fanaticus.” As Henry Jenkins puts it in his seminal fan studies book *Textual Poachers* (1992), “In its most literal sense, “fanaticus” simply meant “Of or belonging to the temple, a temple servant, a devotee” but it quickly assumed more negative connotations, “Of persons inspired by orgiastic rites and enthusiastic frenzy” (Oxford Latin Dictionary)” (12). Jenkins’ primary contribution to the field of fan studies was to debunk this common perception of fans as a pathological group of lunatics. Jenkins instead turned his attention to the ways in which fans integrate media objects into their lives and produce community through shared identification with particular texts.

Fandom, then, is a community or subculture comprised of individuals who identify as fans of one such text. As Mark Duffett (2013) puts it, “One becomes a ‘fan’ not by being a regular viewer of a particular program but by translating that viewing into some kind of cultural activity, by sharing feelings and thoughts about program content

with friends, by joining a ‘community’ of other fans who share common interests” (63). Duffett argues that fandom is defined by three main concepts: *identification*, *practice*, and *community*. These three concepts are particularly useful for my own study of queer female fandom, as the process of sexual and gender identification is extremely important to this fandom, and in turn, influences the fan practices that maintain and define this community.

As a number of queer scholars have illustrated, queer female fandom often expands beyond the models of fandom that Jenkins and others often study. Moving away from the more generalist work of Jenkins and Duffett, more attention has been focused in recent years on the distinct subcultural fan practices of groups like queer women. (See *Transformative Works and Cultures*’ [special issue](#) on Queer Female Fandom). Kelsey Cameron (2017) notes that queer women “lack both identity reinforcement from mainstream culture” as well as “the embodied sexual spaces that many position as key to the cultural lives of gay men” (1.6). Driver demonstrates the ways in which queer girls use popular media to find belonging and “communicate their differences,” while Stephanie M. Yeung (2014) illustrates the length queer women go to in order to sustain and preserve what she calls “fugitive representations.” Drawing from the insights of scholars such as Jenkins and Duffett as well as queer fan scholars, I will look specifically at the ways in which queer female fans do and do not conform to normative definitions of fandom, highlighting the spaces, practices, and affective communities that define us as a subcultural group.

Next, we must agree on a definition of **space**. To make matters more complicated, for this project I am looking at both physical and online spaces, meaning the level of embodiment (i.e. the physical presence of the body) will vary from space to space. To begin, spaces, at least as they are constituted by humans or by civilizations, are locations that individuals or groups inhabit. As Katherine Fobear puts it, “space is described as being both a “process and social product” that conditions and is constituted by social relations (G. Visser, 2008, p. 1345)” (723). As such, spaces can be either permanent – like a public library – or fleeting – like the space created between two queer women when a [Hayley Kiyoko](#) song plays in the supermarket (See Valentine 1995). In addition, as I highlighted above, spaces can be both physical or virtual – both these types of spaces have the ability to transmit affect through its inhabitants.

The construction of spaces by humans as a “social product” as well as their ability to transmit affect are two essential elements to this working definition of space. Teresa Brennan (2004) defines affect by asking this question: “Is there anyone who has not, at least once, walked into a room and “felt the atmosphere”?” (1). It is a space’s ability to transmit this sensation – one that travels between individuals and between objects and is often difficult to put into words – that may bind its inhabitants together, or alternatively, tear them apart. In my own study, I will investigate a selection of spaces that have been or are important to queer women, looking at their organization, the emotional or physical experience of being there, as well as their relationship to the concept of safety.

Next up, of course, we must come to an understanding of what exactly is a **safe space**. The term “safe space” has a long and storied history. It primarily emerged during the feminist movement of the mid-to-late 20th century among activist circles, though it is now most popularly used on college campuses and in classrooms. A simple definition of the term comes from The Roestone Collective (2014), who state that “In feminist, queer, and civil rights movements an understanding of safe space has developed that is associated with keeping marginalized groups free from violence and harassment” (1346). Naturally, however, this term has been utilized in varying ways. The Roestone Collective bring up [Take Back the Night](#) protests (a movement to make the streets safe for women) as well as lesbian separatist communities as two examples of how a safe space might manifest.

These two examples bring up the distinction between two types of safe spaces – those that are “inclusive” and those that are “separatist.” Several of the spaces I have explored, namely ClexaCon and women’s music festivals, struggle to maintain themselves as either wholly inclusive or wholly separatist. The concept of a safe space is often paradoxical, as certain spaces may highlight and celebrate some forms of difference (such as gender or sexuality) while obscuring others (such as race or ability). In this respect, a safe space can be described by Rose’s (1993:137, 140, 154) idea of “paradoxical space”—a space that “does not replicate the exclusions of the Same and the Other”, “but is simultaneously safe and unsafe, inside and outside” (The Roestone Collective, 1355).

To conclude, while safe spaces often fall short of their commitments, there are some common expectations among marginalized groups of what a safe space should be. (Most of these expectations were brought up by the participants in my study). **First**, a safe space should be a space where individuals feel safe from harm, violence, and judgment. **Second**, a safe space should be a space where individuals are given the freedom to express themselves. And **third**, a safe space should be a space where inhabitants feel cared for and listened to. The question of inclusivity/exclusivity often threatens these goals, as I discovered in my investigation of women’s music festivals, ClexaCon, and other queer spaces online. I will engage with this concept in my investigation of ClexaCon in order to gauge the complexity of its meaning and the lengths we still have to go to achieve true “inclusivity” in our queer spaces.

Lastly, there are some theoretical concepts that underpin my research that I must briefly mention. The concepts most relevant to my work are **grief/melancholia**, **affect**, and **futurity**. I draw from Judith Butler (2004) who discusses the ways in which queer people are in part constituted by their own vulnerability. Butler argues that grief is not simply a private process, but instead reveals the inherent sociality that defines our existence. Queer people have a unique relationship to grief, and though I am not primarily studying the Bury Your Gays trope nor Lexa’s death, these losses still permeate the minds of many queer female fans and inform many of our relationships to popular media as a whole. José Esteban Muñoz (2009) has also written productively about mourning, suggesting that a potential result of grief, when performed *queerly* and without



pathologization, is an investment in queer futurity and utopia. I will illustrate how for queer fans, the objects used to create this utopia are found in popular media. Similarly, Sarah Ahmed (2010), one of the foremost scholars of affect, writes about the ways in which we orient ourselves toward happiness, and suggests that by orienting ourselves towards objects we associate with happiness, “we are aiming somewhere else: toward a happiness that is presumed to follow” (26). Though I don’t wish to psychoanalyze queer women or queer female fans, I do believe this critical theory is a useful tool for illuminating the social, political, and emotional structures that shape our lives.

### ***The Chapters to Follow***

The primary focus of this project, as well as the reason I began to research this topic, is the annual convention for queer women’s media, ClexaCon. I first heard about ClexaCon while I was writing my undergraduate [thesis](#) about the Bury Your Gays Trope and the reverberations of Lexa’s death on *The 100* among queer fans and among television culture as a whole. ClexaCon was founded in 2017, a year after Lexa’s death, as a celebration of the fictional couple Clexa, one of the most popular lesbian couples of the century, as well as a call to action for better LGBT representation. ClexaCon represents a physical manifestation of the online community building queer fans have been engaged in for years, and thus serves as a fitting focal point for this project. I attended ClexaCon in April of 2019, and while there interviewed attendees about their experiences at the convention and their experiences with queer female fandom and queer female community in general. [Chapter Three](#) of this project will explore the concept of

ClexaCon as a safe space for queer women and as a space for community building, using my interviews and observations as the basis for this discussion.

Because I want to investigate both contemporary and historical iterations of queer female fandom and community, [Chapter One](#) will explore lesbian spaces of the 20th century in order to contextualize the cultural moment we are in today. I will look both at specific spaces, such as women’s music festivals and lesbian bars, as well as popular perspectives about lesbian culture from this era. In this chapter, I will look specifically at the contemporary discourse surrounding the supposed disappearance of lesbian spaces and lesbian culture more broadly, as discussed in Bonnie J. Morris’ book *The Disappearing L* (2016). Through this exploration, I will consider a number of questions such as: *Has lesbian culture disappeared? Where has it gone? And what, exactly, is lesbian culture?* Important to this discussion is the practice of naming and the expansion of queerness as a category, which has disrupted some of the more static definitions of womanhood and lesbianism that were popularized in the second half of the 20th century. This chapter will draw connections between queer female cultures of the past and present, as well as illustrate how our cultural spaces have changed – for better or for worse.

**Chapter Two**, which will explore online fan communities, will focus specifically on YouTube as an archive for queer female content and as a tool for international community building. My primary case study for this chapter will be the fan communities that emerged around several popular “real-life” lesbian couples on

YouTube, and the continued dedication of fans even after their breakups. This example usefully illustrates the strength of this online community building as well as the emotional investment many queer women fans have in this content. As a bonus piece for this chapter, I have also included an article I wrote about “[Juliantina](#),” a lesbian couple on the Mexican soap opera *Amar a Muerte* (Univision, 2018) that has achieved international popularity. This piece illustrates queer women’s use of YouTube as a tool of translation and archiving for these “fugitive representations” (Yeung). Taken together, these two examples illustrate the unique dedication of queer women to their chosen media objects, as well as the lengths queer fans go to preserve and centralize their stories.

My hope is that this project, as an open-access academic work that engages heavily with popular culture, will educate and empower those within the queer community as well as those outside it, while also validating the cultural productions and practices of queer women who have not historically received such validation. In what follows I will illustrate the continued importance of safe and affirming spaces for queer women, the centrality of fandom in creating these spaces, as well as the long-standing difficulty of creating spaces that are truly safe for its inhabitants. Though the questions I am asking have no definitive answers, I hope this project serves as a jumping-off point for further discussion and scholarship on these topics.

## Chapter 1: Uncovering Queer Histories

In the last decade or so, the prevailing discourse about lesbian culture and lesbian spaces has centered around the concept of disappearance. The recent closure of some of the oldest lesbian bars across the country (The Oxwood Inn in LA, The Lexington Club in San Francisco, Hershee Bar in Norfolk) is often understood as both a symptom and a cause of this cultural disappearance, as these spaces have long served as safe havens and as catalysts for community building. For an older generation of lesbians, this loss feels acute, but for younger queer women it may not even register as a loss, as these lesbian cultural touchstones of the 20th century are now often seen as uncool or outdated. This generational dissonance indicates that there has been a lack of sustained conversation between generations of queer women, and that cultural knowledge has not been passed along – in either direction.

With this chapter I hope to diminish this gap by investigating lesbian spaces of the 20th century not simply for how they might have failed (both financially and in their apparent inability to connect across generations), but for how they functioned as cultural safe spaces. In doing so, I will illustrate what lesbian culture may have looked like in the second half of the 20th century in order to connect these cultural moments to current developments in queer female culture and space today. In particular, I am interested in how we might conceptualize the four lesbian cultural touchstones I will be looking at – lesbian pulp novels, lesbian bars, feminist bookstores, and women’s music festivals – in

terms of fandom, particularly as it relates to queer female fandom today. I have chosen to frame these cultural moments using the lens of fandom because I have found through my research that media, and queer women's collective relationship to it, has been a throughline in these communities across time. In fact, this chapter was partially inspired by two older lesbians I interviewed who compared ClexaCon (the focus of Chapter 3) to the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. By making these connections, I hope to illustrate the long-standing centrality of media within queer cultures, as well the different strategies queer women have taken and continue to take to create and maintain cultural spaces.

**A note on language:** Elsewhere in this project, you will hear me refer to the population I am studying as “queer women” or “queer female fans.” In this chapter, when referring to the people and places of the past, I will be using the term “lesbian.” This is not because I think the term lesbian is outdated or only belongs in the past – it is in fact the term I am most likely to use to describe myself – but rather because I want to be both inclusive and historically specific. I use queer women to refer to the present because that is a term that is often employed in present-day spaces, as well as because through my own research I have found that spaces centered around lesbian or lesbian-adjacent content are often populated by women of varying gender and sexual identities that may or may not be encompassed by the term lesbian. Correspondingly, I use the term lesbian in this chapter specifically because that is the term most prominently used by the women who inhabited these spaces – even though bisexual women and trans individuals did also participate in these spaces to varying degrees (more on that later). This change in language also illustrates cultural shifts within queer culture that I will discuss later on.

This chapter also serves as a means to contextualize the next two chapters of this project, which will focus on examples of queer female communities online as well

as the queer female fan convention ClexaCon, placing these moments within a lineage of queer cultural productions. I also intend for this project to serve as an archive of lesbian and queer women's culture and history, following Anne Cvetkovich's (2002, 2003) recognition that queer archives are essential in maintaining both our cultural and institutional memory. I will be looking at the four moments/spaces in lesbian history that I outlined above because they represent four significant moments of community building for lesbians, and because they illustrate the importance of media and cultural spaces in building these communities. To conclude this chapter, I will go into some of the reasons that have been proposed to explain the purported disappearance of this culture and these spaces, and interrogate how these changes may have contributed to the queer culture that exists today.

### **1950-1965: Lesbian Pulp Novels**

The first case study I will be looking at is not a physical space, but rather a particular media text that had an effect on the spaces that were *imagined* for queer women: lesbian pulp novels. Lesbian pulp novels had their heyday in the 1950s and early 1960s, a period during which "more lesbian novels were published [...] than at any other time in history" (Zimmerman 9). These cheap paperback books are known for their titillating covers, and were often written by men for a male audience. However, as Yvonne Keller (2005) notes, there was a distinct subset of these novels during this period that were written by women, and that quickly gained a dedicated female audience. Keller calls these pulps "pro-lesbian," and estimates that at least 90 of the 500 novels published

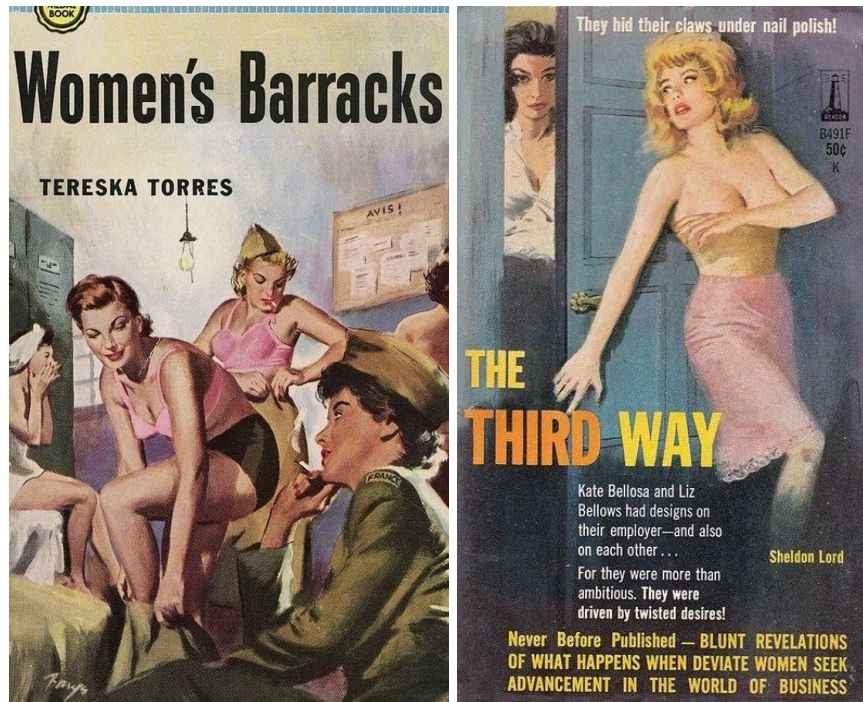
during this period fall into this category. However, although there were some more “affirming” lesbian pulp novels that existed during this time, lesbians voraciously consumed these novels regardless of quality. Joan Nestle has called these novels “survival literature,” as they were “coveted and treasured for their sometimes positive and sometimes awful but decidedly lesbian and decidedly available representation” (Keller 386).

Keller goes on to suggest that lesbian pulp novels are “important to lesbian studies because their truly impressive quantities helped create the largest generation of self-defined lesbians up to that point (387),” a generation of women who would go on to be involved in the first national gay rights movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. Lesbian pulps allowed lesbians to see themselves represented, confirming that they did in fact *exist*, and opened up the possibility that there were others out there like them. As Linnea Stenson puts it:

The emancipatory potential of pulp novels lie not simply in their storylines or covers, but rather in the cultural practice of consuming them, which allowed lesbians an opportunity (within an otherwise rigidly heteronormative system of representation) to re-imagine themselves and the world around them (46).

These pulp novels greatly affected the lesbian imaginary, allowing lesbians to finally envision a space for themselves in the cultural sphere. However, the imagined space that opened up as a result of these novels was limited – the characters in these books were almost exclusively white, leaving lesbians of color out of this cultural

imaginary (Keller). Despite this, lesbian pulp novels were still consumed by lesbians of color, as there was little else in the way of sapphic media available at the time.



[Figure 1]: *Right*: *Women's Barracks* by Tereska Torres, known as the first lesbian pulp (1950, Fawcett Books). [Figure 2] *Left*: *The Third Way* by Sheldon Lord (Beacon Books, 1962).

In addition to expanding the space of the lesbian cultural imaginary, these novels in some cases encouraged the formation of physical lesbian spaces. Stenson writes about a lesbian couple from Toronto who packed up and moved to Greenwich Village because they had learned from the pulps that was where lesbians lived (46). Indeed, lesbian pulp novels not only encouraged lesbian self-identification among readers, but also “conveyed a sense of lesbian culture, and sometimes helped lesbians find others like themselves” (Walters 85). Readers of these pulps were made aware of the spaces that lesbian might



frequent, thus increasing the profile of spaces such as lesbian bars. In her book *Heroic Desire* (1998), Sally Munt writes that “nightclubs were a visible site for women interested in ‘seeing’ other women, and it is in this literature of the 1950s and 1960s that the bar becomes consolidated as the symbol of the home” (40). Thus, lesbian pulp novels were significant in lesbian history both because they inspired lesbian self-identification and encouraged lesbians to envision their own cultural spaces. In the next section I will investigate another significant moment in lesbian history during this period: the emergence of lesbian bars.

### **Lesbian Bars**

Over the last decade or so, a peculiar “disappearance” seems to have occurred. Lesbian bars across the country, even the oldest and most prominent bars, have been shutting down. News articles lamenting this loss appear every few months, creating the sense that the disappearance of lesbian bars across the U.S. has become something of an epidemic. The loss of these spaces is likely perceived differently by different populations. For older queer women, this disappearance may feel like a loss of community or a loss of history. For younger queer women, many of whom have never even set foot in a lesbian bar, this disappearance may seem like the regrettable loss of a bygone era, or perhaps even the welcome consequence of a culture that is less caught up in labels. Instead of investigating which of these perspectives holds the most merit, what I intend to do in this section is illustrate how lesbian bars have historically functioned within lesbian culture, as well as investigate the potential reasons for their disappearance.

By doing so, I hope to highlight the centrality of lesbian bars among lesbian culture of the past, while also illustrating in subsequent chapters the ways in which young queer women have managed to find community despite their relative absence.

Lesbian bars have a long and storied history in the United States. In her 1992 article “Invisible Women in Invisible Places” Maxine Wolf “traces Lesbian use of bar environments in the U.S. to the late 1800s and the existence of bars used exclusively by Lesbians to the 1920s” (142). Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis (2005) suggest that by the 1940s, “gay and lesbian social life became firmly established in bars in most cities in the U.S.” (29). Wolf notes that laws (including anti “cross-dressing” measures and statutes prohibiting sexual acts “against nature”) and the constant threat of violence greatly affected the experience and the physical environment of these spaces, with many lesbian bars lacking the signage or other physical features that would explicitly mark them as lesbian. Up until the 1970s (and even afterward) going to these bars was risky, as patrons were always under threat of violence or exposure. As Wolf puts it, “women who remained in the bar environments in the 50s and 60s had a conscious sense that they were risking a great deal to be there and decided it was worth it” (153).



[Figure 3]: *The Green Door, North Hollywood, 1955. Credit.*

This issue of safety and risk greatly affected the clientele of these bars during the first few decades of their existence and leads us to an important point – the bars were often segregated, both in terms of class and race. In her study of lesbian bars in Detroit from 1939 to 1965, a period during which there were approximately 20 bars, Roey Thorpe (2005) found that these bars had mostly white clientele and mostly white owners, and that the bars were also segregated by class. According to Thorpe, “Blue collar and white collar lesbians had different ideas and needs when it came to the question of safety” (178). Thorpe argues that for working-class lesbians, safety meant having a “turf,” and having a community that acted as protection when violence arose. On the

other hand, middle-class lesbians defined safety as living an acceptable, middle-class life while also developing friendships and relationships with other women in private (Thorpe 175). In addition, Thorpe illustrates, middle-class women with jobs such as teachers or librarians would almost definitely be fired if they were outed, while working-class women who worked in factories would likely face violence if they were outed but could potentially keep their jobs (175).

In their study of lesbian bars in Baltimore during the 1930s and 1940s, Kennedy and Davis (2005) echo these sentiments, noting that because of laws during this period that prevented women from entering bars (in an effort to stop venereal disease), many lesbian bars were located in red-light districts, which further discouraged middle or upper-class women from patronizing them. Upper-class women instead hosted their own private parties, which in turn working-class women were not invited to. Black lesbians in Buffalo during this period, greatly outnumbered at lesbian bars, most often socialize at house parties or at straight black bars. Kennedy and Davis note that due the size of the black population in Buffalo during this time, the city could not offer anonymity to black lesbians” (67), and thus some traveled to New York City to find community. The specific raced and classed environments of bars during this period gives us insight into who needed these spaces, who had access to them, and how they were used. As Thorpe notes, once lesbian bars became institutionalized community spaces in the 1970s, they gained more middle-class patrons and lost many of the qualities that defined them as

working-class spaces in previous decades (179). However, these new patrons also increased their economic viability.



[Figure 4]: *Maud's Study, San Francisco, 1940s.* Credit.

In her study of lesbian bars in Montréal, Julie Podmore (2006) divides the history of these bars into five different eras: The Red-Light Era (1950–1970); The Age of ‘Underground’ (1968–1979); The Golden Age (1982–1992); and The Queer Era (1992–2001). The characteristics of The Red-Light Era most closely align with the bar scenes highlighted above in Detroit and Baltimore, as Montréal had similar laws preventing women from entering bars until 1971. During the Underground era lesbian bars in Montréal moved downtown, and during the Golden Age the bars become more

diverse both in terms of physical location and population, thus increasing their popularity. The Queer Era marks the beginning of the decline in popularity of lesbian bars, a decline which has continued since Podmore concluded her study in the early 2000s. Indeed, from 1992 to 2003, the number of lesbian bars in Montréal decreased from 7 to 1, while gay male spaces and mixed-gender spaces proliferated.

Podmore provides several explanations for the disappearance of lesbian spaces in Montréal. One of these explanations is the increasing popularity of a more broadly “queer” culture that emerged in the 1990s. The increasing popularity of queer or mixed-gender spaces meant that lesbian bars could no longer sustain themselves. In addition, economic forces had a role to play. While gay neighborhoods were often gentrified by the gay community itself (ie. the cost of living in these neighborhoods increased as a result of middle-upper class gay men flocking to the area), lesbian spaces thrived in diverse neighborhoods that became gentrified by outside forces. Lastly, it is important to note that in Montréal, as in many other cities, there have always been more gay bars than lesbian bars. As Podmore puts it, “The asymmetries of gender within the formation of ‘community’—queer or otherwise—have an important role to play in the production of identity and space” (618). Thus, it is likely a combination of cultural and economic forces that have led to the decline of lesbian bars in North America. Indeed, while the dominance of male-centric spaces over female-centric ones is not new, this inequity has had a distinct and lasting effect on queer women and lesbian spaces in particular.

Importantly, the disappearance of lesbian bars in the 21st century also means that queer women of different generations have very different experiences and perspectives in regard to community spaces. Katherine Fobear, in her 2012 study entitled “Beyond A Lesbian Space? An Investigation on The Intergenerational Discourse Surrounding Lesbian Public Social Places in Amsterdam,” has some significant insights about this topic. She focused on several bars in Amsterdam that had to allow gay men and straight women into their spaces in order to keep their doors open. Fobear found that older women felt that lesbian-only spaces had in the past contributed to the feeling of “uniting under a common cause” (732), something that they saw as missing with new generations. On the other hand, Fobear notes that younger women felt like lesbian-only spaces were “too confined to one aesthetic, ideological, and social appeal.” (736).

This intergenerational discourse that Fobear highlights indicates that there is still not a consensus about the necessity of lesbian bars as a community space. While some younger queer women may find lesbian bars old-fashioned or stifling, older women often that these spaces were and are essential to one’s sense of self-acceptance and to community building practices, not to mention the years of history contained within their walls. Podmore suggests we look at these spaces within a historical context:

While in retrospect this practice may seem ‘essentialist’ and limiting, at the time it was seen as necessary to ensure the rare control that these women had over commercial, ‘sexualized’ space. Their women-only status, therefore, was an important territorial strategy that ensured freedom from harassment and voyeurs (612).

For much of their existence, the primary function of lesbian bars was safety, producing territorial practices that today might read as exclusionary. With this historical context in mind, we may begin to consider how notions of safety and inclusion/exclusion are deployed in contemporary iterations of queer community spaces. As Fobear puts it, we may be “caught in the uneasy divide of being beyond having an exclusionary space while at the same time needing a space where [we] are included fully” (743). We will continue to ponder these questions throughout this project, focusing on how safety is often predicated on the notion of exclusivity, and considering how we might utilize the concept of safe spaces in the future.

### **Feminist Bookstores**

The next space I take as my object of study is also one that largely seems to have “disappeared” from our culture today. Between the 1970s and the 1990s, feminist bookstores acted as lesbian community spaces that both empowered women to learn about lesbian and feminist history while also serving as the meeting places for community events. Kristen Hogan notes that at the height of the movement, there were 130 feminist bookstores across North America, all connected through community newsletters. As of 2020, there are only 10 remaining feminist bookstores in North America, according to [this list](#) compiled by Paste Magazine (three of stores on the list have closed since this list was first published). The disappearance of feminist bookstores likely has a lot to do with the forces of capitalism and the increasing power of corporations like Amazon (who [famously](#) got into a legal battle with the lesbian-owned Amazon



Bookstore Cooperative), as well as the decline in popularity of second-wave feminist and lesbian feminist ideologies and practices. With this section, I again want to explore the importance of feminist bookstores to the lesbian community in the 20th century, as well as the connection between media, identity, and community building.

In her book *The Feminist Bookstore Movement: Lesbian Antiracism and Feminist Accountability* (2016), Kristen Hogan notes that feminist bookstores had several different functions for lesbians and feminists. She suggests that for bookwomen themselves, feminist bookstores constituted a networked community where bookwomen communicated with one another through writings, newsletters, and events, attempting to hold one another accountable to the ethical standards that they preached. For bookstore patrons, feminist bookstores served as a destination for lesbian travelers, or as a refuge for those in need of support or escape. In addition, through the support of the Feminist Bookstore Network and the Feminist Press, the bookstores encouraged the publication of feminist and lesbian books by authors such as Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldúa. These factors made feminist bookstores unique meeting spaces for lesbians in the late 20th century.



[Figure 5]: *Left: bell hooks and Byllye Avery at Charis, in Atlanta, Georgia, circa 1985. Credit.*  
[Figure 6]: *Right: Poets Audre Lorde, Meridel Lesueur & Adrienne Rich. Credit.*

Because of their status as a retail and archival space (preserving and supplying lesbian texts) as well as an event space, feminist bookstores uniquely exemplify the connection between media and minority community building. Feminist bookstores provided individual support and education in the form of literature, as well as community support in the form of lesbian networks and events. In a 2005 essay, Kathleen Liddle notes that “visiting a feminist bookstore is repeatedly cited as a key event in the coming out process” (157). The location of these bookstores was thus significant, as lesbians without a feminist bookstore in their town may have found it necessary to travel to the nearest bookstore to find this community. The dispersed locality of feminist bookstores illustrates one of the largest differences between lesbian community of this era and that of today. While in the 1970s and 80s lesbians searched for other lesbians locally – or else

traveled to a specific lesbian-centric location – now many queer women find support online from others who may live nowhere near them, as lesbian-centric physical spaces have become less prevalent.



[Figure 7]: *Staffers in front of Old Wives Tale in San Francisco c. early 1980s.* Credit.

Additionally, feminist bookstores were important to lesbians because of the media content housed within them. As I mentioned earlier, feminist bookstores exposed lesbians not only to other local women like them, but also to the writings of lesbians and feminists from throughout history. As Liddle puts it:

Although we could think of feminist bookstores as being comprised of both community and merchandise, in essence the books being sold are part of a dispersed lesbian community. Enfolded in their pages are the voices of a diversity

of women – real and fictional – whose words provide comfort, encouragement, and guidance (150).

While one's personal connection to these formative, canonical lesbian texts might not fall within the popular definition of fandom, it is interesting to note how Liddle's description of the empowering function of these books might reflect how one would describe, say, watching Emily Fields come out on the teen drama *Pretty Little Liars* (Freeform, 2010-2017). Indeed, television series like *Pretty Little Liars* in many ways function for young queer women as “dispersed lesbian community” Liddle describes, while sites such as Tumblr and Twitter may act as the spaces where women gather to talk about these texts. The function of feminist bookstores as a community space as well as a space to purchase or consume particular media in some ways reflects the contemporary function of queer fandom today, though the economic and industrial circumstances of these two modes of community are fairly different. In point of fact, the relationship between lesbian movements and lesbian media with the mainstream remains a strained one throughout all of these examples, which is likely one of the reasons most of these spaces have not been able to sustain themselves. In the last section of this chapter, we will look at another force present in many of these spaces: inclusion and exclusion.

### **Women's Music Festivals**

The first women's music festival was held at Sacramento State University in 1973. The first National Women's Music Festival was held the following year, and the first Michigan Womyn's Music Festival was held in 1976. At their height, both festivals

had around 10,000 attendees. These festivals were conceived as non-hierarchical, intimate and exclusive spaces, which in theory meant that they were safe spaces for women, and in particular, for lesbians. These festivals were, for the most part, rural, affordable (attendees could volunteer to pay their way), free from shame, and also encouraged discussions about social issues in politics. In essence, though the festivals centered on live music, they were also much more than that, acting for some women as a sort of sacred pilgrimage and inspiring sexual, political or spiritual awakenings.

Unfortunately, there is little archival evidence of these festivals, as they were not recorded for safety reasons, and little was known about the festivals to outsiders. (Of course, the relative invisibility of these festivals may have been one of the things that allowed them to act and feel like safe spaces for patrons, a value that doesn't necessarily align with the focus on visibility in modern queer culture). My intent with this section is to locate women's music festivals along the continuum of lesbian history, paying close attention to how these festivals functioned as safe spaces through the joint processes of inclusion and exclusion. In doing so, I will illustrate both the importance of safe spaces for marginalized communities, as well as the difficulty of defining the boundaries of a community. While many of the spaces I have discussed bring up issues of inclusivity and exclusivity, in recent years much of this discourse has coalesced around women's music festivals in particular, likely because they are understood to represent the politics of a bygone era. Whether or not statements like this tell the whole story is something I will investigate in this section.



[Figure 8]: *The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, 1977. Credit*

In her book *The Disappearing L: Erasure of Lesbian Spaces and Culture* (2016), Bonnie Morris discusses some of the significant cultural events of lesbian culture in the 20th century. The book contains her personal archival material from women's music festivals since the 1970s, including her observations and interviews with attendees. Morris suggests that these festivals served as moments of awakening and revelation for many lesbians, proving to attendees that there was such a thing as a lesbian community.

In Morris' words:

An important function of feminist concerts and festivals in the mid-1970s was their transmission of once-hidden information about lesbian lives. Such gatherings were visual, auditory proof of what Adrienne Rich called lesbian existence and the lesbian continuum. (118)

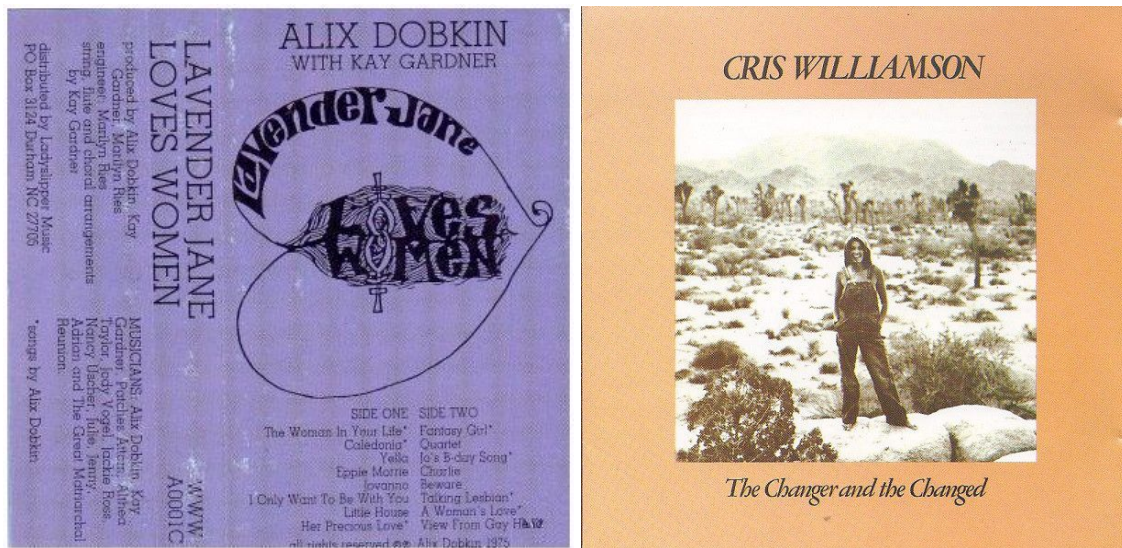
As primarily rural spaces, women's music festivals also allowed women to freely express their gender and sexuality. (This particular locality separates these spaces from lesbian bars and feminist bookstores, which were often located closer to urban centers). As Browne (2011) illustrates, the rural location of these festivals meant that women felt free in their bodies – nudity was common at the festivals – and allowed them to freely engage in sexual encounters without fear of voyeurism. (Security was sometimes employed in order to deter peeping toms). To most attendees, these festivals felt like their own small universes, completely distinct from –rather than reflective of – the real world from which they all came.

In addition to the significance of women's music festivals as a community space, women also came (and returned) for the music itself. As Morris notes, the “songs and albums” of lesbian musicians were “intrinsically woven into many women's coming-out experiences and relationships” (31) Furthermore, purchasing lesbian music would allow festival attendees to relive the experience once they were back in the “real world”. As Jill Dolan (2012) puts it, along with being affirming or cathartic, “women's music was pedagogical in the 1970s” (2017). Music and politics were much more intertwined during this decade in part because, as Dolan suggests, political issues felt urgent during this era. Indeed, music was both socially and politically important to lesbians, as it created both imagined and physical community. In her article “Creating Transgressive Space: The Music of kd lang,” Gill Valentine (1995) demonstrates that lesbian music has the

potential to create lesbian space even outside of women’s music festivals. Valentine argues that:

[The] ability of lang's music to signify a sense of belonging or imagined community amongst lesbians means that when two women catch each other's eyes in this way, her music facilitates the fleeting creation of a lesbian space (480).

The creation of this space can happen at the supermarket when lang’s music plays over the speakers, or at one of her concerts where lesbian audience members create this lesbian space through their existence within it. Despite the contemporary understanding of lesbian music as overly earnest and desexualized, what Christina Belcher (2011) calls “shameful lesbian musicality” (413), lesbian music in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s was emotional, sexual, and political, serving as the soundtrack to the social and political awakening of an entire generation of women.



[Figure 9]: Left: Lavender Jane Loves Women (1973) by Alix Dobkin, often considered the first explicitly lesbian album. [Figure 10]: Right: The Changer and the Changed (1975), Cris Williamson



Although women's music festivals are often depicted as utopic spaces, they are not without their internal issues. In their study of the National Women's Music Festival, Eder et. al (1994) pose one of the central questions (and one of the central problems) of women's music festivals. They ask: "Is it possible to create a community based on shared values and identity that is also open to a diverse constituency?" (485). They question whether differences among lesbians can be recognized when the central focus on the festival is the *commonality* among lesbians. Through their research Eder et. al found that this issue particularly affects lesbians of color, noting that "although they may have felt more welcome as lesbians than in mainstream society, many did not feel accepted as women of color" (501). While many festivals did have specific events, groups, or performances specifically for women of color, criticisms and discussions about lesbian difference were often part of the discourse surrounding these festivals.



[Figure 11]: *In 1992 MichFest conducted a “Gender Survey” survey about trans inclusion at the festival. The survey indicated that the majority of women wanted the festival to be open to trans women. Credit.*

The most famous example of inclusion/exclusion at women’s music festivals is tied to the definition of womanhood itself. Apart from Sarah McLachlan’s Lilith Fair, The Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival (MichFest for short) is arguably the most well-known of the women’s music festivals largely because of its now (in)famous anti-trans policy. Until its closure in 2015, founder Lisa Vogel maintained this policy, despite increasing protests. (This continued backlash was likely one of the reasons for the festival’s discontinuation). In a clear attempt to deflect such criticism, a sample statement from the 25th anniversary of the festival in 2000 reads: “claiming one week a year as

womyn-born womyn space is not in contradiction to being trans-positive and trans-allies” (Morris 103). Vogel, as well as Morris herself, seem to indicate that it was the unruly trans activists, rather than transphobic language and exclusion, that shut down the festival and lead to the disappearance of an important cultural movement. It is important to note here that trans exclusion is *not* necessary for the creation of a successful and safe space for women; there are in fact plenty of other women’s music festivals that did not and do not participate in this exclusion, including the still-running National Women’s Music Festival.

Though trans exclusion in lesbian spaces is not unique to the Michigan Womyn’s Festival, it is unfortunate that MichFest’s policy has come to symbolize what many perceive as the antiquated nature of lesbian culture. As Dolan puts it, “the history that’s been told of women’s culture has been oversimplified to imply a lack of healthy dissent or resistance from within the ranks” (209). Though racial segregation and trans exclusion were present in some of these lesbian spaces of the 20th century, these practices were not enacted or condoned by all within these communities. Nonetheless, issues of inclusion and exclusion permeate throughout all of recent lesbian history and continue today, and must be taken into account when considering the construction of safe spaces.

**A note:** Issues of inclusion and exclusion have permeated women’s communities, and in particular women’s musical communities, for many years. For example, the feminist punk rock Riot Grrrl movement which began in the 1990s was in part a response to the perceived exclusivity of women’s music of the 1970s, which itself was a response to the male-dominated mainstream music industry.

### **Conclusion: Gone Where?**

What all of these spaces and movements have in common is the sense that they have all begun to disappear – both literally and in terms of their cultural significance. Apart from their brief resurgence in popularity upon the release of *Carol* (which was based on the Patricia Highsmith novel *The Price of Salt*) in 2015, lesbian pulp novels have largely gone extinct, and contemporary queer women’s fandom often revolves around television instead of literature. The disappearance of lesbian bars, feminist bookstores, and women’s music festivals is often seen by an older generation of lesbians as the loss of history as well as the loss of a sense of unity that some believe once existed in these spaces. However, my research suggests that this unity, when it did exist, was often at the expense of a more diverse community. Nonetheless, I find this discourse surrounding the disappearance of these cultural institutions an interesting topic to consider. What I want us to evaluate here is where *have* these spaces gone? What is the cause of their disappearance? And finally, what does all of this have to do with queer women’s culture today?

In her book *The Disappearing L*, Bonnie Morris attempts to work out some of the reasons why lesbian culture and history seems to have been largely erased. In her own words:

For lesbians, current reasons for cultural erasure include a potent mix of conventional sexism, cycles of conflict where women are set up to attack one another (the old “horizontal hostility” within minority culture), lack of representation in history institutions such as museums, and the mainstreaming of the LGBT movement (178).

This reasoning has some merit, and her note about the lack of institutionalized representations of our history is extremely significant and deserves further consideration. However, Morris goes on to suggest that lesbian culture has gone the way of the dinosaurs because of the contemporary push to include trans people in our spaces and acknowledge them in our histories. As she puts it, “today, “man hating” has been replaced by the label of transphobia or TERF (“Trans Excluding Radical Feminist”) as a means to discredit lesbians and/or deny a platform for articulating lived lesbian experiences” (183). By referring to the term TERF as a “slur” (3), Morris denies the validity of the critiques that trans people and their allies have lobbied at lesbian spaces and histories that exclude trans people, blaming these activists for a “retroactive stigma” (3) that she argues is now applied to events like the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival. Morris is correct in suggesting that “lesbian” is still often seen as a dirty word, but placing the blame for this on the shoulders of trans activists is dishonest and ignores the larger forces at play, including actual forces of sexism, lesbophobia, and biphobia that are still present today.

Unfortunately, Morris is not alone in this opinion that “trans inclusion” is destroying the lesbian community. After all of its original staff were fired in 2016, the once-beloved queer women’s website AfterEllen has now devolved into a space where anti-trans sentiment runs rampant. (Read former AfterEllen writer Heather Hogan’s post about the weaponization of the term “lesbophobia” here). Fortunately, other prominent LGBT women’s media outlets and writers have banded together to fight this regressive

movement, and AfterEllen has been swiftly denounced by many others. Sadly, this backward-facing turn by AfterEllen reinforces the perception the lesbian of as a figure of the past – what Elizabeth Freeman calls the “lesbian drag” (Belcher 412). As Belcher puts it, “in other words, the “lesbian” is a temporal figure that pulls the queer, progressive present back toward a degraded, conservative past” (412). The AfterEllen takeover thus contributes to this flattening of what a lesbian is and can be, and ignore the potential for solidarity and community among lesbian, bisexual, and trans people.

Clearly, some of the cultural connotations and spacial boundaries of lesbian culture of the 20th century are still relevant today. As I will illustrate in Chapter 3, ClexaCon is not a perfect space either, as the idea of safety has different connotations for different members of the queer community. Additionally, online spaces can also participate in exclusionary practices. However, there are also some significant differences between queer women’s culture of the past and the present, namely as it relates to the concept of space. For younger queer women, the process of coming out and coming into the queer community is achieved online, whereas older women often came of age by accessing the “network of physical social spaces and events” (Morris 114) that defined lesbian culture from the 1970s to the 1990s. While older queer women might have found self-awareness or self-acceptance through attending one of these events, many younger queer women have this experience after consuming a piece of personally significant media. (Most younger queer women can probably tell you what their first introduction to queer women in the media was – mine was the *Pretty Little Liars* books).

These significant media moments don't often lead queer women to the door of a lesbian bar – instead one's first foray into queer women's culture might be on Tumblr, Twitter, or YouTube, likely through engagement with a particular fandom. This leads me to an important point about the concept of space. Space can be both physical or virtual – both types of space have the ability to transmit affect, or emotion, through the individuals that travel through and within that space. Thus, while watching Cris Williamson perform at the National Women's Music Festival in 1975 with 6,000 other women might be a different experience than live-blogging a fictional lesbian couple's first kiss on Tumblr along with other queer fans, both have the effect of binding these communities together through fandom and through the unifying process of experiencing strong emotions within a group. While these lesbian histories may seem like they come from another world entirely, we can connect them to contemporary cultural productions by highlighting the longstanding centrality of media objects within queer culture, as well as the enduring focus on safe and affirming spaces among communities of queer women. My intent with this chapter was to urge us not to forget these histories, and to suggest that we may celebrate the ways in which these people and these spaces were revolutionary, while also considering some of their downfalls and how these same issues may continue to permeate queer culture today. Now that this history has been uncovered, the next two chapters will focus on queer female community and space as it relates to fandom more specifically.

## **Chapter 2 – “Hi I’m Here to Cry”: Online Queer Fandom, Lesbian YouTube Couples, and Digital Breakups**

### **Introduction**

A lot has changed since the time periods I covered in [Chapter 1](#), both in terms of broader social conventions as well as the media landscape we now live in. Much of this change has gone hand in hand with the rise of the internet and the increasing ease of online communication. For the queer community, the internet has been particularly transformative, as queer people have long used the internet as a tool to manifest digital communities when physical ones are not available. For queer women who were not alive during the rise of lesbian bars, women’s music festivals, and feminist bookstores, online spaces such as Tumblr or YouTube are often essential in the coming out process. In the 2010s – particularly with the increased accessibility of popular media on an international level – pop culture and popular media are often closely intertwined with this process. Popular media can thus become a common language that is shared among queer women across the globe, while also providing queer fans with a sense of wider acceptance and validation. While in the 1950s a lesbian might have begun to explore her sexuality after reading a lesbian pulp novel, in the 21st century the amount of media that queer women may choose to consume during their coming out process has increased significantly. Indeed, queer



communities online are often inextricable from fan communities, as many young people discover their sexual identity through fandom, or alternatively, find fandoms as a result of their sexual identity. (See: Susan Driver's 2007 book *Queer Girls and Popular Culture*).

As a whole, this project seeks to investigate the spaces that have emerged for queer women as a result of fandom. Chapter 1 discussed the historical precedents of queer culture today, focusing on the physical spaces created by and for lesbians. Chapter 3 will focus on the fan convention ClexaCon as an example of a physical manifestation of the online community building queer female fans have been engaging in for years. This chapter bridges the gap between these two moments by highlighting the digital fan practices of queer women on a potentially international level. (See my bonus piece on [“Juliantina”](#) for more on this detail). Here I ask the question: *how has YouTube, as well as the content it hosts, created conditions for the emergence of online spaces for queer female fans?* I want to consider here how queer female fans have utilized the platform as a means of digital and international community building. Secondly, I ask *what are the unique practices that define these spaces and fandoms?* Here I will consider the concept of queer cultural literacy and the [queer canon](#), fan labor, and the transmission of emotion in online spaces.

In this chapter, instead of detailing the complete history of queer fandom and queer community online (a nearly impossible task), I am going to focus on one specific platform and an example of the queer fan practices that occur on that platform. (For more on this topic, see Transformative Works and Cultures' [special](#)

[issue](#) on queer female fandom). I have chosen to look specifically at YouTube because I believe that the queer fan practices that emerge on the platform illustrate some of the unique characteristics of queer female fandom more broadly. These characteristics include this fandom's intertextual focus as well as its precarious nature, which contributes to the intensity of emotions attached to these media objects. (This intensity is made clearly visible in the examples at the center of this chapter). I have also chosen to focus on YouTube because although there is more and more mainstream content that depicts queer characters, a lot of queer media can still be found outside of mainstream systems of film and television production.

In order to answer the questions I posed above, I will focus on one example of queer female fandom that I think illustrates some of these themes. In the next section, I will discuss two “real-life” lesbian YouTube couples – “Shannon and Cammie” and “Kaelyn and Lucy” – and their eventual breakups, focusing on the pervasive precarity of queer media, the powerful binding effect of grief, and how these videos are used as examples of happy queer futures. This case study will lead to a consideration of what I call the queer canon and the ways in which queer female fans gain a type of “queer cultural literacy” (Driver 13). This cultural literacy allows fans to engage with this media in a way that considers the broader landscape of queer media, a landscape that is generally only visible in its entirety to queer fans. By conducting a discourse analysis of the comments on these YouTube videos, I will be able to gauge the reactions and sentiments of fans and better understand how they define their relationship to these videos and the fandoms surrounding them.

Though the majority of content on YouTube is not queer-oriented, the amount of queer content on the platform is still far greater than in mainstream visual media. The breadth of this queer content is vast and includes vlogs, television clips and episodes, music videos, sketches, comedy videos, and more. The content hosted on YouTube allows queer women to find niche content that caters specifically to their interests, while also providing space for community building through its function as a social media platform. While YouTube is often understood as mainly a video-sharing platform, the comments section of the site, as well as its use on other sites such as Twitter and Tumblr, allow it to function like a social media platform as well. The use of YouTube as a community-building space illustrates the centrality of media objects to queer identity development and indicates a break from a previous era when physical spaces might have served this function. Additionally, the prominence of online spaces in contemporary queer culture also complicates the notion of safe or exclusive spaces that were central to lesbian culture of the 20th century, as these online spaces do not have definable boundaries or rules of entry.

### **Lesbian YouTube Couples**

In May of 2016, while relaxing at my hotel in Southern India, I had the following exchange with my friend Alissa on Facebook Messenger:

**Me:** Did u hear about Shannon and Cammie...

**Alissa:** WHAT AVOUT THEM

**Me:** .....they broke up. like a week ago

**Alissa:** OH MY GOD NOOO. There is no hope left in this world

The conversation continued as Alissa expressed her disappointment about the breakup, later proclaiming “I’m actually gonna cry.” Shannon and Cammie were a real-life lesbian couple who became popular online around 2014 after they began posting YouTube videos of themselves completing tag videos, answering fan questions, and detailing their life as a couple. They publicly announced their breakup in May of 2016, and their breakup video was uploaded to YouTube on July 1st of the same year.

As my conversation with Alissa illustrates, fans, particularly queer women fans like Alissa and I, were very upset by Shannon and Cammie’s breakup and expressed their feelings in various forms online. The moment of their breakup was significant on its own, but then, two months later, another popular lesbian couple on YouTube announced their breakup. Kaelyn and Lucy, who became popular in 2012 as a long-distance-couple that eventually moved in together, uploaded their breakup video on September 11, 2016. Both of these breakup videos elicited emotional and affective responses from fans, and as I will illustrate, these responses traveled across videos, and across the two YouTube channels. Though queer content of all kinds often evokes intense reactions from queer fans, queer content on YouTube often elicits even more personal investments from queer fans as this content is seen as closer to (if not synonymous with) reality. Indeed, YouTube videos often rely on the concept of intimacy (Raun 2018), as fans often become personally invested in what they see as the true-to-life journeys of YouTubers. Thus, as I will illustrate, it is both the content and the form of these videos that produced such intense responses. The

topics I want to keep in mind here are what the reactions of fans to these breakups say about the nature of queer female fandom and YouTube fandom, as well as the importance of YouTube as a space for the archiving of this queer content.

To begin, it is important to understand both the history and the popularity these two couples achieved. Shannon and Cammie posted videos to the channel *nowthisisliving*, which was originally (and is once again) Shannon's personal channel. The channel has 673,000 subscribers, and 86 million channel views. (All of the following video statistics are as of December 6, 2019). The first video Shannon and Cammie uploaded as a couple is called "Girlfriend Tag | LGBT" and was uploaded on July 18, 2014. Their breakup video, which was uploaded almost two years later, is the channel's second most popular video and has 3 million views and 9,353 comments. In total, 97 videos of them as a couple have been uploaded to the channel, amounting to hundreds of hours of footage. Kaelyn and Lucy's channel is called *Kaelyn and Lucy*, and their first video, entitled "July 2011", was uploaded on April 27, 2012. They have uploaded 139 videos on the channel, many of which (like their first video) detail their experiences reuniting after time apart, either in the UK or in America. Their breakup video – uploaded more than four years after their first video – has amassed 1.2 million views and 4,375 comments. (Since these two (in)famous breakup videos, the "lesbian breakup video" has become a video category in and of itself, with popular lesbian YouTubers Rose and Rosie even making [a video ranking lesbian breakups](#) on YouTube).

Indeed, these two couples are not the only popular lesbian couples on YouTube; others include [Rose and Rosie](#), [Bria and Chrissy](#), [Sam and Alyssa](#), [Paige and Holly](#), and [Kristen and Steph](#), among others. In addition, solo lesbian YouTubers like [Ari Fitz](#), [Amber's Closet](#), and [Hannah Hart](#) have achieved significant success. As several scholars (Alexander & Losh, 2010, Lovelock 2016, and Wuest, 2014) note, YouTube has also become a prolific space for the production of “coming out” videos, a trend that aligns closely with the focus on authenticity among YouTube creators. Indeed, the centrality of intimacy and authenticity on YouTube, as well as its algorithmic functions (ie. pointing the viewer to related videos) allow these queer cultural forms to proliferate on the site. Lastly, as I note below in regards to the “queer canon,” YouTube has become a useful space for the archiving of fictional lesbian representations. This broader context illustrates why queer female fans might turn to YouTube to find content that fits their needs.

The fandoms surrounding both of these couples have expanded outside of YouTube, as fans have created Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube pages dedicated to the couples. The couples themselves were also active on these social media platforms. Although the expansiveness of these fandoms is significant, I will be focusing specifically on YouTube comments because these responses are the most immediate and the videos themselves are at the center of these fandoms. YouTube comments are able to be read and posted before, during, and after the viewing of the videos themselves, and thus constitute an essential component of YouTube as a social and communicative platform. In addition, I am interested in how YouTube has emerged

as an online space for queer women to congregate, as a result of the creative engagements of both queer YouTube creators and fans. In this vein, we may want to assess whether or not the queer enclaves created on YouTube could be considered “safe spaces,” or whether their space on this enormous and often troll-filled platform negates this categorization.



[Figure 12]: Screenshot from Shannon & Cammie’s (pre-breakup) video, entitled “[Our First Time](#).”

## **Background**

### *Methods*

In order to investigate the questions I have highlighted above, I have performed a discourse analysis of the first 100 comments on six videos – the two breakup videos, as well as two videos from each couple uploaded prior to the

breakup. In general, discourse analysis is used to investigate the process of communication, looking at what is said, why it's said, who says it, and the effects of this language. I use this tool to consider how fans understand their relationship to these videos and the ways in which they communicate with one another as well as with these YouTube creators.

As I analyzed the comments section I focused on the comments that represented a common sentiment among viewers, and I then divided these comments into categories that I will discuss in the next section. Though the first 100 comments that show up below a YouTube video are not wholly representative of every comment posted, the comments that show up first are the ones with the most likes or responses, which indicates that these comments may represent a popular opinion among viewers.

The comments I have pulled out to include in this chapter are those that most clearly or succinctly represent the sentiment I am focusing on. Comments were anonymized to protect the privacy of users who might not want their comments – many of which are of a personal nature – to be published with their names attached. Throughout my analysis, I looked for the ways in which commenters performed and/or transmitted an affective response to these videos, and how that affect traveled throughout the YouTube platform. By this I mean the ways in which affective responses to one video or one couple did not simply “stay put” among a single video or channel, and instead traveled around/across various lesbian-centered content on YouTube. In this context we might think of affect by considering Theresa Brennan’s famous question, “Is there anyone who has not, at least once, walked into a room and



“felt the atmosphere?” (1). In this sense, to be *affected* is to feel the passage of emotion or feeling through one’s body. Of course, while YouTube is not a physical space, online environments can still carry the same type of affective charge that physical spaces can.

### *Affect*

There has already been much scholarly work produced about the circulation of affect through online spaces. Jodi Dean’s influential book *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive*, is particularly relevant to this project. Dean wrote that “Blogs, social networks, Twitter, YouTube: they produce and circulate affect as a binding technique” (2010, 95). I argue that it is fans’ affective investment in these couples that made watching their videos pleasurable, and that this investment is also what caused such strong reactions to their breakups. Dean also notes that each blog post, video, or tweet “accrues a tiny affective nugget” (2010, 95).

I will illustrate how the affect that is tied to these couples’ videos changes once the breakups occur. In this vein, I also draw from Sarah Ahmed, who proposes the concept of “happy objects,” i.e. objects that become tied to the promise of happiness. Ahmed writes that “If objects provide a means for making us happy, then in directing ourselves toward this or that object, we are aiming somewhere else: toward a happiness that is presumed to follow” (2010, 26). I contend that these couples’ YouTube videos initially circulated as happy objects, but for long-time viewers, this happiness became detached from the videos once the couples broke up.

### *Parasocial Relationships*

The intense investment that many fans have in these couples is in part because of the supposed intimacy that emerges between YouTube creators and their fans. Horton & Wohl (1956) might have defined this bond as what they called a “parasocial relationship,” which is a one-sided relationship one might have with a celebrity or a fictional character, for example. Indeed, Meyrowitz (1994) identified among fans what he called “parasocial breakups,” which have been shown to cause parasocial grief and intense emotional reactions (Sanderson and Cheong, 2010; Eyal and Cohen, 2006; Cohen, 2003, 2004). DeGroot and Leith (2015) illustrate that parasocial breakups can be applied to the deaths of fictional television characters as well. In the case of YouTube couples, this breakup has a double meaning – first there is the “real-life” breakup of the couple, and then the parasocial breakup of the couple and their fans. The supposed intimacy between YouTubers and their fans and this “double breakup” thus affects how fans grieve this particular loss.

At the same time, this focus on intimacy within the YouTube community complicates this notion of the parasocial. Tobias Raun (2018) has written about the ways in which transgender micro-celebrities on YouTube have capitalized on the idea of intimacy in order to create interactive fan communities, which in turn re-configures intimacy as a currency (both social and economic). Raun (2018) argued that “micro-celebrities must signal accessibility, availability, presence, and connectedness – and maybe most importantly authenticity – all of which presuppose and rely on some form of intimacy” (100). This reliance on intimacy at least partially disengages

the Youtuber/fan relationship from the concept of the parasocial, as both fans and creators conceptualize this relationship differently than a typical celebrity/fan relationship. Within the YouTube community, sharing personal information with fans is the backbone of the fan/YouTuber relationship, whereas for mainstream celebrities this type of sharing, though appreciated by fans, is not expected in the same fashion. This reliance on intimacy is one of the qualities fans most appreciate about YouTube celebrities, and this intimacy is also a powerful and affective force for queer fans looking for someone to relate or look up to.

Insert vlogmas video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=66amgixZO9Y>

Vlogs like these are an example of the intimacy that is often expected on YouTube.

This video is part of “vlogmas,” which is a series that some YouTubers do that involves vlogging every day of December until Christmas day. Vlogmas videos often give viewers more access to YouTubers lives, as most YouTubers do not normally vlog every day (or vlog regularly at all).



[Figure 13] Screenshot from Shannon and Cammie’s breakup video, entitled “[why we broke up.](#)”

### *The Queer Canon and the Archive*

Another important aspect of queer female fans’ relationship to these videos is their existence within what I call the “queer canon.” As Stephanie M. Yeung (2014) notes, YouTube has become a productive space for the proliferation of videos depicting lesbian couples on television series across the world. As Yeung puts it, “YouTube, as de facto archive, has become a site for the preservation of and community building around global lesbian representations” (2014, 50). These videos include clips of fictional lesbian couples, as well as real-life queer women posting on their own channels, and they are produced and consumed on an international level. Thus, the videos of these two couples exist not only within the broader YouTube archive, but also within an archive of global lesbian love. I call this archive the queer

canon (see this [bonus chapter](#) about the concept), and it is fans' knowledge of this canon that contributes to their reactions to each individual text.

However, it is important to note that this queer canon is not in fact universal. This particular canon of real-life YouTube couples is specifically a *white* queer canon – both the couples I am focusing on, as well as the other lesbian couples mentioned in the comments, are white and cisgender. While there are queer women of color and queer trans women with significant presences on YouTube, the comments on these videos indicate that these women are often not considered within this canon. Perhaps they exist on the periphery of this canon, or within alternative or subgeneric canons – this particular question is beyond the scope of this chapter. In the future, I would urge readers to continue investigating how other factors like race, gender identity, and ability affect the formation of queer canons.

Lastly, YouTube serves as an archival space where fans can view, re-view, and save these videos. As Abigail De Kosnik argues, “At present, each media commodity becomes, at the instant of its release, an archive to be plundered, an original to be memorized, copied, and manipulated – a starting point or springboard for receiver's creativity, rather than an end unto itself” (2016, 4). The archive of YouTube allows users to interact with videos on “fan time,” which De Kosnik argues is “spent in repetition rather than in progression” (2016, 159). As Ann Cvetkovich (2003) illustrates, the maintenance of an archive is particularly important for the queer community. Cvetkovich writes about “the profoundly affective power of a useful archive, especially an archive of sexuality and gay and lesbian life, which must

preserve and produce not just knowledge but *feeling*” (2003, 241, emphasis mine). I argue that it is the queer feelings depicted in these videos, namely happiness and romantic love, that make them a powerful and affective archive for queer YouTube users in particular.

### **Pre-Breakup: The Videos as Happy Objects**

In order to situate the breakup videos in the context within which they would have been received, I will begin by looking at comments that were posted on the pre-breakup videos while the couples were still together. During this period, the videos of the two couples were still being circulated as happy objects, and were associated with queer love and happiness. I have separated the comments on these videos into two main categories: comments that focus on how “cute” the couples are, and comments that describe how inspirational the videos are. Here are some examples of comments in the first category.

#### *Category 1: “Cuteness”*

**[Comment on “October 2012.” 2014]**

i started screaming from cuteness overload [0 likes]

**[Comment on “The Girlfriend TAG!” 2014]**

I’m watching your videos all over again because you’re stinkin adorable!!!!!!!!!!!! [7 likes]

**[Comment on “Our First Time.” 2014]**

Rewatching the same videos on this channel over and over because there hasn’t been a new video in two weeks and I need my cute lesbian couple fix.  
:P [2 likes]

**[Comment on “Our First Time.” 2015]**

OMFG ITS BEEN 10 SECONDS INTO THIS VIDEO AND IM ALREADY DYING HKJSALHUIIDSAHDL WHY ARE THEY SO PRETTY AND CUTE [62 likes]

Comments like these often contain exclamation points, emojis, or all-caps, indicating an overwhelming investment in the “cuteness” of these couples. For many viewers, this investment in “cuteness” is aspirational, as whatever warm feelings these videos may produce in viewers may also be connected to a sense of longing for this queer “cuteness” in their own lives. As two of these comments suggest, fans would also rewatch these videos when they needed their “cute lesbian couple fix.” While comments exclaiming about the “cuteness” of couples are common across the broader genre of YouTube couples, the aforementioned “cute lesbian fix” comment indicates that these affective responses are reactions to not only their status as couples in love, but also as *lesbian* couples in love. The second category, which I will discuss below, also supports this conjecture that many fans are responding specifically to the images of lesbian love that these couples represent. Though I cannot decisively know the sexual identity of these commenters, the number of comments that focus on these couples’ lesbian identities indicates that a large number of commenters identify as lesbian or bisexual themselves.

*Category 2: “Inspiration”*

Comments in the second category, which describe the ways in which the videos have inspired the commenters, indicate the importance of identity in these videos more clearly. What follows are some examples from the second category of comments.

**[Comment on “Our First Time.” 2016]**

you guys inspired me to come out to my parents in November :))) [5 likes]

**[Comment on “Our First Time.” 2014]**

Love you guys so much! I also live in Texas but my town isn't as cool with out couples like Dallas and Austin. Y'all are a big inspiration! [1 like]

**[Comment on "Our First Time." 2016]**

you guys are a big inspiration to me. I am discovering that I like girls and you both just give me the advice I need to just tell myself I'm not making a big mistake by thinking this way. thank you so much for sharing your videos with us! you guys truly are amazing!!! [2 likes]

**[Comment on "Our First Time." 2015]**

I adore you ladies! I hope I will find a wonderful girl someday and we will live our lives openly and proudly, and have even 1/4 of the happiness you two have together! [1 like]

The main emphasis of these types of comments is either that the videos have inspired the commenter to come out or further accept their own sexuality, or that the videos give the commenter hope that they will someday find the happiness that these couples have.

This sense of futurity is important to the circulation of these pre-breakup videos as happy objects. Here I turn to Julie Wilson and Emily Chivers Yochim, who use Ahmed's concept of happy objects to discuss the "pinning" practices of moms on Pinterest. They contend that "the practice of pinning happiness is posting and sharing content that points toward the possibility of happiness" (Wilson & Chivers 2015, 234). The videos of these lesbian couples may serve as these future-oriented happy objects for queer fans who may not see happy queer couples in their daily lives. Fans may orient themselves towards these objects as a form of identification, as identification itself often points towards the future. As Ahmed puts it, "identification is the desire to take a place where one is not yet. As such, identification expands the space of the subject: it is a form of love that tells the subject what it could become in the intensity of its direction towards another (love as 'towardness')" (2004, 126). For

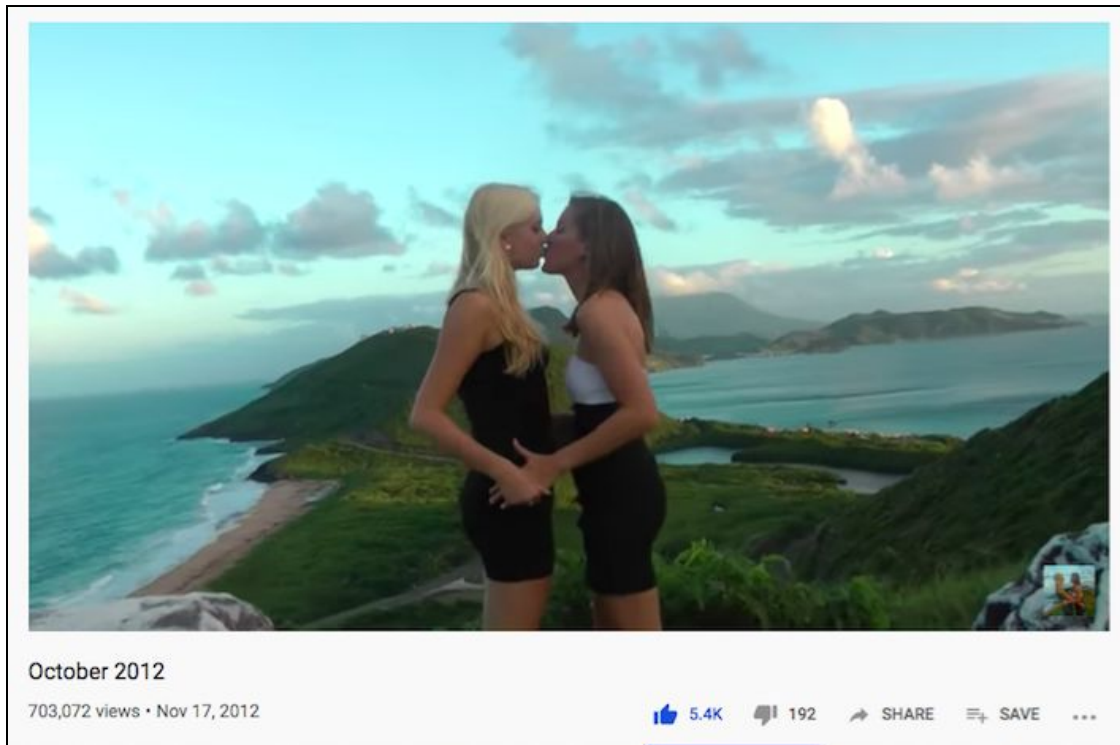


lesbian and bisexual viewers, investment in these videos as happy objects may provide ontological security in a world saturated with precarity, particularly for LGBTQ people (see Butler, 2004). This precarity is underscored by the continued physical and/or emotional violence many LGBTQ people face, as well as the limited examples of queer happiness (romantic or otherwise) that are available to young queer people looking for models of queer stability. Taken together, the comments under these videos indicate the affective investment viewers have in these couples, and likely contributed to the intensity of reactions to the breakups that followed.

### **Post-Breakup: Grief, Loss, and Anger**

On May 11, 2016, Cammie Scott tweeted the following: “Shannon and I are no longer together. I love you guys endlessly but please understand we have to do what's best for ourselves right now <3”. On July 1, 2016, the much-awaited breakup video, entitled “why we broke up”, was uploaded to the nowthisisliving channel. On September 11, 2016, after almost three months with no uploads, Kaelyn and Lucy uploaded their breakup video, entitled “The End”. Both of these videos, and the breakups of these two couples, elicited strong emotional responses from fans. For some fans, the close temporal proximity between these two breakups compounded the emotional devastation that they experienced. In addition, on May 18, 2016, it was officially confirmed (by Stevie, on Twitter) that another popular lesbian YouTube couple, Ally Hills and Stevie Boebi, had broken up. They never made a breakup video, as they did not run a joint channel, so I will not be discussing their breakup in detail here. However, it is important to note that at least some queer women fans

would have had knowledge of all three of these couples. I will now turn to the responses viewers had to these breakups.



[Figure 14]: Screenshot from Kaelyn & Lucy’s (pre-breakup) video, entitled “[October 2012](#).”

In her book *Post-Object Fandom*, Rebecca Williams writes that “a fan pure relationship may only be sustained while it offers ontological security and a sense of trust in the other party” (2015, 26). Put simply, ontological security is the maintenance of a coherent framework or narrative of the self within an environment saturated by doubt and uncertainty. Williams argues that when this fan pure relationship ends due to the loss of a fan object, the fan goes through a period of mourning wherein they must face this loss of ontological security. This is the period where what Williams calls the “post-object fandom” begins. She describes three possible responses a fan may exhibit in response to this loss: a reiteration discourse, a

rejection discourse, or a renegotiation discourse. For my purposes, I will focus on the first two responses. The reiteration discourse involves a reiteration of the fans' self-reflexive and identify-affirming relationship to the text, while the rejection discourse occurs "when the ending of fan objects is perceived as violating the sense of ontological security that has previously been negotiated via fandom" (Williams 2015, 103). The renegotiation discourse – which is exemplified by fans who have a more moderate reaction to these endings and are able to "move on" – is not applicable in this case because fans who had this response were presumably less likely to comment on the videos. (I found very few comments that fit within this categorization). Instead, I have posited a fourth response (*The Queer Canon response*) viewers have to these videos, which involves viewers highlighting the intertextuality of their viewing practices on YouTube through an engagement with the (white) queer canon.

### *Category 3: "The Reiteration Discourse"*

First, I will provide examples of fans who exemplify the reiteration discourse. In their comments, these fans highlight how these videos have had a positive effect on their lives and thank the couples for the services they have provided fans.

#### **[3.4] [Comment on "The End." 2016]**

I feel so lucky to have been able to follow both of you through the last few years and you'll always be an inspiration to me. I wish you both happiness in the separate paths you might take. [1 like]

#### **[Comment on "The End." 2016]**

You two were the reason I considered the fact that I wasn't straight. i came across multiple videos if yours a couple years ago and kind of clicked in my brain that I wasn't straight. thank you so much for everything you've done for me [21 likes]

#### **[Comment on "Girlfriend Tag | LGBT." 2016]**

Although you guys are no longer together, these videos continue to inspire people all of the time. The reason my girlfriend and I started our channel was because we saw how much you helped and inspired so many gay people and we can only hope to do the same! You are both individually amazing and will always be:) [2 likes]

Though comments like these were present on both the breakup videos, they were the least common type of response I found. The following comments, which represent the rejection discourse, were much more common. These comments include some type of speculation about the breakup, often containing suggestions that one individual within the couple is primarily responsible for the breakup, or judgments about how quickly one or both of the women have “moved on”.

*Category 4: “The Rejection Discourse”*

**[Comment on “why we broke up.” 2017]**

reasons like this are bs. cammie wanted to find herself, yet she got into a new relationship a few months later? pls. [288 likes]

**[Comment on “why we broke up.” 2017]**

So u guys broke up to work on personal growth individually...yet u guys r dating other people. Soooo, now I ask, what was missing in that relationship that now you’ve found in another person? [115 likes]

**[Comment on “The End.” 2017]**

3:07 is when you know that this decision was taken by Kaelyn and Kaelyn alone and for her happiness alone. [33 likes]

**[Comment on “The End.” 2017]**

I’ve watched this over and over again and each time I cry and get more mad at Kaelyn, she seems so indifferent while Lucy seems broken hearted. Now I find out Kaelyn has already moved on with someone else I’m just...I’m cant. [46 likes]

For many of these commenters, their response to the rupture in ontological security that these videos triggered was to lash out at the couples (or one individual within the couple) in order to rationalize this loss. The large number of these types of

responses, as well as the high number of likes that many of these responses garnered, indicates that these sentiments were shared by many fans. These responses illustrate how fans themselves had a personal and emotional stake in these relationships and felt they had knowledge of their inner workings. Responses such as these illustrate the ways in which YouTube acts as a liminal space that blurs the lines between fiction and reality. While many commenters seem to view these videos as the unfiltered truth, most YouTube users are also aware of the editing process that these videos undergo. In addition, fan comments like these resist the categorization of these relationships as parasocial, as many fans feel close to these YouTubers, and the YouTubers themselves often claim that they feel the same way.

*Category 5: “The Queer Canon Response”*

The last type of response that was prominent in the comments section were comments highlighting the context of these breakups as they relate to other lesbian couples on YouTube. I call this the “queer canon response,” and I argue that this response arises among viewers who are familiar with the canon of (white) queer female YouTubers, and the canon of queer female media content more broadly. Knowledge of this canon gives each relationship more meaning, as these “in-the-know” fans are aware of previous lesbian breakups, and the general precarity of queer female representations as evidenced by the Bury Your Gays trope. Most of the comments that fall into this category appeared on Kaelyn and Lucy’s video, as their video was released after Shannon and Cammie’s, but some viewers made similar comments about Shannon and Cammie as it related to Stevie and Ally’s breakup.

**[Comment on “The End.” 2016]**

why is everyone breaking up? [215 likes]

**[Comment on “The End.” 2016]**

The apocalypse is ongoing, somebody better superglue Rose and Rosie together  
[1.6k likes]

**[Comment on “The End.” 2016]**

rose, rosie, bria, and chrissy are all we have left [88 likes]

**[Comment on “The End.” 2016]**

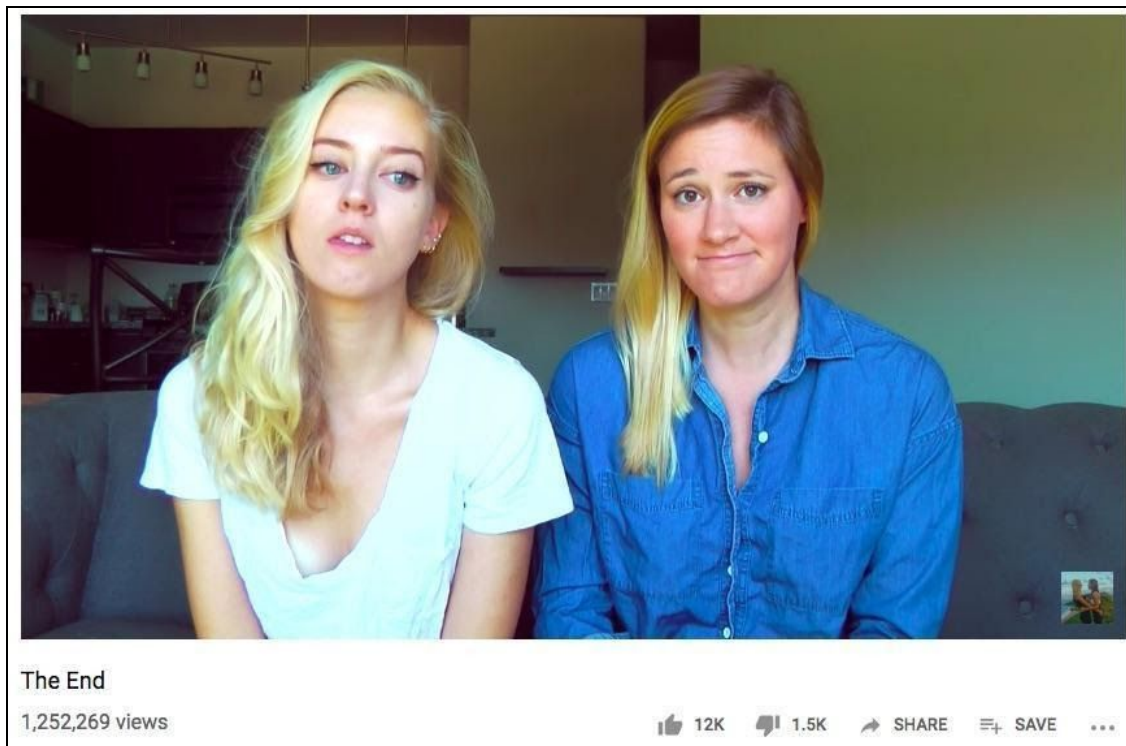
ok 2016 haven't you done enough damage already, also plz don't touch rose and Rosie just leave peacefully [603 likes]

As these comments suggest, the temporal proximity between these breakups created an anxiety within the broader lesbian YouTube fandom. Many commenters mention two other popular lesbian YouTube couples, Rose and Rosie and Bria and Chrissy, both of whom are married couples and have between 800,000 and 900,000 subscribers. These lesbian YouTubers are thus part of the (white) queer canon on YouTube, related to one another by virtue of their sexual orientation and the subsequent queer or lesbian content they produce. These comments highlight the intertextual viewing practices of queer women who watch YouTube, illustrating what Susan Driver calls the “queer possibilities of cultural literacy” (2007, 13). These comments also demonstrate the ways in which queer fan viewing practices are always underscored with precarity, causing some fans to hold on to these happy objects even more forcefully.

**The Videos as an “Archive of Feelings”**

As mentioned above, the continued accessibility of these videos is a significant aspect of this post-object fandom. Shannon and Cammie's videos are still available, even though Shannon now makes solo videos on nowthisisliving and

Cammie has started her own channel. Kaelyn and Lucy’s videos are still available even though their channel is no longer active. Lucy comments on the decision to keep the videos online in the breakup video, noting that “the videos on this channel for now are gonna remain public because they touched so many people”. These videos then remain as an archive for fans to revisit whenever they so choose, or alternatively, as content for new fans to discover. However, instead of continuing to circulate online as happy objects, for many fans these videos took on a different association after the breakups. Instead of being associated with happiness and queer futurity, these videos instead became objects of melancholia, as fans revisit old videos that have taken on new connotations.



[Figure 15]: Screenshot from Kaelyn & Lucy’s breakup video, entitled “[The End](#).”

In order to illustrate this phenomenon, I have gone back to pre-breakup videos and looked at comments that were posted after the breakups were made public. The vast majority of these comments express some type of grief. Some of the comments were posted shortly after the breakup videos were uploaded, and others were posted up to two years after the breakups.

**[Comment on “Our First Time.” 2016]**

hi i’m here to cry [1k likes]

**[Comment on “Girlfriend Tag | LGBT.” 2016]**

WHY DID THIS POP UP IN MY NOTIFICATIONS I’M CRYING [23 likes]

**[Comment on “Our First Time.” 2018]**

I’m here in 2018. And I feel like crying because I want what they have. [2 likes]

While these videos were at the time of their upload date “happy” videos for most fans, for these commenters this happiness is now tinged with grief. There may also be a sense of catharsis present in these responses, as fans go back to watch these videos knowing it will upset them perhaps as a way to productively let go of these feelings. This re-watching, prompted either by the YouTube algorithm or fans’ own desires to revisit these videos, indicates that the process of grieving for these relationships is not always linear, and may come and go in waves depending on new feelings or new content that may arise after the fact. Similar comments appear under the breakup videos themselves, with viewers coming back to watch the videos months or years later, even though they know it’s “torture” to do so.

**[Comment on “why we broke up.” 2017]**

why am i doing this to myself [1.3k likes]

**[Comment on “why we broke up.” 2017]**



I watch this at least once a month to remind myself that love does not exist  
[19 likes]

**[Comment on “why we broke up.” 2017]**

I love torturing myself [3 likes]

These comments indicate that for some fans, there is an almost insurmountable urge to re-watch these videos, despite the fact that fans know it will hurt them to do so. This cycle is then cemented as a practice as viewers may scroll down and read about how other fans are engaging in the same re-watching.

The above comments suggest that for some viewers, re-watching these videos constitutes a cycle of melancholia, which as Freud suggested, is a rejection of the “proper” form of mourning, which involves a gradual letting go of the lost object. Instead of accepting that these objects are lost, some fans continue to revisit the site of this loss. Some scholars, such as Muñoz (1999) and Ahmed (2004), have attempted to theorize melancholia in a new light. Both scholars suggest that melancholia can be understood as a queer refusal; a persistent dedication to what has been lost. The viewing practices of these fans illustrate not only the devotion of queer fans to these queer objects, but also how they engage with people and objects in ways that may be difficult to understand for those outside these communities. These re-watching practices indicate a refusal to accept the loss of a fan object, and exemplify the process of keeping the object alive despite its unavoidable “death”. While for most fans, these videos are no longer happy objects, the videos clearly still have use for fans as objects of mourning. The changing meaning of these videos indicate that archives are not fixed entities, but instead, their meanings change as the conditions

surrounding them evolve. These online archives are “living”, as comments accumulate and meaning transforms from context to context, and from person to person. Indeed, the preservation of feelings is very important to queer female fandom, as the communal and emotional experience of viewing this media is essential to the experience of fandom.

**Can YouTube really be a queer archive? A note on the algorithm:** As I highlight in this chapter, YouTube can be used as an archive for queer media. However, this possibility is complicated by how YouTube’s algorithm functions and the prospect of monetization. LGBT YouTubers have [continued to report](#) that their videos are being [demonetized or age-restricted](#) simply because their videos contain “queer content” or the word gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender [in the title](#). Though LGBT YouTubers continue to have success on YouTube in terms of viewership, this issue clearly undermines the notion that YouTube is a platform that truly supports queer content and queer creators.

These lesbian-centered, affective fan/object relationships reveal the complex nature of queer viewership in online contexts. The pockets of affect that circulate through and across lesbian videos on multiple channels illustrate the intertextuality and communal nature of queer female viewing practices, complicating frameworks of what constitutes a fandom or a coherent fan object. This intertextuality is defined by the existence of what I call the (in this case, white) queer canon, which is comprised of texts related to one another by virtue of their queer content. In the future, we –as queer people, scholars, or fans – need to work to address the ways in which factors like race, gender expression, and ability affect the formation of this queer canon and the media we choose to consume. (Indeed, many of the most popular queer female media texts are centered around whiteness and femininity). In addition, although this queer archive on YouTube is tenuous (as I highlight in the text box above), when this content is available to queer female fans it provides them with a sense of security in

their own identity – a sense of security that for many, is few and far between. These characteristics of this fandom make these pockets of YouTube feel like spaces of community, affirmation, and safety for some fans, and in many ways, these feelings are reflected in other spaces across the broader [queer female cyberspace](#).

In this vein, we might consider how the queer female side of YouTube interacts with the concept of safety. Social media, and online spaces in general, are famous for attracting trolls, and other forms of mean-spirited interactions. Can we then consider queer communities online safe spaces? The first problem with this conception is that queer pockets of the internet like the fandom surrounding these YouTube couples have no defined boundaries, and it is difficult to visualize the borders of these spaces. Nonetheless, because YouTube and social media have become segmented (ie. users only see a very narrow and incomplete view of the broader media landscape), one's experience with these platforms becomes very individualized, and users from different communities and with different interests may see entirely different content on their respective feeds.

The second issue with conceptualizing these online communities as safe spaces is the prevalence of trolls. However, in my own research, this was less of an issue that I would have imagined, perhaps because of the niche-ified nature of social media that I just described. I found no comments (out of the 100 I reviewed on each video) that might be classified as homophobic. This might be because fans (or the YouTubers themselves) have thumbs-downed or reported these types of comments, or because “haters” would not have encountered these videos in their feeds to begin

with. Whatever the reason, the community that has formed around these videos has created what we might call a safe(er) space, where this archive of queer feelings exists for fans to return to again and again – whether to mourn or to commemorate – with little fear of judgment.

### **Conclusion**

This example of queer female fandom on YouTube reveals the unique nature of queer viewership and queer fandom in online contexts. The pockets of affect that circulate through and across lesbian videos on multiple channels illustrate the intertextuality and communal nature of queer female viewing practices, complicating how we might define what constitutes a distinct fandom or a distinct fan object. This intertextuality is defined by the existence of what I call the queer canon, which is comprised of texts related to one another only by virtue of their queer content. We must however continue to consider how factors like race, gender identity, and ability contribute to what media gets included within this canon.

I chose this particular YouTube fandom in part because I believe it illustrates the extremely personal investment that many queer female fans have in the media they choose to consume. This investment is not entirely different from the personal investments of fans more broadly, except that for queer fans, these visions of queer happiness they find on YouTube may not be visible anywhere else. Queer media across the board often has the profound effect of providing fans with a sense of ontological security, and when this media “dies” – whether it be the breakups of lesbian couples on YouTube or the death of fictional queer characters like Lexa on

*The 100* (The CW, 2014-) – queer fans have what might otherwise be described as an extreme reaction.

When the media in question involves “real” people, like on YouTube, reactions to these endings hit particularly close to home. In the end, despite the aforementioned issues with the monetization of queer content, YouTube – as well as other sites like Dailymotion, Twitter, and Tumblr – serve as an archive of queer *feeling*, a mode of being that is at the very heart of queer female fandom. The ability of these online spaces to preserve and transmit these feelings is what make them suitable platforms for the formation of queer female fandom, and is also what differentiates queer female community of today from that of the past.

Indeed, there are many differences between the way queer communities form today and the way they formed in the 20th century, but there are also some similarities. Among queer women of all generations, the concept of cultural literacy is significant. While today queer women might illustrate their queer cultural literacy by displaying an encyclopedic knowledge of *The L Word* (Showtime, 2004-2009) or Hayley Kiyoko’s [music videos](#), in the past lesbians might have found community because of their interest in lesbian pulp novels or the music of k.d. Lang. In addition, for queer women across generations, the importance of experiencing emotions as a group is central to community building. For young queer women today, this emotional connection occurs primarily in online spaces like YouTube and Tumblr, whereas for lesbians in the 1970s this might have occurred at a women’s music festival or at a feminist literary event. Although the differences between generations

at times seem vast, I hope that highlighting these connections – the centrality of media, whether it be mainstream or alternative, in making connections and building community – will allow us to begin to bridge this gap.

Nonetheless, there are also several significant differences between queer female community of today and of the 20th century. Most obviously, the concept of lesbian and queer female space has changed drastically over the last couple of decades. In the 20th century, and in particular prior to the widespread use of the internet, one's physical location defined their access to queer community.

As I noted in Chapter 1, some lesbians would travel long distances to find queer community, whether it be Greenwich Village, a women's music festival, or a feminist bookstore. While some queer women still travel to find community (as I will illustrate in Chapter 3), it is now much easier and more common to find queer community online, as most queer fandom exists on an international level. Because of this, queer communities have become more niche, as queer women now have the ability to bond with one another over their shared sexual orientation *and* similar media taste, whereas in the past lesbians might have found camaraderie simply because of the first characteristic. In addition, the nature of lesbian and queer (safe) space has become more niche and less institutionalized, as long-standing lesbian spaces (see Chapter 1) such as lesbian bars and women's music festivals have greatly diminished in numbers ([though not disappeared entirely](#)). These spaces now primarily exist online, with the exception of specific events like ClexaCon, or concerts put on by queer women, such as Hayley Kiyoko or [King Princess](#).

With this chapter I intended to illustrate the distinct fan practices of queer women, as well as the ways in which queer spaces emerge within non-queer spaces, apart from the mainstream, and often unnamed as such. In looking at the case study of lesbian couples on YouTube, I highlighted the importance of affect, emotion and grief in creating a binding effect among fans. All of this occurred in online spaces, although as I will illustrate in Chapter 3, the intensity of emotions transmitted in these online spaces at times spills out into the “real world.” Indeed, the fan convention ClexaCon, which serves as the focus of Chapter 3, was created as a response to the death of a fictional lesbian character (Lexa from *The 100*, one-half of the “Clexa” relationship), and as a space for queer female fans to gather and discuss their shared interests. This chapter serves as a bridge between Chapters 1 and 3, outlining the genealogy of queer female community and fandom as it moves from physical spaces, to online spaces, and back to physical spaces once again. By defining and exploring this queer lineage, I hope to illustrate the creative ways in which queer women have engaged with mainstream and alternative media, fandom, and space over time.

## Chapter 3 – I’m Here Because “I’m Hella Gay”: ClexaCon and the Contemporary Search for Safe Spaces

### Introduction

It’s mid-April, and I’m walking down the Las Vegas strip. I walk past the towering Hooters hotel and up to the Tropicana, my place of residence for the next three days. As I get closer to my destination, I begin to see some unusual sights. Several people are dressed as Captain Marvel (in her 1990s humanoid disguise), some seem to be dressed as sheriffs, and there are a few goth witches wandering around. As I enter the main hall, the full picture comes into focus. The room is filled with booths, and people milling about. Across the hall, someone is dressed as what I can only describe as a gay matador, and they shout some sort of war cry, which is then echoed several times across the room. In one corner, there is a television playing fan-videos, and people occasionally walk by and scream. On the other side of the room, there is a spindly wooden throne where people are posing for pictures. Although not everyone is dressed up as a character, everyone in attendance looks, well – *gay*.

Given the focus of this chapter, it may come as little to surprise to you that the event I am describing is ClexaCon, the annual media and entertainment convention for queer women. I attended ClexaCon in April of 2019 in order to conduct research for this project. While there, I interviewed attendees, attended panels, and generally observed the goings-on of the convention. ClexaCon, and the research I conducted there, served as the jumping-off point for this entire project.

The first ClexaCon took place from March 3rd to March 5th, 2017, in Las Vegas, Nevada. The convention was started in honor of a wildly popular lesbian



couple on the CW series *The 100* (2014-) who were known by the portmanteau (or [ship name](#)) “Clexa.” In March of 2016 (March 3rd, to be exact), one half of the couple, a character named Lexa, was killed off of the series in a manner that many fans found both insulting and deeply upsetting. Thus, the convention was founded as a space to mourn this loss, as a celebration of positive LGBT representation, and as a public show of support for the advocacy work being done to improve such representation. ClexaCon events now include various panels, workshops, a film festival, opportunities to meet convention guests, and a space for vendors to sell their work. Guests in 2019 included cast members from *Carmilla* (YouTube, 2014-2016), *Legends of Tomorrow* (The CW, 2016-), *One Day at a Time* (Netflix 2017-), *Runaways* (Hulu, 2017-2019) and *Wynona Earp*, (SyFy, 2016-).

I chose to conduct my research at ClexaCon because I see this convention as a turning point for both queer women’s community and fandom in general. While the concept of [identity politics](#) and identity-based movements and spaces have become more [contentious](#) in [recent years](#), the creation of this convention indicates that identity-based communities are still meaningful, useful, and even necessary. Through this research, I was able to investigate the ways in which queer women and queer people have endeavored to carve out safe spaces in a media landscape where they are often excluded or fetishized. ClexaCon, I argue, represents a physical manifestation of what this space might look like, while simultaneously exemplifying a push to increase queer women’s cultural visibility in popular media and culture. Through my interviews and observations, I gained an understanding of how these queer women

find community, solidarity, and safety in a society that continues to construct queer women as either invisible or exploited. In addition, through my research I was able to get a better understanding of how queer women, queer people, and fans conceptualize the meaning of a safe space and investigate how ClexaCon does and does not live up to the standards of that categorization.

In order to get at these complex issues, I begin this chapter with a series of questions I hope to answer here. These questions also reflect some of the things I asked those that I interviewed. First, I ask, what practices, attitudes, and feelings define ClexaCon? Second, is ClexaCon a safe space? If so, for whom? What makes it a safe space? Third, how does embodiment – ie. the function of physically *being* in the space rather than participating in online environments – function at ClexaCon? What does it mean that ClexaCon is a physical space? And lastly, do we still need safe spaces for queer women? It is my intention that this chapter will work to answer these questions, or at the very least provide enough compelling arguments that we may continue to discuss them further.

### **Background: Safe Spaces and Fandom**

#### *Safe Spaces*

Before we go on to the interview portion of this chapter, I would like to return to the discussion of space – namely, safe spaces – that I brought up in the introduction. As I noted there, the term “safe space” has a long and storied history. As The Roestone Collective (2014) highlights, the term primarily emerged during the feminist movement of the mid-to-late 20th century among activist circles, and in this

usage “is associated with keeping marginalized groups free from violence and harassment” (1346). Naturally, however, this term has been utilized in varying ways, some of which are contradictory. One distinction we might make between different types of safe spaces are those that are “inclusive” and those that are “separatist”. Oftentimes spaces like ClexaCon or the women’s music festivals I discussed in [Chapter 1](#) struggle to define themselves as either wholly inclusive or wholly separatist. This lack of distinction indicates the slippery meaning of the term, which can often be paradoxical in nature, and as the Roestone Collective puts it, can be “simultaneously safe and unsafe” (1355).

To avoid definitional confusion, I have come up with some expectations of what a safe space should be, based on my own research and many of the things participants in my study brought up. These guidelines will make it easier to determine how ClexaCon does or does not function as a safe space. The expectations are as follows. **First**, a safe space should be a space where individuals feel safe from harm, violence, and judgment. **Second**, a safe space should be a space where individuals are given the freedom to express themselves. And **third**, a safe space should be a space where inhabitants feel cared for and listened to. In the next section, I will turn to the responses of my interviewees in order to evaluate if these expectations were met at ClexaCon.

### *Pop Culture & Fandom*

For many queer fans – in particular those that attended ClexaCon –fandom can act as the type of safe space I just described above. In this vein, I contend with

this project that popular media and popular culture have value not just industrially or aesthetically, but also personally, emotionally, and culturally. This is particularly true for those who have been marginalized in the public sphere. As Susan Driver puts it in her 2007 book *Queer Girls and Popular Culture*, “popular culture is [...] a process through which queer girls creatively imagine possibilities, forge connections, make meanings, and articulate relations” (14). I have illustrated this point in [Chapters 1 and 2](#), and I believe that the existence of ClexaCon proves this to be true even more clearly. While popular media may be important to individuals because of the particular nature or aesthetic of a media object, one’s relationship to pop culture often expands beyond the media object itself. As Kelsey Cameron (2017) writes in her [piece](#) about the origins of Autostraddle (one of the few sites dedicated to queer female media and culture), “TLW [The L Word], in other words, provided an opportunity: an initial rallying point that helped queer women find each other and jump-started conversation among them. The things these women build as a result—relationships, communities, Web spaces such as Autostraddle—are not, however, primarily about the show” (5.3). Indeed, many people I spoke to at ClexaCon told me that the primary reason they returned to the convention was not because of the media they were interested in, but the people they had met and were sure to meet again.

In a similar vein, oftentimes fandom is not simply about enjoying a particular media text, but about the community that is formed there. In their [article](#) about LGBTQ identity recovery work in fandom, Dym et. al (2019) establish the psychological and emotional benefits that queer people often gain through

participation in fandom. They cite Judith Herman's (2015) model of trauma recovery, which she conceptualizes as "taking place across three stages: (1) establishing safety, (2) reconstructing the story, and (3) restoring connections with others" (5). Dym et al. found that queer people's involvement in fandom acted as a catalyst for trauma and identity recovery, providing them with benefits such as finding others like them, identity processing through role-play and fan fiction, the creation of community narratives, and resources and mentorship (19). The virtual or physical location of this fandom is significant, as Dym et. al note that "the activities that people can participate in and contribute to within this community are dependent on its position as a subversive online space that is both *visible to those who need it and invisible to harmful outsiders*" (19, emphasis mine).

While public involvement in queer or queer-adjacent fandom may involve elements of risk – as Camille Bacon-Smith explores in *Enterprising Women* (1992) – the "selective visibility" (24) of these fan communities can mitigate these risks and establish a particular fan space as reasonably safe from unwanted outsiders. This selective visibility was a significant element of ClexaCon as well, because although the convention took place in the bustling metropolis that is Las Vegas, even other residents of the hotel seemed unaware of our presence, and the ClexaCon badge meant nothing outside of the convention itself. (Of course, the presence of cosplayers likely indicated to other guests at the hotel that *something* was happening, though I'd imagine most of them remained ignorant of the specifics).

### *Fan Conventions*

Indeed, the context of a fan space and its relationship to safety influences the social relations that define the space. Nicole Lamerichs (2014) writes that “the fan convention is an ‘affective space’”, which structures the convention in three ways: “first, as an imaginative space; second, as a social space; third, as a space of intimacy” (264). These qualities, Lamerichs argues, are produced by the convention’s “media-saturated environment, in which fiction is actualized and memorized, and its social and physical contexts” (270). In the case of ClexaCon, the physical and social context of Las Vegas is significant. The experience of both safe and unsafe spaces for queer people is acutely embodied in the hidden locality of ClexaCon in the heterosexual theme park that is Vegas. While the convention’s “selective visibility” produces a feeling of relative safety within the convention, this feeling is completely stripped away when one leaves the hotel (or even the convention space), as the Las Vegas strip exemplifies how unsafe the rest of the world can feel for queer people.

The unique (in)visibility of ClexaCon allows attendees to experience a sense of “shared intimacy” (Lamerichs 271), which is predicated upon a collective dedication to fiction, and in particular, romantic fiction. Writing about fandom and its relationship to socialization and space, Kaarina Nikunen (2014) suggests that “fan sites can be understood as social spaces that enlarge the local spaces of fandom and exceed the constraints of geography” (5). While ClexaCon is a physical space and does not literally exceed the constraints of geography, its complex relationship with Las Vegas and the distance that many attendees traveled to be there mean that its

physical location is both structurally and affectively significant, while in some sense also being inconsequential.

Indeed, rather than being steeped in structure or tradition (in part because it is so new), ClexaCon produces and is produced by the raw emotion and passion of its attendees. In this sense, ClexaCon falls within Hernandez' (2012) understanding of *communitas* fandom, which as Yamato (2018) describes, is based on shared experiences and emotions, rather than the ritualist, hierarchical function of structural fandom. Because of ClexaCon's newness, its contradictory location in Las Vegas, and its emphasis on feelings – both joy and grief – the convention functions on an instinctual and emotional level, rather than a structural one (perhaps to the detriment of its own functionality, as I will discuss later).

In Anne Gilbert's (2017) chapter on industry presence and marketing at San Diego Comic-Con (SDCC), she writes about how mainstream industry promotion structures events and expectations. Gilbert writes that “this [exclusivity, anticipation] is how fandom is structured at SDCC, conscripting attendees into the promotion of media enterprises, thus implicating them into systems of hype and interpellating fans into an understanding of loyalty as a marketing strategy” (321). In addition, she notes that “at SDCC, fans are hailed as collaborators in efforts to reinforce the value of celebrity and media content” (328). At ClexaCon, fan devotion and the value of media content is measured in a slightly different way. ClexaCon attendees often illustrate their devotion through fan-creations (fan fiction, fan art, fan vids, etc.) rather than through means of mainstream consumption. In addition, rather than screening

exclusive, never-before-seen content at panels, each panel began with a [fan-made video](#) of the series, film, or relationship that the panel focused on.

Because ClexaCon is likely not seen as a hugely profitable location for mainstream industrial marketing (perhaps erroneously), mainstream industry presence at ClexaCon was minimal. The few production companies that attended the convention, such as Tello films, make and market content specifically for queer women, trans, and non-binary people. Additionally, ClexaCon also hosts a film festival where independent filmmakers can show their films, further distancing the convention from the mainstream television and film industries. However, although these independent artists had a presence at ClexaCon, most people I spoke to exclusively expressed excitement about the mainstream content being celebrated at the convention, rather than expressing a desire to celebrate or discover new, independent content. This is a thread I will begin to unravel later on as I investigate the ways in which ClexaCon does and does not function as a safe space.

### **“Is Anyone Gay Here?”: Interviews and Observations**

#### *ClexaCon: An Overview*

Before I dig into the interviews I conducted, I want to provide a brief description of how ClexaCon 2019 functioned. As I mentioned above, the convention took place in the Tropicana Hotel, in a series of rooms and halls near the back of the building. There were a number of people dressed in cosplay at the event, though the majority of attendees were not in cosplay. Despite the convention’s name, I only saw two people dressed as Lexa over the course of three days. According to an attendee I



spoke to who had gone all three years, Lexa was the most popular cosplay character the first year, followed by “WayHaught” (a lesbian couple on the series) from *Wynonna Earp* the second year. By my estimation, the most popular cosplay characters in 2019 seemed to be Captain Marvel/Carol Danvers from the film *Captain Marvel* (2019), Nicole from *Wynona Earp*, and Nico (and sometimes Karolina) from *Runaways*. The location where I conducted interviews seemed to function as a sort of relaxation space, as people used the couches there to take a break in between panels or other events. In addition, the TV playing fan videos attracted many passersby, as people would see a fan video of their favorite couple or series playing and at times scream in delight (or despair). (See my bonus piece on this phenomenon [here](#)). This corner was in the main hall of the convention, which housed the fan-vendors selling or promoting their creative work, as well as the meet-and-greet area for ClexaCon guests.

The largest panel room, where the most popular panels were held, was directly across from the main hall. The other rooms were either around the corner or up an escalator from the main hall. Upstairs there was a gaming room, a quiet room, rooms where photo sessions took place, and, the film festival screening room. There was very minimal security, which struck me and some of the attendees as odd – one attendee told me there were bag checks at last years’ convention. Nonetheless, there didn’t seem to be any interlopers at the convention, and most attendees I spoke to noted that the convention felt very separate from the “outside world.” Many ClexaCon attendees came in pairs or with their significant others, some came with

larger groups, some came alone, and some came to meet up with friends from across the country that they'd met through fandom. The hall was at all times filled with noise and energy, as the audio recordings of my interviews can attest, and there was a sense of excitement and joy that permeated throughout the convention. This energy, I believe, is one of the things that caused attendees to be so enthusiastic about speaking to me about my project. It is to these moments of engaging conversation that I will now turn.

### *Methods*

In order to get a sense of how ClexaCon attendees thought about queer female fandom, community, space, and the convention itself, I conducted interviews over the course of the three-day event. Almost all of the interviews I conducted were spontaneous, with the exception of two interviewees who I messaged with beforehand on Facebook or Tumblr. My strategy for conducting interviews was born out of my intention to be considerate of attendees' time and space. Instead of walking up to individuals at the convention and asking for interviews, I chose to stand at a stationary location and hold up a sign indicating my intention to conduct interviews. My sign simply read "Researching queer women – Come talk to me!" I stood with this sign in the corner of the main hall, near the couches, the television playing fan videos, and the blow-up unicorns. Rather than approaching people at the convention who may have been uncomfortable talking to me or tired from the days' events and needing a quiet break to relax, holding up my sign meant that only people willing to talk to strangers and/or interested in being involved in my research would be asked

for an interview. Generally, people would see my sign, come up and ask me about my research, and then I would ask them if they would like to be interviewed. Almost everyone I asked for an interview in this manner said yes.



[Figure 16]: *My very artfully rendered sign, next to the blow-up unicorns.*

The questions I asked mainly revolved around the individual's relationship to ClexaCon, queer female fandom, community, and space in general, and if they thought of ClexaCon specifically as a safe space. Though I had a list of specific questions to begin with, these questions sometimes varied depending on how each conversation went. The interviews generally lasted about five minutes, (the longest of them clocking in at about 18), and were recorded, with the interviewees' consent, on my phone. The interviews were anonymous, and as such, I did not ask for names, sexual or gender identity, or pronouns. My intention with this decision was to make sure interviewees did not feel pressured to disclose any personal information that they did not wish to disclose to a stranger. However, many interviewees offered up this information without my prompting. As such, if an interviewee disclosed their pronouns to me, I will use that pronoun here, and if not, I will use the pronoun "they"

to describe them. The only demographic information I did ask for was age, as I was interested in learning more about how different generations viewed these issues of queerness, fandom, and space. In total, I interviewed 32 people over the course of 21 different interviews.

*Why did you come to ClexaCon?*

The first question I asked most people was *why did you come to ClexaCon?* Many people's answers to this were similar, though some were very intimate and personal. The most popular answer to this question was that people came to ClexaCon to find or return to community, and/or to celebrate the importance of fandom in their own lives, particularly as it relates to their own queerness. Below are some responses that represent some common sentiments among interviewees.

A: "Well, I'm hella gay" (2A).

A: "I kept coming back because of community" (4A).

A: "For my people!" (17A)

A: "Um, for starters my friend Alyssa invited me – we met at a Hayley Kiyoko concert" (20A).

A: [About going the first year] "I mean there was a lot of shows a lot of lesbian characters died during that spring so it felt like there was **a need to like gather together with community** [...] I was like 'okay I need to go and be around these people in person and have these conversations'" (21A).

As these responses illustrate, though the particular media objects present at ClexaCon are important to many attendees, it is the relationships and community built *around* this media that prompted many to attend the convention in the first place. As interviewee 21A describes, this need for community came to a head in 2016 and 2017 when awareness about the Bury Your Gays trope was at its height, spurring the first ClexaCon in 2017.

In addition, some attendees also had very personal relationships with particular media which in turn inspired them to attend ClexaCon. As interviewee 14A, who was a vendor at ClexaCon describes:

“So last year was my first year I was an attendee. Um, and it was my, I was only maybe out for a few months, so it was just like kind of an impromptu decision. I loved *Supergirl* and I knew Chyler Leigh was going, Sanvers was like probably the main reason I came out because their storyline really just like helped me accept myself um, so I thought I just sort of needed this mental break to be surrounded in a like queer safe space, um, and ClexaCon was that for me. And I had such a great time last year that I decided to come back as an artist and vendor” (14A).

As this attendee notes, it was both their relationship with *Supergirl* and Sanvers (a lesbian couple on the show) and their need for queer community that prompted them to attend, and then return to ClexaCon. Indeed, for many queer people, the connections between community, media, and identity are very strong. We might call this process of community building and self-discovery that interviewee 14A describes as a type of “identity work.” As Dym et. al illustrate, “the process of constructing community narratives, either through writing or other creative works, can be seen as a kind of identity work — that is, a process through which people engage in “forming, repairing, maintaining, or strengthening... their identities [55]” (4). In this sense, a passion for popular media and fandom, as well as a focus on creativity and community building, makes ClexaCon a uniquely useful space for this type of identity recovery work. The powerful personal and emotional effect of such community-driven spaces may point to one reason why so many people have traveled many miles and spent hundreds of dollars to attend an event like ClexaCon.

*Is ClexaCon a Safe Space For Queer Women?*

The next question I usually asked interviewees was *Is ClexaCon a safe space for queer women?* The most common answer to this question was an emphatic *yes*, with no qualifications. Below are some examples of these answers:

A: “I have never felt safer in my life” (5B)

A: “It's like you walk through the world and you have to wear a mask to breathe because the air was made for straight white men, and you know you come here and you can take off the mask and **you can breathe** the air because we're all – you know” (15A)

A: “It's cool to be in an area where I feel safe, 100% safe, walking around, holding her hand, just being myself.” (2B)

A: “Yeah **we can't do this at home**. Yeah we get, even here we've gotten extreme dirty looks”. (2A) “Yeah like at other casinos.” (2B)

Many people I interviewed highlighted how ClexaCon felt like a space that was completely free from judgment because everyone in attendance was assumed to be queer. As interviewee 15A notes, they felt a sense of extreme relief – that of being able to breathe freely for the first time – because of the exclusively queer atmosphere created at ClexaCon. Indeed, the differences between ClexaCon and the “outside world” were made even more striking because of its location on The Strip. A number of couples at ClexaCon told me they did not feel comfortable holding hands outside of the convention, and as interviewees 2A and 2B note, even at other casinos nearby they did not feel safe. This dichotomy between inside/outside was very apparent to me as well, as the experience of leaving the convention and entering Las Vegas – wearing the ClexaCon badge and what may potentially be read as “gay” clothing – remained an alarming encounter each time. For many attendees, myself included, this polarity further emphasized the ways in which ClexaCon felt like a safe space.

Despite these emphatically positive answers, not everyone I spoke to answered this question without qualifications. Those that answered this question with

more reservations often highlighted critiques about the ClexaCon's relationship to other matrices of identity such as race, gender, and ability. I have highlighted some of these answers below.

A: "I would conceptualize it as a *safer space*" (4A)

A: "Yes in the sense that, you know, we are surrounded by people who have something in common with us, but um, it is a little different for queer women of color, um. And you know, sometimes you're not always um, the person that is catered to." (10A)

A: "Queer women, collectively, yes, I feel like there are some problems of inclusivity that are a factor in terms of other intersections of identity as they align with queerness like the issue with it taking so long to have a **disability, accessibility policy**", (17A)

A: "Um, I think that people who are queer and might want to feel welcome within the space when it describes itself as **queer women and allies** that kind of leaves things like trans and non-binary people in sort of an odd space within that." (17A)

A: [Queer women of color might feel isolated being that Clexacon] "tends to celebrate I think someone said 'the hot white femme ladies'" (17A)

As these individuals highlight, while ClexaCon is often understood as a safe space for queer women as a broad category, once you get more specific about, as interviewee 17A put it, "other intersections of identity as they align with queerness," this categorization becomes more complex. Many of these issues are structural. As interviewee 17A notes, there was some delay/confusion about the disability and accessibility policy, and the description of ClexaCon as a space for "LGBTQ women and allies" may leave trans or non-binary people feeling left out. In addition, many of the television series celebrated at ClexaCon star white actors, which further solidifies the association between queerness and whiteness, rather than highlighting the experiences and interests of QPOC. (Of course, this particular problem is much bigger than ClexaCon itself, and is an issue with queer female fandom more broadly, as well as the mainstream television and film industries).

While only a few people brought up these critiques with me personally, further critiques were lobbied at ClexaCon on Twitter, using the hashtag [#Clexapocalypse](#). Many of the critiques discussed using this hashtag were about issues that vendors had – specifically about how the artist alley (where they sold their work) was not properly advertised, how they were not able to make enough money to cover the cost of their tables, as well as a general critique of how they were treated by convention staff. This was not an issue that came up in my interviews, likely because most of the people I interviewed were not vendors themselves. In addition, some critiques made using this hashtag focused on a need for more inclusivity regarding people of color, trans and non-binary people, and disabled people. Some of these critiques focused on the diversity (or lack thereof) of ClexaCon guests, which illustrates the point that interviewee 10A made about who the convention caters to.

Part of this issue with diversity and inclusivity may be a result of ClexaCon's focus on mainstream, rather than independent content. While there was a film festival and spaces for independent creators to showcase their content, almost everyone I spoke to (apart from the people there specifically to show their own films) expressed a nearly exclusive interest in the most popular fandoms celebrated at the convention. This focus on mainstream content also means that the media celebrated at ClexaCon is predominantly white and cisgender – reflecting the norms of the broader television industry. Perhaps, a more concerted effort to highlight more independent content would be a way to begin to tackle this issue of diversity. While this type of representation may not be an issue of physical safety for ClexaCon attendees, it is an



issue of inclusion, which affects the emotional, personal, and interpersonal experience QPOC might have at the convention.

*Have you found other spaces that feel safe for queer women?*

As a follow-up to my previous question about safe spaces, I wanted to know if attendees had found other spaces that felt safe for them as queer women or queer people. As I discussed in Chapter 1, there is a common perception that lesbian or queer female spaces have gone extinct, and I was interested to see if ClexaCon attendees had experienced this themselves. As I suspected, the most common answer to this question was fairly simple – *no*. However, some people qualified this answer by discussing spaces that were not necessarily queer-only spaces, but that felt safe nonetheless. Several interviewees discussed other conventions that acted as safe spaces for them, such as [DragonCon](#) and [TGIFemslash](#). Others noted particular online fan communities or group chats they were in with fans from across the world. Interviewee 32A noted that there are “pockets” of Twitter and Tumblr can feel like safe spaces, but also qualified this by saying that these spaces can be difficult to define because “there's not like a main flagship location that is like 'this one place! go here!' that is a safe place.” This same interviewee also discussed AfterEllen as somewhere that *used to be* a safe space, as well as Autostraddle, which now remains one of the only (inclusive) [sites for queer women](#)'s entertainment. In this vein, one person I spoke to, interviewee 5D, told me: “**I would say ClexaCon is like the real-life version of what I have online.**” Thus, instead of acting as a nebulous, potentially safe space with no borders or stability – as interviewee 32A described –

ClexaCon is (for the time being) a permanent, physical, well-defined space where the relationships and communities that have flourished online are strengthened and revisited in a new environment.

There were a few other answers to this question – one interviewee suggested college as a place that felt momentarily safe for them, while another brought up lesbian musician Brandi Carlile’s music festival (perhaps a throwback to the festivals I discuss in Chapter 1). Indeed, the continuing importance of music among queer women came up several times in interviews, and it is something I have continued to think about as I work on this project. Speaking to several people in line for the *Runaways* panel one morning, we all noted that the only other place we had felt safe in this way was at a Hayley Kiyoko concert (which of course, we had all attended at some point). In fact, several people I spoke to at ClexaCon said they had initially met at a Hayley Kiyoko concert, including one pair I met who were now dating. Thus, while women’s music festivals do not exist on the scale they once did, there are a small number of queer female musicians – namely Kiyoko and [King Princess](#) – who make space at their concerts for the type of freedom that many ClexaCon attendees felt. (Read my bonus piece about Hayley Kiyoko’s *Expectations* [here](#)).

Nonetheless, most people I spoke to noted that spaces that are safe for queer women were few and far between, and no one I spoke to mentioned lesbian bars or feminist bookstores as places that might serve this function. Indeed, one interviewee – who was only there to support her wife and didn’t even have a badge – got so emotional when I asked her about safe spaces that she started crying while speaking

about how she rarely feels completely safe at home or at her workplace. **While being at ClexaCon was an exciting and joyful experience for many, it also became an emotional space because of the ways in which it so starkly revealed the lack of freedom or safety attendees felt elsewhere.** In this sense, we can conceptualize safety as both a structural and an emotional construct, though of course the two frames influence one another.

*Why have so many queer women found community through fandom? What is unique about queer female fandom?*

As indicated above, many attendees at ClexaCon suggested to me that fandom, and specifically fandom that centered on queer women, was one of the only places where they were able to find a sense of safety and community. Thus, I was interested to hear from attendees about why they believe this to be the case, and what about queer female fandom they felt was unique. In regards to this first question, interviewees had many very insightful answers. Below are some such responses.

A: “So we just sort of form little groups where we tell each other our stories, and that’s sort of very affirming and important” (11B).

A: “Fandom’s like kind of this weird bubble of people that sort of understand that a character isn’t just a character, it’s like representative of your own experiences and um, how you feel” (14A).

A: “I think it’s a shorthand to talk to each other” (20A).

As several attendees I spoke to mentioned, fandom often gives queer people a sense of affirmation and comfort, both because of the stories being told in media and the ways in which fandom celebrates the importance of such media. In addition, as interviewee 20A notes, fandom can act as “shorthand” and be a conversation starter for queer women, a particularly important function given the prevalence of social

anxiety within the queer community. Indeed, participation in fandom or a shared familiarity with media can not only act as a common language, but also as a potentially safe(r) entry point for discussing queerness. For example, two women might come to an understanding that they are both queer by discovering that they have both watched *Wynona Earp* or, more obviously, *The L Word*. These qualities – comfort, affirmation, and the emergence of a shared language – are the aspects of fandom that the ClexaCon attendees I spoke to found most essential.

In regards to the second question, *what is unique about queer female fandom*, many people I spoke to had similar answers. The most common answer to this question was that because media depicting queer women can be difficult to find, fans are very dedicated to their chosen media once they have found it. Indeed, as several interviewees told me, because queer women have to so often fight to be heard in online spaces, there is a particular type of intensity that comes with these fandoms. Below are several answers that represent some common sentiments among fans that I spoke to.

A: “I would say the ferocity of it is pretty intense. I would equate it to like football and like how intense people get, and like how intense people get with their sports” (13A).

A: “We hang onto it harder” (15A).

A: “I think we’re very migratory” (17A).

A: “I feel the thing that makes these fandoms different is that we don't get spotlights the same way” (6A).

A: “Sometimes you'll watch something because it's good, and sometimes you'll just watch something because its gay” (18A).

These responses illustrate the ways in which the emotional, and as one fan put it seemingly “aggressive” nature of queer female fandom is tied up in the continued scarcity of queer representation in popular media. As a result of this, as interviewee

17A put it, queer female fans are often “migratory,” hopping from one media object to the next not because of any shared generic or textual conventions between the media, but for the promise of at least a moment of queer intimacy on screen. (As interviewee 18A notes, the quality of such media is not always guaranteed). These practices make queer female fandom a unique community of people, comprised of fans looking for not only entertainment, but for representation, catharsis, community, and safety.

### *Generational Differences*

The last topic I want to focus on is not a specific question I asked interviewees, but rather a theme I hoped to tease out among my interviews and observations, and among each of these chapters. One of the things I am most interested in exploring with this project is the perceived or actual differences among generations of queer women, particularly in relation to community, space, and fandom. Luckily for me (and to my surprise), there were a number of women in attendance who were several decades my senior who were willing to speak to me about this topic. The most valuable resource I found were two women in their 60s and 70s, who had been together for 40 years. In our 18-minute long interview (which included very little talking on my part), we discussed how ClexaCon is both different and similar to the spaces they had in the 70s and 80s, and how they view queer culture today. Below are some excerpts from that interview.

A: “Well, we were saying that, um, there seems to be a difference in the cohesiveness of the queer community now as opposed to what it was back when we were coming out” (7A).

A: “And actually, we actually described to friends that when we're going to ClexaCon, we said **it's kind of like the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival**

without the music. You know, so this is kind of taken a place because we don't have that as much anymore" (7B).

A: "Every generation has to find its own identifying charms and just define for themselves what they think is most important. There's just a lot of things that just don't resonate the same way because we have different experiences, you know" (7B).

I was particularly amazed by their comparison between ClexaCon and the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, a connection I was thinking about as I began this project but had not yet put into words. Throughout our interview, I sensed no resentment from them about what had been lost, but instead found they had an interest in younger queer women, and even a sense of pride of how queer women today have found their own ways to create community. Indeed, these women specifically told me how impressed they were by the organizing that followed Lexa's death, as they implicitly knew the importance of media representation, noting that one of the few lesbian films they had for many years was *The Children's Hour* (1961), which includes the oft-repeated theme of women being punished for their lesbianism. As Lexa's death was the original impetus for the convention's formation, this understanding about media representation was shared among everyone I spoke to.

Despite the lack of communication between generations, the older women I spoke to noted that they still saw connections among what they had gone through as young people and what young queer people are experiencing today. One woman I spoke to, a 52-year old lesbian who had attended ClexaCon on her own, articulated her thoughts about these connections in this way:

A: "When it happened to Tara, there's people like in my generation that are like, WTF? and then like now it's like, this is happening again. And then like, I think that created generations, bonds across generations, because for a lot of the younger folks, it's like, this is the first time, they know about what happened with Tara, but they weren't there when it happened right? And so

it's like, it's happening to them, and we're like 'oh yeah, we know about that'" (8A).

Indeed, Tara – a lesbian character on *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* who was killed in a manner eerily similar to Lexa – remains an important figure within queer female fandom that connects women across generations. In fact, the most multigenerational panel I attended was the Amber Benson panel (Amber Benson is the actress who played Tara). At one point the panel moderator Dana Piccoli asked the audience, *how many people in this room have had their lives affected by Buffy?* Everyone in the room raised their hands. Next, she asked *how many people first saw themselves in Tara?* Again, every person in the room raised their hands. (It was at this point in the panel that Amber started to cry). This moment illustrates how the content that was so important to older generations – like *Buffy* and *Xena: Warrior Princess* – is still important and a part of the cultural lexicon today, which means there are still interests we share among generations. While much of the initial work surrounding Lexa's death was done by young people, the grief that spurred this action is in no way foreign to older queer people, who experienced moments like these before the internet was what it is today. Indeed, we might even consider the ways in which affect and emotion can travel across and through generations of queer people, despite the distance we often perceive between us.

### **Conclusion: Safety, Community, and History**

I began this chapter with a discussion of safe spaces – the relevant literature on the topic, their historical resonances, and how this concept functions in a place like ClexaCon. Now is the time we might reflect on what we've learned from this

discussion. First, let's consider the question I asked throughout this chapter: *is this is a safe space?* While this question elicited passionate, thoughtful, and nuanced responses from my interviewees, perhaps a different question might better uncover the complexities of this topic. What if, instead of asking *is this is a safe space*, we asked *for whom is this space safe?* This way, the answer to this question is not simply “yes” or “no,” and instead encourages reflection on the part of the respondent. Indeed, the answer to this question may be affected by numerous characteristics of the space – the physical space itself, organizational strategies, infrastructure, services, inhabitants/attendees, among other aspects.

Of course, I did not ask my interviewees this more nuanced (but also slightly leading) question and instead asked them the “simpler” one. As I illustrated above, the majority of respondents answered this question emphatically in the affirmative. Nonetheless, many respondents also answered this question with important disclaimers – *yes but, almost, sometimes*. The relative safety of ClexaCon for its attendees is influenced by several factors, such as:

- Who is being catered to? (White women, queer women, trans & non-binary people, etc.)
- How do event organizers respond to feedback/criticism? (Regarding things like the disability policy or other issues of access. Here we might again look at the critiques leveled through the [#Clexapocalypse](#) conversation)
- What language is being used? (The description of the event “for LGBTQ women and allies” structures a sense of who belongs at the convention)
- What media content is highlighted? (As I mentioned earlier, many people come to ClexaCon for the mainstream media content, which is more likely to feature white, feminine, and cisgender characters than independent queer content is).



Additionally, some characteristics that factor into this sense of safety are more ephemeral than structural. As Dym et al. illustrate in their work, identity-focused spaces such as ClexaCon allow attendees to safely inhabit their identities, find mentorship and friendship, create community bonds, and process their identity-based traumas. The sense of safety these processes generate are primarily influenced by the inhabitants of a space rather than it's structure. Nonetheless, all of these characteristics of a space, whether they be structural or circumstantial, affect the experience of being in a space and whether or not it feels safe for each inhabitant. At ClexaCon, each individual's sense of safety within the space was influenced by their unique needs, perspective, and experience in the so-called "outside" world.

In addition to safe spaces, my other topic of inquiry within this chapter is the current state of queer female fandom, media, community, and the connections therein. I gained several significant insights into this topic. One of the things that came up again and again in this project was the importance of intense emotion within the creation and maintenance of fandom and community. Moreover, it is not simply the *existence* of strong emotion that is a significant aspect of community building, but rather the moment(s) of experiencing emotion *communally* that produce such bonds. This process exists across time and space – at the women's musical festivals of the 1970s, within the lesbian fandoms on YouTube, and of course, at ClexaCon.

For many queer women involved in fandom, these intense, communal emotions are often tinged with grief or sadness. Indeed, it was the death of a beloved fictional lesbian, Lexa, that led to the creation of ClexaCon. Lexa's death, and the

death of other characters like her, continue to haunt queer female media and fandom today, as the threat of queer death or disappearance continues to shadow queer representations. This is one of the reasons why, as one of my interviewees put it, queer female fans are often very “migratory,” jumping from one media object to the next, hunting for media that will not eventually end in disappointment. This detail illustrates one of the characteristics of queer female fandom that I have been highlighting throughout – that this fandom is less invested in a singular media object, and more invested in an identity, a sensibility, and a community. As many of my respondents suggested, involvement in this fandom not only gives them enjoyment, but also a sense of safety, affirmation, and a shorthand with which to talk to one another.

These experiences are not unique to young queer women, of course. As two of my interviewees noted, in some ways ClexaCon is today’s version of women’s music festivals, which no longer exist in the same ways they used to. Indeed, it seems that an intense, emotional orientation towards *something* is a characteristic of queer female community that has existed across time. This something is very often media, albeit in different forms and in very different contexts. In addition, some media objects – such as *Xena*, *Buffy*, *Bound* (1996), or *Desert Hearts* (1986) – have remained central to queer female fandom and community, illustrating that such objects give meaning to fans of all ages, perhaps creating a common language across generations. As my research has illustrated, there may be more connections between ostensibly disparate generations of queer women than we might think.

ClexaCon also harkens back to queer and lesbian spaces of the past in that it is a physical, rather than an exclusively online space. This produces a different experience of being in the space than what I described of YouTube fandoms in Chapter 2. For ClexaCon attendees, seeing that these people and communities that they have only interacted with online are truly *real* is an invigorating encounter, and one that affirms one's sense of identity and the spaces they can occupy in the world. Indeed, harkening back to my previous point about communal emotions, the experience of attending ClexaCon rather than experiencing or watching media "together" in an online context is an intensely emotional experience that reveals the depth of our connection to this media and to one another.

While it would be difficult to argue that ClexaCon is an entirely safe space – perhaps because no space truly is – I hope this chapter can give us a sense of how we might think and talk about issues of safety, community, and space. Indeed, I hope this chapter can start a conversation about the reasons we still need spaces that are safe and affirming for queer people and queer women in particular, but also some of the traps we fall into when structuring that safety – namely the marginality or exclusion that trans and non-binary people, people of color, and disabled people often experience in these spaces. ClexaCon, as a unique physical space for queer women, makes visible precisely these issues, and will likely continue to instigate the conversations about community, identity, and inclusion that have been circulating for decades.

## Conclusion

When I first set out to work on this project, I had several questions in mind. First, I wanted to know how we might conceptualize the community I call “queer female fandom.” Where is this community located? What media texts does this fandom center on? How do we define this fandom in terms of space? In regard to this question of space, I was interested in exploring the different community formations and social interactions that occur in online spaces as well as physical ones. This is how I came up with the ideas for Chapters [2](#) and [3](#), which look at YouTube fandom and the fan convention ClexaCon, respectively. In addition, the thread I wanted to consider throughout all of this is how these phenomena have resonances across time. I wrote [Chapter 1](#), which focuses on lesbian fandom and space throughout the 20th century, as a way to illustrate the connections and dissonances between queer female space and community from then to now. Throughout these chapters, I demonstrated where we’ve been, where we are now, and where we might be headed in the future. In this vein, I questioned the notion that spaces like ClexaCon are truly *safe* for everyone, and I challenge readers to continue this discussion about how we might work to more productively mobilize the concept of safe spaces in the future.

*Overview: What Did We Learn?*

In Chapter 1, I discussed lesbian pulp novels, lesbian bars, feminist bookstores, and women’s music festivals. In this chapter, we learned about the importance of physicality in the creation of lesbian community. Even lesbian pulp novels, which were not specifically connected to physical spaces, gave lesbians the

tools to find one another as they congregated at the lesbian-centric spaces described in the books. One of the reasons lesbians in the previous century found these spaces so significant and transformative was because of the ways in which they encouraged experiences of communal emotion. Importantly, these emotional experiences were often predicated on the centrality of media – in particular music and literature – in these spaces. The importance of these media-focused feelings is one of the threads we can connect from queer women’s cultural practices of the 20th century to those of today.

The lesbian-centric spaces I discuss in this chapter also connect to the issue of safe spaces I investigated in regards to ClexaCon. The safety of these 20th-century spaces was often seen to be predicated on their exclusivity, which had consequences in terms of inclusion, namely in regards to race and gender identity. Indeed, many early lesbian bars were segregated (both by class and race), and several women’s music festivals were embroiled in controversy over their trans-exclusionary policies. While queer female spaces inhabited by young people today are generally understood to be more open to gender and racial diversity, these issues are have not completely disappeared, as I illustrated in Chapter 3. With spaces that focus on a single aspect of identity – such as queerness – other facets of queer people’s identities sometimes get overlooked, ignored, or excluded entirely from the conversation. This can lead to an unfortunate situation where the needs of people of color, disabled people, and trans people are unattended to, as queerness (as it is defined *apart* rather than in conjunction *with* from these other identities) is centered within these spaces. These

issues, which are both definitional and structural, have been present in queer communities of the past as well as those of today.

In Chapter 2 I discussed queer female fandom on YouTube, specifically in relation to two prominent real-life lesbian couples on the site. In this chapter, I illustrated the importance of cultural literacy in the creation and maintenance of queer female fandom. By this I mean the idea that having a particular type of knowledge about media that is important to queer women will allow you to access and understand this community in ways that you likely not be able to without such knowledge. This idea highlights the fact that queer female fandom is often highly intertextual, meaning that it spans through and across various media objects. As such, the extent of this fandom is often invisible to those outside the community who do not have this type of cultural literacy. (See my “multifandom” music video about queer female fandom [here](#)). The “selective visibility” (Dym et. al) of this fandom allows fans to feel safe expressing whatever intense and/or intimate emotions this media brings up without (significant) fear of judgment. This is important in regards to the lesbian couples on YouTube that I discuss in this chapter, as their breakups elicited very intense, grief-filled reactions from fans, which thus illustrates the investment many fans had in their relationship. The communal experience of grief is also central to the emergence of ClexaCon, which was created as a response to the death of an extremely popular lesbian character named Lexa on the CW series *The 100* (2014 – Present).

In Chapter 3 I did an ethnography of the fan convention ClexaCon, focusing on how the event does and does not function as a safe space and investigating its place within a lineage of queer female cultural production. In this chapter I discussed the significance of ClexaCon as a physical space, and how for many attendees seeing this community embodied in “real life” produced powerful and emotional responses. I also investigated the generational resonances and dissonances that emerged within this convention, in particular focusing on a conversation I had with an older couple who explicitly compared ClexaCon to the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival. I concluded this chapter with a discussion of some of the factors that go into producing a space such as ClexaCon as safe or not, such as the geographical/physical nature of the space, who is being catered to, the language that is used, and the particular media that is being highlighted. Many of these characteristics were brought up by people I interviewed, some of whom questioned whether or not ClexaCon was truly a safe space in an intersectional sense (ie. considering other factors in conjunction with queerness, such as race and ability).

Taken together, these chapters reveal some interesting characteristics of queer female fandom, community, and the complexities of safe spaces that I believe warrant continued discussion. All of these chapters illustrated the importance of safety for queer women not only in terms of physical safety, but also as it affects one’s ability to safely express emotions. In the 1970s lesbians felt this safety expressing their musical or literary passions at a women’s music festival or a feminist bookstore, while in the 2010s some queer women express their queer feelings in the comments section of

lesbian YouTube videos. At ClexaCon, many people spoke to me about the freedom they felt in being able to express themselves fully, with all of the uninhibited enthusiasm and emotionality that entails. Indeed, I have illustrated with this project the importance of intense feelings – both joy and grief – in the production and maintenance of queer female fandom, and I hope we can continue to think of ways we might mobilize these emotions in productive/disruptive ways in the future. (I'm thinking here of the [activism](#) done in the wake of Lexa's death and the discussion surrounding the Bury Your Gays Trope).

I have engaged with the idea of cultural literacy throughout this project by illustrating the importance of a shared vocabulary among queer women across time and space. While the world (or at least the United States) is generally understood (rightly or wrongly) to be safer for LGBTQ people now than it has been before, this shared language and cultural literacy is essential as a means for safely making connections with other queer people, both in online and offline spaces. Indeed, one of the most unique aspects of queer female fandom is its intertextuality and the numerous media texts that comprise this language of queerness in pop culture. This expansiveness is often not captured or understood by society at large, which is one of the reasons why queer female fandom continues to feel like an intimate and niche space, but also why we often feel left out of the conversation. This project then serves as a means to give these cultural forms the time and space that they deserve.

*Discussions for the Future: Disappearance, Inclusion, Visibility*



One of the concepts I discussed in this project that I believe deserves further consideration is the notion of disappearance. Oftentimes, the narrative of lesbian space is centered around this concept. This may be factually correct in terms of the dwindling number of lesbian or female-centric spaces, but I also want to consider some of the troubling connections that are sometimes made between this notion of disappearance and that of an increased inclusivity within queer spaces. Some have argued (I'm thinking here of Bonnie J. Morris in her book *The Disappearing L* (2016), which I discuss in Chapter 1) that the disappearance of lesbian space is largely caused by the expansion of the notion of queerness, namely as it relates to the inclusion of trans women and trans people within these spaces. I wholeheartedly reject this argument, and I hope that we can continue to discuss the need for safe spaces without vilifying the groups who have (very rightly) criticized the exclusivity of such spaces. Indeed, I think there is a way we can continue to center lesbians, queer women, and trans & non-binary people in our constructions of space and community without losing sight of what makes these spaces unique in the first place. (Here we might think of the dating app Lex, which centers queer women and trans & non-binary people in its [historicized construction](#)).

In addition, there is a seemingly contradictory progression of the disappearance of lesbian space with a simultaneous increase in lesbian visibility within pop culture. While the wildly popular series *The L Word* (Showtime, 2004-2009) was rebooted in 2019 because of its continued popularity and supposed relevance, the cultural spaces that the characters inhabited in the original series for the

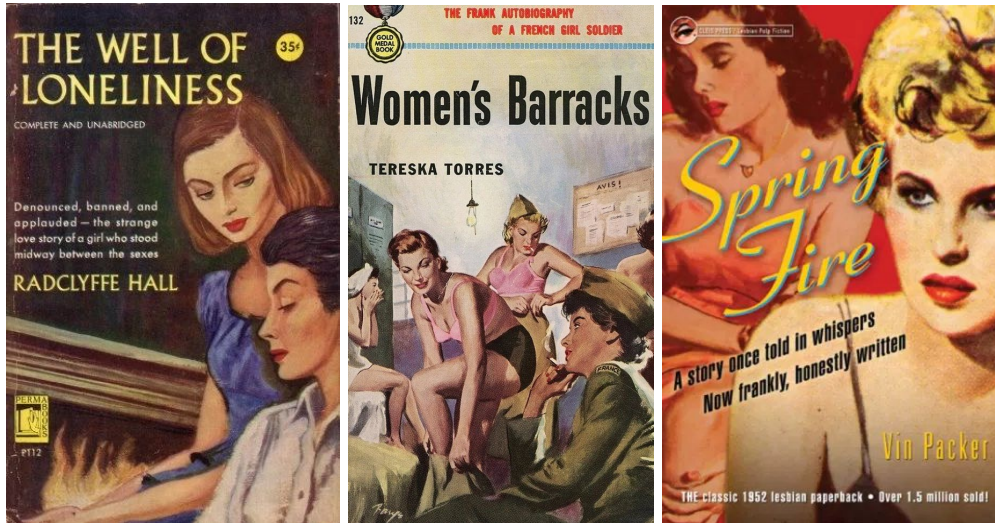
most part no longer exist. (In fact, this disappearance became a plot point in the reboot). Perhaps these divergent trajectories exist because this (slightly) increased lesbian visibility has caused people to think lesbian spaces are no longer needed. However, this logic falls apart when you consider that the increasing visibility of gay men in media has not decreased the popularity of gay male spaces, and in fact has done the exact opposite. (Though of course, this trend comes with its own issues of commercialization and fetishization). Indeed, an increase in visibility does not necessarily mean that queer people are more likely to be accepted by their family and friends, or less likely to experience violence, homelessness, or poverty. As the popularity of spaces such as ClexaCon indicates, these safe spaces are still needed and desired by queer people and exist both despite and because of this increased media visibility.

I hope this project will continue to encourage discussion about these questions of space, inclusion and pop culture, for which there are no clear-cut answers. The concept of “safe spaces” remains a complex and contested topic, and this project investigated some of these complexities throughout. With this thesis I illuminated these issues as they exist across time and space, drawing attention to the histories that often elicit both commemoration and critique. As such, it is my desire that the discussions I evoked in this project will not end here, but instead will continue to spark questions, considerations, and celebrations. As José Esteban Muñoz writes in his book *Cruising Utopia*, “queerness should and could be about a desire for another way of being in both the world and time, a desire that resists mandates to accept that

which is not enough” (96). It is my hope that while remembering and keeping alive the past, we can also resist the complacency of which Muñoz speaks and create the safe and expansive futures that we know can exist.

## Bonus Content

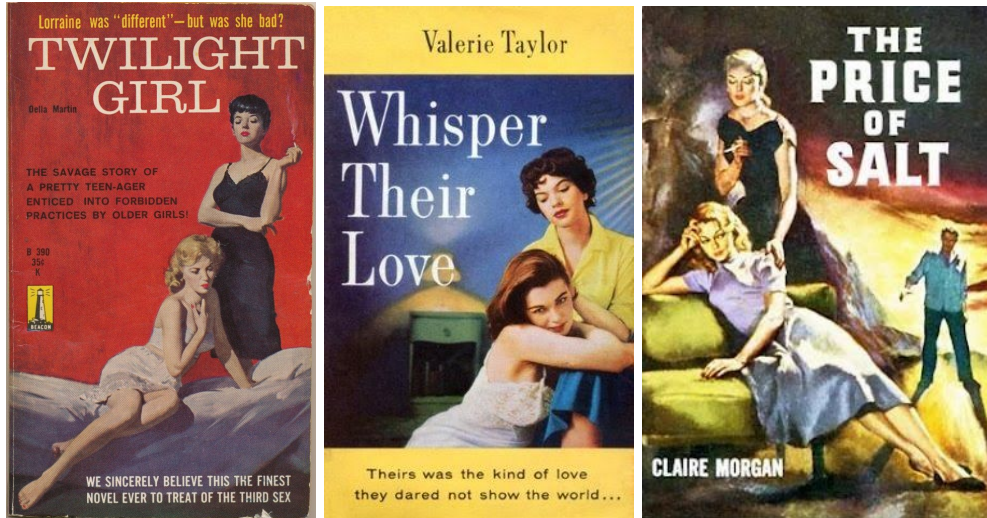
### Bonus 1: Lesbian Pulp Gallery



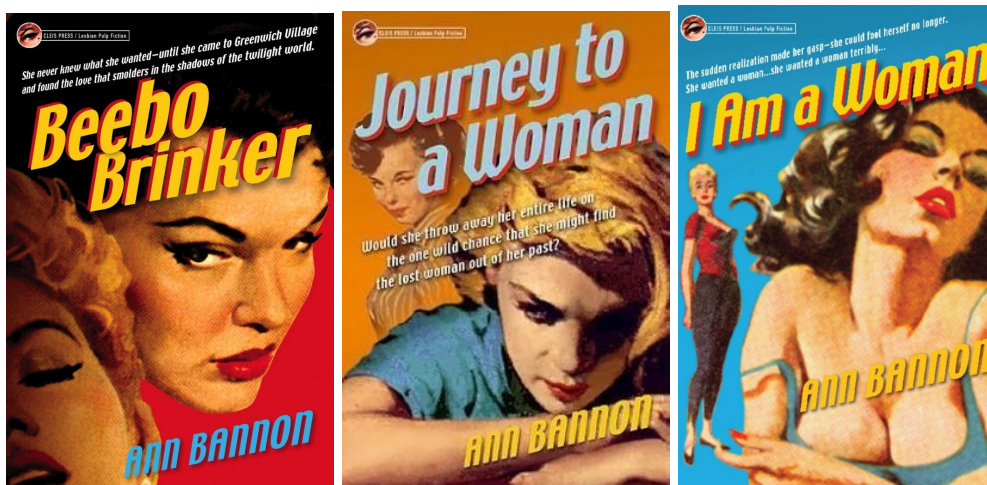
[Figures 17-19]: **Left:** *The Well of Loneliness*, written by Radclyffe Hall. (1928, Jonathan Cape). Predates the lesbian pulp phenomenon. [Credit](#). **Middle:** *Women's Barracks*, by Tereska Torres. Often known as the first lesbian pulp. (1950, Fawcett Books). [Credit](#). **Right:** *Spring Fire*, by Vin Parker. A pro-lesbian pulp novel. (1952, Gold Medal Books). [Credit](#).



[Figures 20-22]: **Left:** *We Walk Alone: Through Lesbos' Lonely Groves*, by Ann Aldrich. (1955, Fawcett Gold Medal). A journalistic pulp. [Credit](#). **Middle:** *This Bed We Made* by Artemis Smith. (1961, Monarch). A virile adventure. Note the man on the cover, a convention that was popular in virile adventures. [Credit](#). **Right:** *The Third Way* by Sheldon Lord. (1962, Beacon Books). A virile adventure. [Credit](#).



[Figures 23-25]: **Left:** *Twilight Girl* by Della Martin. (1961, Beacon Books). A pro-lesbian pulp. Note the tagline – "Lorraine was "different – but was she bad?" Credit. **Middle:** *Whisper Their Love* by Valerie Taylor. A pro-lesbian pulp. (1957, Fawcett). Credit. **Right:** *The Price of Salt*, by Patricia Highsmith (published under the pseudonym Claire Morgan). (1952, Coward-McCann). This book gained an immediate and lasting cult following, and was made into the 2015 film *Carol* starring Cate Blanchett and Rooney Mara. Credit.



[Figures 26-28]: **Left:** *Beebo Brinker*, by Ann Bannon. (1962, Gold Medal Books. This edition, 2001). Bannon wrote the famous Beebo Brinker Chronicles, which are comprised of six books published between 1957 and 1962. Credit. **Middle:** *Journey to a Woman*, by Ann Bannon. (1960, Gold Medal Books. This edition, 2001). Ann Bannon (Born Ann Weldy) was 22 years old and married when she published her first book. Credit. **Right:** *I Am a Woman*, by Ann Bannon. (1959, Gold Medal Books This edition, 2001). The series was republished in 2001 and adapted as an Off-Broadway production. Credit.

## Bonus 2: The Ascent of Lesbian Jesus: Hayley Kiyoko's Expectations

In 1973, Alix Dobkin released *Lavender Jane Loves Women*, now known as the first “out” lesbian album ever released. In March of 2018, 45 years later, Hayley Kiyoko released her debut album *Expectations*, the first-ever mainstream lesbian pop album. Kiyoko, an LA native and former Disney Channel star, is known by her fans as “Lesbian Jesus,” a nickname which illustrates the reverences with which fans treat her and her music. The album [peaked at #12](#) on the Billboard Hot 200 and received mixed to positive reviews from critics, but more importantly, it is an album that is beloved by fans. (If Hayley Kiyoko is Lesbian Jesus, then it only follows that *Expectations* is the lesbian bible).

While the connection between Alix Dobkin and Hayley Kiyoko that I opened with may seem tenuous, what I am attempting to do here is draw a line (albeit, not a straight one) between the origins of lesbian music in the 1970s and Kiyoko's ascension as Lesbian Jesus in 2019. In Jodie Taylor's (2012) chapter about lesbian music in the mainstream, she provides a brief overview of lesbian music from the 1970s to the 2000s. Taylor writes that “womyn's music” in the 1970s “was a reaction against the heteropatriarchy and the sexist power politics that dominated the rock and pop styles championed by the mainstream music industry of the time” (41). Thus, both the content and style of lesbian music was posited as an alternative to the mainstream, heteronormative music industry. Dobkin's *Lavender Jane Loves Women* was in this sense both political and polemical. In Dobkin's own words, the album contained “an express desire for ‘lesbians to have tangible musical proof of their

existence” (Taylor, 41). During this era, lesbian feminist music was explicitly alternative, and there was no desire among these musicians to enter the mainstream.

In the 1980s and 1990s, more mainstream lesbian artists like Tracy Chapman and k.d. lang saw “mainstreaming” as a subversive action (Taylor 42). It is important to note, however, that many of these artists, including lesbian icon Melissa Etheridge, were not “out” during the early years of their careers. In 1993, k.d. lang and Cindy Crawford’s famous [Vanity Fair cover](#) is said to have marked the beginning of the concept of “lesbian chic” and the mainstream media’s fascination with (certain types) of lesbians. This fascination, which at times bordered on fetishization, continued through the 2000s, culminating in events like the Madonna/Britney Spears kiss at the 2003 VMAs, the Russian band t.A.T.u’s faux lesbian aesthetic, and Katy Perry’s straight-girl-experimenting-at-a-party anthem “I Kissed A Girl” in 2008.

To put it simply, lesbian culture and lesbian media have always had a complicated relationship with the mainstream. As Taylor puts it, “given the marginalization of queers within the mainstream, a phrase like ‘mainstream lesbian music’ is likely to be read as a contradiction in terms” (39). This is why the release of Kiyoko’s *Expectations*, an album that truly is one of the first of its kind, is such a significant moment in the history of music more broadly, and in the history of lesbian music specifically. Since Kiyoko’s foray into pop music, several other queer female artists, such as King Princess and Clairo, have released albums, with King Princess even [performing on SNL](#). However, at the time of *Expectations*’ release, and when Kiyoko released her first big single in 2015, she had few peers in the industry.

*Expectations* was released on March 30, 2018, from the label Atlantic Records. The album was preceded by three singles (and their respective music videos), “Sleepover,” “Feelings,” and “Curious.” The single “Curious” [peaked](#) at #40 on the US Mainstream Top 40, while no other songs from the album charted. Kiyoko co-wrote and co-produced every song on the album with her two co-producers Cecil Bernardy and Jonathon Dorr. None of the songwriters or producers on the album are what you might call experienced hit-makers, which is likely indicative of the limited time and money Atlantic was willing to spend on the record, a reluctance that is made more visible by the company’s hesitance to really push the album into the mainstream pop landscape. (Much of the album’s success can likely be attributed to the passion of Kiyoko’s dedicated fan base). Many of the songs on the album are very radio-friendly, particularly the album’s best song, “Curious,” which includes a catchy tongue-twister of a chorus. Pitchfork’s Laura Snapes calls Kiyoko’s flirty duet with queer R&B star Kehlani “[a certified bisexual bop](#),” noting that it “has legs as a genuine hit if the label is prepared to attempt to push a queer love song into the mainstream.” Snapes also notes that Halsey and Lauren Jauregui’s queer pop duet “Strangers” only [peaked at #100](#) on the Billboard Hot 100, illustrating that perhaps the mainstream industry is not quite ready for a queer pop song to truly top the charts.

Regardless of *Expectations*’ position on the charts, the album has a decidedly mainstream pop sound. The production on *Expectations* is sleek and modern, but with a soft edge. The sound is pleasant, although not particularly innovative. Kiyoko really shines when her melodies and lyrics are the sharpest, on songs like “Curious” and



“He’ll Never Love You (HNLY).” Emily Mackay of the Guardian [praises Kiyoko’s songwriting voice](#), calling it “frank, fun, fearlessly tussling with her emotions.”

However, Pitchfork’s Snapes argues that *Expectations* “lacks the budget of high-end pop but aspires to its trappings,” and Spin’s Anna Gaca [writes](#) that “the sound is pleasantly aquatic and soft-edged but fussy and overwrought.” While these lukewarm reviews are not entirely unfair, for fans, the *sound* of Kiyoko’s music is not distinctly the point. It is the combination of her lyrics, her visuals, and her general persona as a lesbian pop star that inspire such devotion.



[Figure 29]: Stefanie Scott and Kelsey Chow in the “Girls Like Girls” music video. [Source](#)

To even begin to understand the phenomenon that is Hayley Kiyoko, we must go back to where it all started – the music video for her song “Girls Like Girls,” which was released on June 24, 2015. Kiyoko is known for videos like this one just as much, if not more so, than for her actual music. (Perhaps because although queerness can be represented in many forms, visual media remains such a striking way to depict queer romance, with videos such as these often inspiring impassioned responses from viewers). As of November 2019, the video for “Girls Like Girls” has nearly 114

million views. The video – which depicts two friends who eventually become romantically involved – marks not only Kiyoko’s “coming out” as a lesbian pop star but also her emergence as a visual artist and music video director. Since “Girls Like Girls,” Kiyoko has directed or co-directed all of her subsequent music videos, all of which depict a queer protagonist (either Kiyoko herself or other actors). Kiyoko’s music videos deconstruct a typically male, heterosexual narrative through Kiyoko (or her proxy’s) inclusion in the story.

“Curious” and “Feelings” are both good examples of this deconstruction. In “Curious,” Kiyoko dances at a party with male backup dancers and then lays on the floor covered in beautiful women. As Kiyoko [herself](#) puts it, she wanted to be in \*NSYNC growing up, and the “Curious” music video was her “checking off that box of wanting to be in a boy band.” The video also ends with Kiyoko and her love interest – a girl who has been brushing her off in favor of a guy – making out in the bathroom at the party, with Kiyoko eventually leaving her love interest alone in the bathroom, breathing heavily, as she decides to choose herself over being used. The music video for “Feelings” depicts Kiyoko at her most confident, playfully following her love interest around on a deserted street late at night. Kiyoko is aware that this setup sounds creepy, and spent time considering the gender dynamics of the video. As [she notes](#) in her interview with lesbian writer and humourist Jill Gutowitz, “you’d normally see a guy following a girl down the street. That’s something that I want to do because it’s something I probably would do, but I also want to respect women while doing so.”

The songs themselves, even ones without accompanying videos, represent similar themes in their lyrical content. Many of the lyrics on *Expectations* depict a particular type of queer longing. This longing comes in several different forms – a longing to be with someone who doesn’t feel the same way (in colloquial terms, falling in love with a straight girl), a longing to love in public, or a longing to be with someone who is comfortable with themselves. Several of Kiyoko’s songs illustrate the frustration that comes with finally being comfortable in your identity, only to find that who you want to be with isn’t ready yet, and perhaps never will be. This frustration is clear in songs like “What I Need,” where Kiyoko sings “When we’re all alone, girl you wanna own it / When we’re with your fam, you don’t wanna show it / Oh, you try to keep us on the low.”

Kiyoko’s lyrics often fluctuate between playful cockyness and self-conscious pining, which for the listener provides a rewarding mix of aspirationality and relatability. In “Feelings,” Kiyoko sings of how confident she is in her feelings for a girl, while in “Sleepover” she laments the fact that her best friend only exists as a romantic partner in her head. While Kiyoko’s lyrics often lean toward indignation rather than romantic bliss, she also posits a sort of insistence of her own worth, in spite of her track record with romance. In “Curious,” despite the cocky delivery of many of the lyrics, Kiyoko also insists in the second verse, “I don’t believe you / You ain’t been loving me right.” Through its lyrical content, *Expectations* illustrates the depth of queer desire, avoiding the fetishization and ambiguous language that defined mainstream representations of queer women in the past. As Jill Gutowitz puts it in her

[profile](#) of Kiyoko for Them, “no mainstream artist has presented us with a uniform breadth of conspicuously queer lyrics and visuals like Kiyoko has.”

It is significant that Kiyoko’s music centers not only on queerness as an identity, but on the complexities of lesbian desire. This focus on desire, and specifically on the female or the lesbian gaze, is clearly articulated in the album’s cover photo. The cover of *Expectations* depicts Kiyoko sitting in an ornate room at the center of the frame, gazing at a naked woman lying on the floor in front of her. The woman’s nudity – apart from her back and hip – is not visible to the viewer; only Kiyoko has the full view. In his classic BBC television series *Ways of Seeing* (1972), John Berger describes the ways in which classical visual art, and in particular portraiture, objectifies women through the enactment of the male gaze, whether it be the artist gazing at his muse, or the viewer gazing at the art. Importantly, the “bearer of the look,” to use Laura Mulvey’s phrase, is rarely seen, and instead the image itself frames the women as an object-to-be-looked at. On the cover of *Expectations*, Kiyoko takes the position of the “bearer of the look,” and the object of her gaze, a figure who is usually the focus of the image, is partially pushed out of frame. In this way, Kiyoko’s own lesbian desire is centered as she gazes at the woman in front of her. The viewer, however, is unable to access this gaze from her perspective and instead must focus on Kiyoko’s desire itself as the focal point of the image, rather than the woman we are unable to fully see. In this sense, Kiyoko is able to deconstruct the male gaze through her centering of lesbian desire.



[Figure 30]: The album cover for *Expectations*. [Source](#)

By putting herself in a position that would usually be occupied by men, Kiyoko is able to disrupt dominant understandings of male and female desire. As [Kiyoko](#) herself puts it, this desire for disruption comes from the experience of growing up in a society that understands desire exclusively through the lens of heterosexuality. “Growing up, I didn’t want to be a guy, but I was envious of the way women looked at men, and I wanted women to look at me that same way.” Kiyoko’s performance of desire is significant in that it contradicts two popular and opposing

frameworks of lesbianism: the lesbian as fetishized, and the unsexy, overly emotional lesbian. Kiyoko's music refuses fetishization because it is her own desire that is centered, and departs from lesbian music of the 1970s in its outright discussion of that desire. In her 2011 article about "*Glee's* Shameful Lesbian Musicality," Christina Belcher discusses the way lesbian music becomes associated with lesbian shame, as lesbian music becomes the symbol of the unsexy, stagnant lesbian. This feeds into what Elizabeth Freeman calls the "lesbian drag," wherein "the "lesbian" is a temporal figure that pulls the queer, progressive present back toward a degraded, conservative past" (412). While this assumption that lesbian music is unsexy is perhaps unfair, it is an association that has stuck. In this regard, it is crucial that Kiyoko's *Expectations* allows us to define lesbian music as something that exists not in the past, but in the present day. Nonetheless, while her music *is* sexy, both in sound and content, it is also very emotional and personal. (See, in particular, "Feelings"). Thus, it is not that Kiyoko is completely turning away from pre-digital lesbian culture and practice, but rather that she is updating this artistic frame for the present day.

I would be remiss in my duties as the foremost Hayley Kiyoko scholar if I did not also mention the importance of Kiyoko's music in a performance context. Kiyoko's *Expectations*, as it travels from location to location across different formats, manifests the creation of lesbian space. Most obviously, this space is created at her concerts. I attended the *Expectations* tour when it came to Seattle in April of 2018, and got to experience this unique space – complete with numerous instances of bra-throwing and scores of rainbow flags – for myself. Through Kiyoko's

performance at these venues, and the queer-majority of her audience, these spaces *become* lesbian or queer spaces (if only for a few hours), a transformation that has a profound effect on those in the audience, myself included. In Gill Valentine's 1995 article about the music of k.d. lang, she writes "through appropriating the space of the concert venue, her [k.d. lang's] lesbian audience demonstrates to the few heterosexuals there, how the production of space is dependent on those present" (478). For the few straight people in the audience, this moment creates a strange reversal, where queer people are for once *not* the ones who feel out of place. Additionally, Kiyoko's music encourages the creation of lesbian space in less formal environments. As Valentine puts it, "this ability of lang's music to signify a sense of belonging or imagined community amongst lesbians means that when two women catch each other's eyes in this way, her music facilitates the fleeting creation of a lesbian space" (480). To put it simply, if a Hayley Kiyoko song plays in the supermarket and two queer women lock eyes, an ephemeral lesbian space is created in that moment. In this way, Kiyoko's music implicitly *queers* whichever space it emerges within, providing queer fans with a unique sense of pride and ownership over her music.

While Kiyoko's music does contain some interesting elements – namely her candid and playful lyrics – Kiyoko as an artist cannot be fully understood from simply a musical perspective. There are many other elements – her visuals, her persona – that contribute to her position within the pop music industry and the passionate fandom that has defined her career. For fans, Kiyoko signals

aspirationality through her unmistakable confidence, while also communicating relatability through frequent moments of self-reflection. In her 1998 book *Heroic Desire: Lesbian Identity and Cultural Space*, Sally Munt writes that the “‘lesbian,’ [...] continues to be a powerful strategic sign, an identity – or rather a set of identities – which is responsive and resistant to the nexus of censure which reduces us to an absence” (4). At the heart of it, it is Kiyoko’s lesbian *presence*, across all facets of her art, that determines the cultural power of her music and the dedication of her fans. Lesbian Jesus, indeed.



Bonus 3: The Kiss Heard ‘Round the World: “Juliantina” and International Lesbian Soap Operas

*Note: this piece was originally published in FLOW, a media and culture journal. You can find that article [here](#).*



[Figure 31]: *Juliantina's first kiss. [Source](#).*

In the last decade or so, a peculiar phenomenon has begun to occur in certain corners of the internet. Soap operas, particularly of the Latin American variety, have slowly begun to feature more lesbian couples. There was “PepSi” from *Los Hombres del Paco* (Antena 3, 2005-2010), “Jemma” from *Hand aufs Herz* (sixx, 2010-2011), Kate and Rana from *Coronation Street* (ITV, 1960-), “Clarina” from *Em Família* (Rede Globo, 2014), “Flozmín” from *Las Estrellas* (Channel 13, 2017-2018), and most recently, “Juliantina” from *Amar a Muerte* (Univision, 2018-). Suddenly, it

seemed, with the advent of YouTube and Dailymotion, fans from around the world were able to engage with these relationships without having access to the full series themselves. Hundreds of videos of these couples, completely detached (through editing) from the context in which they originally aired, were uploaded to video sharing sites, and an international lesbian soap opera fandom was built. These videos, what Stephanie M. Yeung has called “fugitive representations” (43) because of the ways in which they are queerly archived and consumed, has continued to proliferate on YouTube and on other video sharing platforms, as more queer women discover and become invested in these relationships. The most recent, and arguably the most popular of these couples, is Juliantina.



[Figure 32]: Screenshot from a Flozmin video on Dailymotion. [Source](#).

Juliantina—a portmanteau of Valentina and Juliana, the two character’s names—is a relationship that exists on the telenovela *Amar a Muerte*. The series aired

both on American Spanish-language network Univision and Mexican network Las Estrellas. *Amar a Muerte* follows a typically complex telenovela storyline centering on the deaths and reincarnations of Valentina and Juliana's respective fathers. This central storyline, however, is only peripheral to Juliantina fans, who are focused exclusively on their love story. Most of this content is archived on YouTube. The most popular Juliantina channels have posted between 270 and 336 videos of the couple. These videos are between one and five minutes long (though usually closer to one), and span their entire relationship, from their first meeting to the conclusion of the series. Juliantina's popularity has expanded further than the usual niche existence of these fugitive representations, with several [famous lesbian YouTubers](#) posting reaction videos, and popular queer websites, such as [Autostraddle](#) posting articles about the couple. The two actresses who portray Juliantina, Macarena Achaga and Bárbara López, even commissioned a special Juliantina photoshoot for their fans. (It is likely that López and Achaga's enthusiastic engagement with fans has contributed to the overall popularity of the pairing). In addition, because viewers were so enamored with the couple, one fan created a fake Juliantina Netflix movie trailer, and another created and circulated a [petition](#) to make a Juliantina spin-off.



[Figure 33]: Post from Achaga’s Instagram depicting the Juliantina photoshoot.  
Source.

Juliantina’s popularity and the fan practices that comprise its fandom illustrate several unique factors that are central to the maintenance and production of queer female fandom online. One of the most intriguing aspects of Juliantina, and of all these soap opera lesbians, is the way that most viewers consume this content. As I mentioned above, the videos that are uploaded to YouTube and other social media sites are edited in such a way that the narrative only focuses on the lesbian relationships, while other storylines become peripheral or even nonexistent. Yeung calls this process “queer cutting” and suggests that “these capabilities [online streaming] are also allowing fans to rescue and preserve generative and meaningful lesbian representations whose value is further discounted within an already

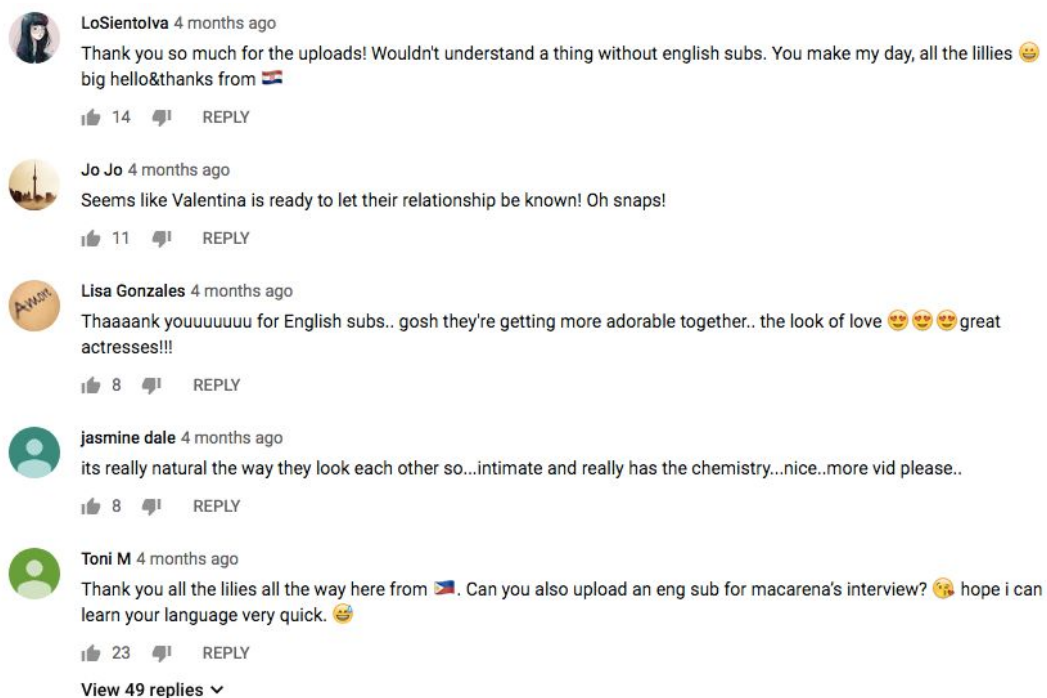
disparaged form” (44). This process of queer cutting complicates normative understandings of television viewership, as Juliantina fans are only interested in one storyline within the series, rather than the series as a whole. The Juliantina videos are edited in such a way as to include only scenes that involve either Valentina or Juliana (or both), so that viewers can follow the Juliantina storyline in its entirety.

Understandably, viewers who only watch the Juliantina videos are often confused about the other narratives within the show (namely the reincarnation storyline), and in this case the comments section acts as a space where fans can ask questions and receive answers from more knowledgeable viewers. YouTube then acts as an archive for this queerly-constructed content, which in turn provides a space for this fandom to coalesce. However, this archive is tenuous, as videos are often flagged for copyright by the networks, which leads to them being blocked in some countries. Fans often combat this problem by making the videos as short as possible or uploading them to Dailymotion, Facebook, or Dropbox instead, where copyright issues are less of a concern.

In addition to this particular style of editing, every Juliantina video is also translated into English by the Latin American fans who upload these videos. (The identities of these video creators remain unknown to most, as they are often only known by their usernames). This extensive fan labor allows for the existence of an international fandom surrounding these representations, with fans often expressing their gratitude for the video creators in the comments section as they wait for the next batch to be uploaded. (See more on translation in text box). The international reach of

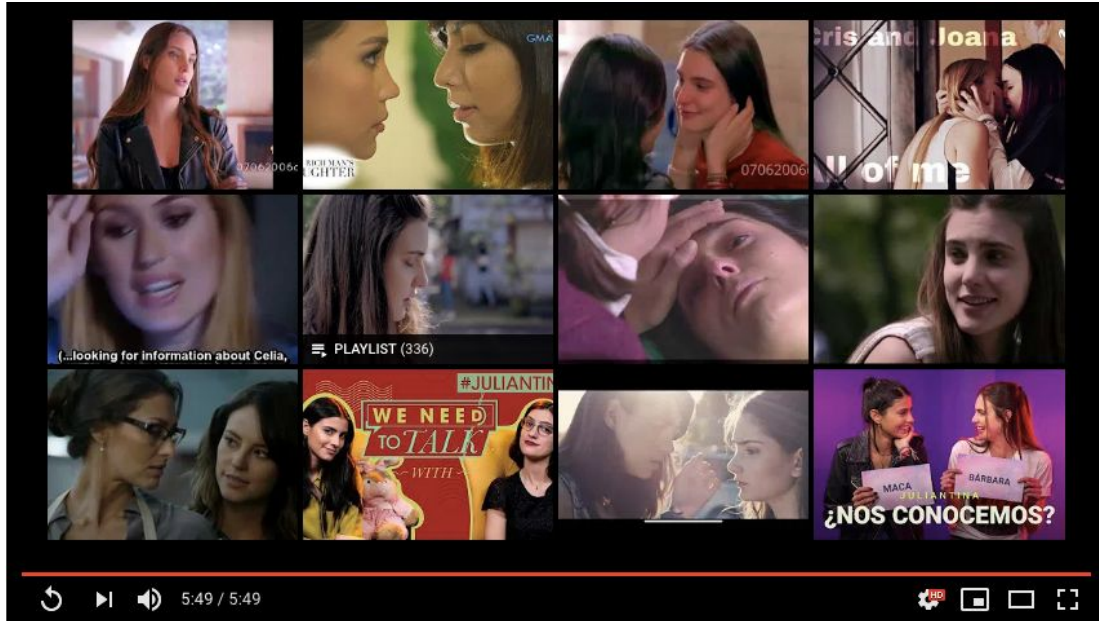
this fandom is made visible in the comments sections of these videos, with viewers often revealing their location through comments such as “Thank you Thailand!” or “Watching from Germany!” Though all fandoms are now more international than ever, the international scope of the Juliantina fandom is significant in that it makes visible the labor that is involved in maintaining this fandom. Additionally, the global flow of Juliantina content is unique, as much (though not all) of queer media that is celebrated and viewed globally is American or English-language content.

Furthermore, the international popularity of Juliantina and other similar couples indicates the continued lack of affirming portrayals of queer women on a global level, as well as the almost indescribable draw these couples have for fans across borders and across language.



[Figure 34]: *A portion of the comments section from a Juliantina video, with commenters praising YouTube user “All the Lilies” for their translation work.*  
*Source.*

While soaps and/or telenovelas like *Amar a Muerte* are often perceived as unrealistic because of their reliance on melodrama, the international popularity of Juliantina with audiences who may not normally watch telenovelas indicates that it is the content rather than the form that draws viewers to the couple. Despite the connotation of soaps as frivolous, many Juliantina fans describe their investment in the couple as predicated upon the perceived “realness” of the relationship. I don’t mean real in the sense of “existing in the non-televisual world,” but rather real for the viewer in the sense of relatability (I have felt/experienced those feelings) or aspirationality (I haven’t experienced that, but I would like to someday). Ien Ang describes this structure of feeling as “emotional realism” (in Storey, 153). It is queer fans’ investment in this emotional realism that produces their enjoyment of these fugitive representations, regardless of the national or generic context in which they exist, and it is sites like YouTube that allow these representations to proliferate on an international level.



[Figure 35]: Youtube suggestions after I watched Juliantina videos on a guest account. Many of these videos are clips of other lesbian couples from Spanish-language soaps and serials.

Though I have focused this article on Juliantina specifically, as I outlined above, there are a number of soaps from around the world that have engendered similar fan practices. These soaps, and the lesbian relationships therein, are part of what we might call the canon of queer female media. As Yeung (46) points out, YouTube, as the disseminator of much of this content, acts as an archive for this canon, and connects these texts to one another through its algorithmic functions. YouTube’s algorithm, as well as the cultural knowledge of fans, allows for and encourages fans of one pairing to become invested in another, as fans who watch these queer soaps are pointed towards similar content hosted on the platform. These fugitive fan practices illustrate what Susan Driver calls the “queer possibilities of cultural literacy” (13), wherein the meaning of a text is decoded according to its queer resonances rather than its narrative cohesion. This canon is rarely made visible to



those outside the queer female community, as this niche content remains only peripheral to the broader public, despite these couples' centrality among queer viewers.



[Figure 36]: Screenshot from a Juliantina video on YouTube entitled “Juliana & Valentina #47 (english subtitles)”. [Source](#).

The fan practices that define the Juliantina fandom illustrate the unique ways in which queer female fans create and consume content, engaging with media in a manner that circumvents problems of access. As Kelsey Cameron puts it, the models of fandom that pioneering fan studies scholar Henry Jenkins often engages with, models that center the practices of white men and are generally divorced from identity work, “do not necessarily translate to queer women, who lack both identity reinforcement from mainstream culture, which Jenkins’s subjects constantly receive, and the embodied sexual spaces that many position as key to the cultural lives of gay men” (1.6). Indeed, the global reach of Juliantina and the fan labor and viewing

practices that define its fandom demonstrate the continued marginality of queer women on screen, and, subsequently, the lengths fans must go to in order to preserve and centralize these stories.

#### Bonus 4: The Queer Canon

The following video is an audio/visual explanation of one of the concepts I have utilized in this project: the queer canon (alternatively titled “the lesbian canon”). This is also an example of “fanvid” or fan video – specifically a “multifandom” video. Read below for a description of the multiple meanings displayed within the video.

**Video:** <https://vimeo.com/370168533>

This music video illustrates one of the concepts that is essential to a comprehensive understanding of queer female fandom – that of the “queer canon,” or more specifically, the “lesbian canon.” This canon encompasses all of the media content – namely television and film – that is popular among queer women who are interested in pop culture. All of this content is thus linked, not by virtue of its form or any generic conventions, but by virtue of the queerness represented within this content. Thus, in order to understand the fandom surrounding one queer media object, one must also consider the other media that has been consumed by queer women previously. Being literate in this “queer canon” allows one to enter into an online community where everyone essentially speaks the same language, a language which is often not understood by those outside the community. Susan Driver calls this the “queer possibilities of cultural literacy” (Driver 13). The canon only reads as a canon by those who are literate in queerness (ie. queer themselves). In essence, these queer

media objects are intertextually linked by virtue of their queerness, and this media is the basis of what we may broadly call “queer female fandom.”

The meaning of this music video, like the meaning of these queer media objects, is multivalent. First of all, the song I have chosen, Muna’s “I Know a Place,” is often considered a queer anthem. Muna is a band comprised of all queer members, and the song’s implicit meaning (described as such by the band and by fans) is that of queer acceptance and safety. Thus, the first layer of meaning in the music video is the most obvious: the connection between the lyrics of the song and the clips shown in the video. The connection between the lyrics and the video clips are fairly simple – lyrics about dancing paired with clips of dancing, or lyrics about comfort paired with someone being comforted. These connections can theoretically be understood by any viewer watching the music video, regardless of their familiarity with the media shown in the video or the concept of queer female fandom more broadly.

An understanding of the second meaning of the music video necessitates some familiarity with the lesbian canon itself. The music video can also be read as a representation of the lesbian canon, ie. as a representation of (some, not all) the content consumed by and popular among queer female fans. Understanding this meaning requires some knowledge of the particular media objects depicted in the video, in order to understand how each clip relates to each series/film as a whole, as well as how each clip represents common themes among queer female content across the media landscape. (In particular, the concept of hurt/comfort, a popular theme in queer fan fiction. This term is fairly explanatory – it involves one character being

emotionally or physically hurt, and another comforting them). In addition, many of these clips represent iconic moments within these media texts, and as such the music video may elicit a stronger emotional response from someone who has seen the majority of the media depicted therein. Lastly, some of the characters depicted in the video are not canonically queer, but are read as queer by many fans and thus are still understood as a part of this broader queer canon. These clips are thus only understood as queer because of their placement among other canonically queer characters, or because of their inclusion within the lesbian canon by queer female fans.

The third meaning of the music video is a combination of the first two meanings – it represents the connection between the lyrics of the song and the concept of queer female fandom. The lyrics themselves may also be understood in two ways. The first relates to the initial meaning I discussed – the lyrics of “I Know a Place” may be read as speaking to the characters in the music video, all of whom are explicitly or implicitly queer and often in need of comfort. Secondly, the “place” in “I Know a Place” may be understood as the space (both online and offline) that is created by communities of queer female fans. Thus, the song may be read as offering comfort to both the queer characters in the video as well as the queer fans watching it. This multivalent meaning would only be fully understood by those conversant in queer female culture and fandom.

As illustrated above, one function of this music video was to explore how different viewers might take different meanings from the video. It serves as a way to consider the concept of queer cultural literacy, and to evaluate the idea of in-group

and out-group viewership of queer content. The notion that various audiences might read this video differently illustrates the ways in which queerness means different things and reads differently depending on one's positionality. In addition, the music video highlights some of the themes that queer women tend to gravitate towards in the media they consume. Most significantly, the video highlights the concept of hurt/comfort, through the lyrics of the song and the clips that were chosen. This concept is central to queer female fandom, and scenes between characters that depict this dynamic are often very popular among fans.

I also worked to highlight the concept of happiness as an aspirational modality. In essence, queer people often gravitate towards examples of queer happiness that give them a model of what a happy queer future might look like (see Muñoz, 2009 Ahmed, 2010). This media often serves as such a model. Lastly, I wanted to highlight in this video the concept of the female gaze. In this context the female gaze is characterized by the act of women looking at other women without the presence of a male perspective. This "queer looking" is a central component of queer media of the past and the present. (See the extending "looking" sequence at the end of Carol (2015)). These concepts, though not always named as such, are important and familiar concepts within the lesbian canon that structure how fans relate to this content. The music video serves as a means to pull out all of these ideas in an audiovisual form.

**Shows/films featured (in order):**

*The Bold Type* (Freeform, 2017-)

*Supergirl* (The CW, 2015-)

*Buffy The Vampire Slayer* (The CW, 1997-2003)

*Once Upon a Time* (ABC, 2011-2018)

*Rizzoli & Isles* (TNT, 2010-2016)

*Carmilla* (YouTube, 2014-2016)

*Black Mirror* (Netflix, 2011-)

*Xena: Warrior Princess* (NBC, 1995-2001)

*Imagine Me and You* (Fox Searchlight, 2006)

*Coronation Street* (ITV, 1960-)

*Las Estrellas* (Channel 13, 2017-2018)

*Grey's Anatomy* (ABC, 2005-)

*Amar a Muerte* (Univision, 2018-2019)

*Person of Interest* (CBS, 2011-2016)

*The 100* (The CW, 2014-)

*Gentleman Jack* (HBO, 2019-)

*Carol* (The Weinstein Company, 2015)

*I Can't Think Straight* (Enlightenment Productions, 2008)

*Captain Marvel* (Marvel Studios, 2019)

*One Day at a Time* (Netflix, 2017-)

*Pretty Little Liars* (2010-2017)

*Orphan Black* (BBC America, 2013-2017)

*Sense8* (Netflix, 2015-2018)

*Orange is the New Black* (Netflix, 2013-2019)

*Wynona Earp* (Syfy, 2016-)

*Skins* (E4, 2007-2013)

*Runaways* (Hulu, 2017-2019)

*The L Word* (Showtime, 2004-2009)

*Black Lightning* (The CW, 2018-)

*But I'm a Cheerleader* (Cheerleader LLC, 1999)



## Bonus 5: Fan Videos

<https://vimeo.com/399501811>

*A video I took of the TV and couches set up in the corner of the main hall. The video playing is a Clexa video.*

One of the most interesting and unexpected experiences I had at ClexaCon was the time I spent observing attendees watching fan videos. The corner of the room where I spent much of my time conducting interviews was also the corner where the television and couches were located. For the entirety of the convention, the TV played fan-made videos on a loop, and attendees would congregate around the couches, either to slow down and relax, or because they couldn't resist watching the videos that were playing. The videos depicted many "ships" from various television shows and movies, the most popular of them including *The 100* (The CW, 2014-), *Supergirl* (The CW, 2015-), *Once Upon a Time* (ABC, 2011-2018), *Lost Girl* (SyFy, 2010-2016), and *Wynona Earp* (SyFy, 2016-). (See my own "multiship" fan video [here](#)). The reactions I observed to these videos clearly illustrated to me the intense, intimate, and often contentious relationships queer female fans have to their favorite content.

As I stood there silently soliciting interviews, I began to notice the reactions that these fan videos elicited from fans. As people walked by the TV, they would often yell – in excitement or in horror, but often the latter – when they saw a

particular fan video playing on the screen. Below are some of the most evocative reactions to these videos.

1. Someone walks by and sees a very emotional Clexa video playing and yells: “WHO MADE THIS???? WHO MADE THIS? I’M GONNA FIND HER!”  
(The video is one by [MissLane](#), a legendary Clexa vidder).
2. Someone walks by and a video about Lexa is playing. They yell: “SHE’S SO SOFT!”
3. A Sanvers (from *Supergirl*) video starts playing and a group of people nearby yell in unison “NOOOO!!!!!!” “Walk away, walk away!” Then they come back: “Why are we trash, why are we all trash?” When a third Sanvers video in a row plays: “Why are we so simple?” “We have such low standards!”
4. A video about Tamsin from *Lost Girl* plays. Someone walks by and says “I don’t wanna see it again!” They put their hands over their eyes. “She’s the reason I’m getting a Valkyrie tattoo!”
5. A Swan Queen (from *Once Upon a Time*) video plays and someone pushes their friend away saying “don’t look, don’t look, don’t look!” As an explanation for this behavior, they tell those of us sitting by the TV, “it’s triggering.” We nod in understanding.

These emotional scenes illustrate how attached many queer female fans are to their favorite pieces of media. (Indeed, as I was conducting an interview I had to turn away from the screen when a *Carol* (2015) video started playing, lest I forget all my

interview questions). These emotional outbursts also reveal how queer female fandom is so often tied up in grief and sadness as well as joy, partially because so many of these stories end badly. As such, issues with the writing and production of these series often cause fans to have a complicated relationship with this media (as illustrated by the Sanvers fans above), one that can at times oscillate between love and hate. Of course, for those fans who made the journey to ClexaCon it is clear love came out on top in this equation, as it often does when media becomes this personal. As these fans illustrate, it's their passion for this media that sustains these fandoms, even as shows end, characters die, and fans move on (or not) to the next best thing.

Indeed, these emotional scenes illustrate some of the insights I found in [Chapter 2](#) regarding melancholia. I have found in my research that there is often a desire among queer female fans to wallow in sadness or grief for some time, despite modern psychiatry's understanding that it is perhaps not healthy to do so. On the other hand, it seems to me that these videos can also provide a sense of catharsis for fans, allowing them to fully reconcile with and live out the complicated feelings they have about this media.

In this vein, these reactions illustrate the contentious relationship many queer fans have with the producers of their favorite media. Because so many of these queer relationships end badly (either because a character dies, or the relationship ends abruptly because of one of the actresses' short-term contracts – see [Sanvers](#)), fans may have loving feelings towards the couple or the fandom, while also viewing the show itself very critically. This explains fans' reactions to the Tamsin video (she

died), as well as the Swan Queen video (they were never “canon,” and Swan Queen fans [haven't always been treated well](#) by those involved in the series). Thus, while watching these videos can be an engaging and cathartic experience, it can also be “triggering,” as the viewer in reaction #5 puts it. Fans’ complicated relationships with this media also illustrate the place of activism within this fandom, with organizations such as [LGBT Fans Deserve Better](#) (which formed right after Lexa’s death) leading the conversation about how to hold media producers accountable for their actions. Indeed, the emotional resonances of this media are often wrapped up in personal, communal, and even political concerns, though initial responses to these videos often occur on a visceral and instinctual level.

Below are some examples of videos that were shown at ClexaCon.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VYbgmvFzVmw>

*This video played before the Lexa’s Legacy panel. Each panel started with a fan-made video like this one, instead of the industry-produced special “sneak preview” videos that often play at conventions like Comic-Con.*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lwWn1tWfhFY>

*Swan Queen is a “non-canon” ship, which means that within the text of the show itself, they are not written as a romantic pairing. They existed on the series *Once Upon a Time* (ABC, 2011-2018). This is one of many videos that manipulates their time on screen together to create an entirely new storyline that better reflects how fans see their relationship (ie. as a romantic one).*

## Bonus 6: Interview Transcript

I wanted to include this interview I did with two lesbians in their 60s and 70s for several reasons. First, because I found it really useful for my project, and second, because I found it to be a really enriching and powerful experience for me personally. I realized after doing this interview that I had never in my life spoken to any queer women over the age of about 50 or so, and that this was something I was really missing in my life. So I have included this interview here in its entirety for you to peruse at your leisure. It's fairly long (the interview was over 16 minutes), so I have bolded the parts that I found most interesting.

### Interview 7: Participants: A (72), B (62), both white.

A: You realize we are generationally, way back.

**Me:** Well I'm interested to, I'm interested to know the, like – do you think, what do you think is different about the current kind of state of like queer community from maybe when you were younger?

A: We were talking about that earlier actually. **Well, we were saying that, um, there seems to be a difference in the cohesiveness of the queer community now as opposed to what it was back when we were coming out.** And uh, When we were coming out as lesbian separatists, lesbian feminists, um, places to be were safe spaces were safe spaces for women only. And now its just kind of all of that has disappeared. People don't want to identify as separatists of feminists or even lesbians. So, that is

very different for us. **And also all of the places that were safe spaces just don't exist anymore.**

**Me:** I've never actually been to a lesbian bar because I never can find them.

**A:** They were nice.

**B:** Yeah I think for me, you know, coming out, it really was impacted in the 70s just with the feminist movement, you know, that was really important, and the empowerment of women, so it was like the empowerment of gay women, lesbians, and I actually like that **every generation has to find its own identifying charms and just define for themselves what they think is most important. There's just a lot of things that just don't resonate the same way because we have different experiences, you know.** But I think now I like the term queer for like an umbrella term, um but I think um, now because I think there is more acceptance in the dominant culture, than when we were coming up, when we were coming up it was just be to gay or just to come out was really really hard. I think now its a little, of course its its own journey for every individual, but there's a lot more acceptance of it and there's a lot more examples of having made that journey and being public with it so that that's easier. Now it seems that, we're talking in one of the intermissions, that people are now identifying even more specifically than like if their aromantic or asexual or the different nuances where you know its like say like when we were coming up we might say like we're lesbians, and you know, we wouldn't look for an identifier that will then specifically say what level of our sexual relationship were in in that moment. You know I'm a celibate lesbian, or I'm a lesbian or you know that

type of thing. It seemed more general. But I think as you go through different generations than its like what becomes the issue that's getting the most pushback from the dominant culture might be what is more important to put energy behind so that that identity can be validated. I don't know if that makes sense.

**Me:** Yeah, that makes sense.

B: Even compared to last year I just noticed there was some themes that came up. Oh, one was, well I went to one of the panels, and this struck me as being interesting but I wasn't really aware of it. People really talking about mental health issues in LGBTQ community, and the fact that maybe having mental health issues is itself an identity and that people were having trouble of letting go of that and its okay to get, if you're on the journey of getting healthier, these were some of the psychologists talking about that that its actually okay to get healthy, but some people found that that meant letting go of a certain identity. Okay, so that was interesting.

A: Very much like uh, deaf people won't get cochlear implants because they don't want to lose that identity of being a deaf person. So it's very interesting.

B: And for me generationally, that's not something that, I mean I think its great for people to uh, address mental health issues, I think everyone should, but I never saw that as a specific thing in the LGBT community, or that that was an identity.

**A: Well, yeah, there were other issues. Mostly it was alcoholism and drug use.**

**You know, so.**

B: So the depression was at the time, and suicidal ideation and yeah. Um.

A: And we were, **when we came out every time we marched or did anything in public, we didn't; know if we were gonna, it was life threatening to march, or to come out, it was job threatening always to come out, and families were actually, you know, they were disowning children, and throwing them out on the streets,** so it was, we came out at a very difficult era, and uh, so when we finally fought to get our identity as lesbians, it was really mind boggling how that changed your whole life and how it changed how you felt about everything and yourself, so it was very, like i said it was life changing to be coming out. So. And even things like relationships, you know. Relationships didn't last for more than six months or a year, on one hand, and on the other hand there were 20 or 30 year relationships. So it was like there was always this dichotomy. There was always this kind of, these forces, kind of working against each other. Do we wanna be in monogamous relationships or not, and so it was, there were a lot of things that had made the evolution of quere community what it is. You know, so.

B: So what's important for you to know? Or, specifics, or stories, or what are you looking for in this interview?

Me: Um, I mean what you've said is great I would also love to hear um if there when you were coming out if there was anything to similar to like the fandom we see today like people coming together around particular music, movies.

B: **In the 70s the women's music, the independent women's music was like a big deal. A really big deal.**



A: **Kriss Williamson, Alex Dobkinn, Meg Christian.** All these women who wrote and sang lyrics that spoke to other women were really the focus of our, you know, of our, the arts scene.

B: And yeah so for the women's coming together and see all the other women there, and the big, uh, hugs that took place. The 20 second hugs. I mean that was representation that you know yeah, we can love each other and it the momentary taking over a public space like a concert hall or something like that just was very empowering like were here and we're able to have a space of our own. That was cool. **And actually, we actually described to friends that when we're going to ClexaCon, we said it's kind of like the Michigan Womyn's music festival without the music. You know, so this is kind of taken a place because we don't have that as much anymore.** Yeah, and so.

A: **We don't have the women's concerts and women's music and you know, the uh, the music that you can go out and buy and play at home and love, you know, and play over and over and over again because it spoke to you. It's really different now. And that was the extent of fandom, we didn't have movies, we didn't have movies we didn't have TV shows.**

B: But we did have, we did have **public forums though there were a lot more discussion groups.** There was like a lesbian feminist liberation that you know put on on like Sundays, women getting together to talk about topics or like politics, or that type of thing. So that's not really fandom, that was like a different thing. But at least

that gave people the opportunity to come together and discuss things that was important in their life.

A: And politics was really important.

B: So what are you gonna do with this research is this qualitative, or is it quantitative are you gonna count the number of times we use the word queer as opposed to the times we use lesbian?

**Me:** No, no [laughs] Just qualitative, I mean I mostly just wanna hear people's experiences and how they understand like queer community and queer fandom and identity and those types of things.

B: I was very impressed though with the um the you know recently with you know recently with the popular shows where lesbians were getting killed off, and then you know, and then you know 'lesbian fans deserve better' you know came out of that. and you know, **I thought that was great. I think that type of response is empowering and uh, that's great.**

A: Yeah, because lesbians always die. No matter what, if it's a movie, whatever it was. If it was a book or a movie, they always die. That was it. They weren't allowed to be happy. In a relationship and be happy. So um, that's big change and that's good.

B: Yeah, what did we get to see, The Killing of Sister George, The Children's Hour. You know, the group with Mary McCarthy. Really old movies. But and you know, the negative outcomes, or just side plots.

A: Yeah, we always died. We always died or went crazy, you know. It was never a good end for a lesbian, or even gay guys. Gay guys had, uh, quite a hard time too. They were always dying off.

B: This is different type of fandom but I do think like in the 70s just like women's literature and the writers you know, books, and poetry, were a big, that was very liberating, **the lesbian poets that came out of that era, were some of the first to write about the emotions and the feelings.**

A: Women's bookstores were founded all over the country. I mean, they were so popular, cafes, um, women's coffee houses were very popular for a long time. And so, that's where **you found artists and performers and the fandom gathered there in those little conclaves.** And not so much in these big conventions. Just in the coffee houses and in a school auditorium or a church auditorium. Something like that. **So it was smaller but very tight knit community.**

B: Very intimate, yeah.

**Me:** Why do you think those kind of spaces have disappeared mostly?

B: Some of it is because some of the stuff has been **absorbed into the more mainstream culture**, so you know, at one point you couldn't find women's books or lesbian books in any place except the women's bookstore, and you know, then Barnes and Noble started a section, and you know you could just find it there. So it was just as a business model things just come and go.

**[I ask their ages - 72 and 62]**

A: And just for the record we've been a couple for 40 years.

B: This is our 40th year, yeah.

**Me:** Wow, that's amazing.

A: We are married, but, now, but, we had to do that, twice. Cuz the first time they, we live in Oregon, and the first time they passed the law that we could get married...

B: The first time they gave out licenses but then it was struck down

A: Yeah we got married, we got a license, we gave them a check for the license, we got married, and then they returned the check two months later.

B: Yeah, it was, yeah. So they just, Multnomah county, which is where Portland is, they started, they sent, there's no reason why you know same sex couples cant get married, so therefore we have to give marriage licenses out. So they started doing it, 3,000 people got them and got married, and then the state put a stop to it.

A: And amended the state constitution.

B: Well first they said that the state supreme court would have to rule on it, whether the county had the right to do it. And they ended up ruling that they didn't. That it was a statewide decision. And in the interum there was a big backlash, and so the voters voted and they voted to amend the constitution to disallow marriage for same sex couples but only after the federal Windsor case. Then everyone had to switch it.

A: Then everyone had a switchback, so we had to get married again.

**Me:** That's crazy.

A: All of that ridiculous stuff goes on. It's kind of all meant to wear you down. You know.

B: I just saw an article I don't know a week ago, saying that um, um, fitness, gyms, LGBTQ gyms are datking the place of uh, like lesbian bars. There are no more lesbian bars. But it's more like a niche market. I think there should be something thought that, we were just talking about how each generation, we want younger people to just go out just have their fun with young people. That's great. But if you're working on a project or you're doing something where you see each other like once a week, you develop friendships even across generations, you know. And we kinda missed that, because it's just less of a structure to provide for that. We had a queer center, in uh, Portland. But it just doesn't really, I don't know, It just doesn't seem to have programs or whatever that seems to um, provide for regular attendance.

A: And we were also talking about earlier today that we have uh, we have more interaction with young straight women than we do with young queer women. And I really kind of, I don't understand that. Because you think they'd be, we'd have more in common, but it doesn't seem to be that way. Young straight women are more interested in socializing with us than queer women are.

B: Because I don't think...because the friends that we've made that happened to be straight you know, the community that we're each a part of isn't the basis of our friendship. We're finding other commonalities. **But young queer women. I understand, they wanna kind of be hanging out with age appropriate people, maybe potential partners or whatever. The energy that they're into. But finding the commonality isn't as easy.**

Me: That's very interesting. Yeah. That's so helpful, thank you for talking to me.

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