The Queer Insistence of Ally McBeal: Lesbian Chic, Postfeminism, and Lesbian Reception

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The current status of lesbian visibility in popular culture—often designated as lesbian chic—is marked by an intersection with the discourses of contemporary postfeminism. Lesbian chic and postfeminism each typifies what Suzanna Danuta Walters defines as "a cultural moment—a convergence of various discourses...that produce a particular sensibility or ethos" (pp. 116–117). The widespread public circulation of the lesbian chic/postfeminist cultural movements converges with the narrative limitations and consumer constraints of popular television. These dynamics are exemplified in the Fox network series, Ally McBeal. Widely touted as geared toward the highly desirable female audience (with a crossover to male fans), the program’s “symptomatic” status (Walters, 1995, p. 6) is a cultural territory that is shared with and shaped by the lesbian fans for whom the playful sexual liminality of the female characters carries a cultural currency and an experiential resonance.

Following a feminist cultural studies approach, I have conducted a series of interviews asking lesbian fans about Ally McBeal. The Ally interviews were engendered from a larger study about how changes in lesbian visibility might impact on understandings of interpretive communities, viewing strategies, and audience identifications. The line between researcher and my own Ally fandom blurred when Ally McBeal began to disrupt and intrude on the interviews of the larger study with what I came to characterize as a queer insistence. Some lesbian respondents discussed watching the program together as a special ritualistic event, whereas others reported making arrangements to exchange copies of Ally episodes that had lesbian content. Participants described the overt lesbian visibility of Ally McBeal—long lingering looks and hot sexy kisses exchanged between female characters—as an excessive and campy representational acknowledgment.

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of the lesbian audience. These social and self-conscious ruminations raised questions about previous understandings of lesbian identifications as subcultural and homogeneous.²

_Ally McBeal_ has become synonymous with postfeminism (Bellafante, 1998), and because I was exploring lesbian chic as a component of postfeminism, the queer insistence of _Ally McBeal_ was compelling. The _Ally_/postfeminist association frequently was expressed through the critical rejection of the program’s reification of negative sexual and gender hegemonies (see Shalit, 1998). Although the program might appear to close down the potential for viewer resistance, I began to wonder if _Ally McBeal’s_ flirtation with lesbian chic might speak to changes in lesbian positionings in broader cultural contexts, and, in turn, if these changes might open up new possibilities for viewer identifications.

The queer insistence of _Ally McBeal_ was inserting itself into my social life as well. At parties, in stores, and in restaurants, women talked about what the _Ally_ characters looked like, how they behaved, and whether or not they were “real lesbians.” The _Ally McBeal_ iconography included a range of female characters of differing race, body, and age categories, and I overheard heated discussions of these portrayals that suggested a nuanced reconfiguration of viewer identifications. By queer insistence, I mean that the queerness of _Ally McBeal_ was entering into the lesbian communal lexicon with a recurring perseverance. Even women who were ambivalent about the homophobic and sexist limitations were watching the program in order to keep up. The multiplicity and subtlety of these identifications suggested that _Ally McBeal’s_ queer insistence reflected a broader cultural fragmentation of lesbian identity.³

Queer has a dual meaning: It functions as an umbrella term for sexual identities, but to queer also means a queering, or a fragmenting, of categories and dichotomies.⁴ Criticisms of changes in lesbian visibility maintain that lesbian chic perpetuates a widespread cultural dichotomy: The good apolitical lesbian who is a gorgeous, sexual adventurer for whom the accouterments of an urban upper-middle-class lifestyle are central; versus, the bad political lesbian who is a manhating, unfashionable, antisex espouser of feminist tenets (see, Hamer & Budge, 1994). The good/bad lesbian dichotomy has great utility for discussing the interrelationships of lesbian chic and postfeminism. Lesbian chic and postfeminism are typically framed in similar ways by critics who decry an equality that hinges on a sexualized appearance constructed through consumer ideals and an erasure of difference; this equality—which is argued to be comprised—is sustained through a depoliticizing individualism. The good/bad lesbian dichotomy highlights these criticisms, and was a viable presence in lesbian fan discussions of the queer insistence of _Ally McBeal_.

This article complicates an easy rejection of _Ally McBeal_ (and by extension of lesbian chic and postfeminism), and instead asks questions about how lesbian viewers might queer, through their engagements with, the good/bad lesbian dichotomy, and in turn, negotiate shifts in the lesbian cultural lexicon. In this ar-
article, I will use the good/bad lesbian dichotomy, as disseminated through *Ally McBeal*, to examine viewer responses to themes that have been significant to feminist cultural studies: first, through questions about beauty standards and consumer culture, and relatedly, sexual objectification and the male gaze; and, second, through questions about representations and erasures of difference.

**Postfeminism and Lesbian Chic**

In 1987, Judith Stacey defined postfeminism as “the simultaneous incorporation, revision, and depoliticization of many of the central goals of second-wave feminism” (qtd. in Dow, 1996, p. 87). The popular positioning of postfeminism reflects these contradictory negotiations of feminist principles. These have manifested in a conservative “backlash” that portrays a failed feminist movement whose legacy is a responsibility for contemporary gender problems (Faludi, 1991). At the nexus of this media-constructed postfeminism is the antithetical belief that gender equality already has been achieved and, as a 1998 *Time Magazine* cover heralded, that “Feminism Is Dead.”

The contradictory reworkings of feminism are illustrated in television programming of the 1980s and 1990s (for summaries, see Dow, 1996 and Press, 1991). Aspects of feminism such as economic parity and professional access are incorporated into plot and character development, yet professional success is attributed to individual initiative rather than to any collective action. When gender issues are included, they are resolved as personal problems and not through a reconfiguration of the system. Furthermore, there is no critique of gender roles, sexual norms, or family relations (Press & Strathman, 1993), and no recognition of race, sex, or class differences (Dow, 1996). The depolitical, individualistic, and homogenous televisual revisions of feminism are regulated through postfeminist symbols that resonate through the cultural imaginary, and, as we shall see, work hand in hand with the good/bad lesbian dichotomy: the increasingly sexualized professional female, the family oriented “new traditionalist,” the frustrated unstable single career woman, and the masculinized angry feminist. These symbols reflect a tension between femininity and feminism that has a dialectical relationship with the good/bad lesbian dichotomy.

On postfeminist television, the emphasis on the individual in gender equality is sustained through the traditional feminine appearance and behavior of the female characters. The oppositional negotiation of femininity and feminism embodied in the symbol of the successful, yet attractive career woman appeals to advertisers who incorporate messages of female empowerment into ads geared toward the highly desirable female demographic. Feminist cultural studies have been concerned with how television constructs female consumer pleasures through the appeal of lifestyle aesthetics (see, Spigel & Mann, 1992, for an overview). Numerous critics have linked the postfeminist backlash to this consumer-driven commercial lib that simultaneously stresses highly sexualized beauty ideals and

The contradiction between feminist principles such as professional gender equality and the individualizing emphasis on feminine looks and sexualized beauty also relates to questions about sexual objectification and the male gaze. As Susan Douglas (1995) has noted, popular portrayals of successful independent female professionals are made more palatable when the characters are overly focused on how they appear to the male characters. The feminized self surveillance reifies the postfeminist positioning is in correspondence with the sexualized chiness of the good/bad lesbian dichotomy. This positioning is in correspondence with the sexualized chiness of the good/bad lesbian dichotomy. The alliance of gender equality with sexualized femininity, and therefore, with lesbian chic, is most fruitful when heterosexual female characters temporarily play with lesbianism through conventions that are traditionally constructed in pornography for the imaginary male spectator. These conventions—exemplified by the chic feminized style of the hypersexed participants—reaffirm the normative heterosexuality of the characters, and in turn, their temporary sexual mobility is attributed to their upwardly mobile class currency. Thus, sexual agency is situated and valorized as an aesthetic choice, devoid of political implications. Additionally, on postfeminist television, the commercial conflation of traditional femininity with individual female empowerment is articulated with discourses about the family and the symbol of the new traditionalist, which locates the home as women’s natural province (Probyn, 1990). This further maintains the parameter of femininity, and the boundaries of heterosexuality, through the correlation of female chiness with traditional roles and behaviors.

The sexualized professional and the new traditionalist are organizing principles of femininity versus feminism, and, as will be developed, of the good/bad lesbian dichotomy. These symbols are positioned alongside the trope of the frustrated single career woman who “in wanting it all” has ended up lonely and alone in a manifestation of the popular positioning of a bankrupt feminism that simultaneously to blame for gendered dissatisfactions. The lines between femininity and feminism are likewise delineated through the extension of the frustrated single professional into the angry and threatening career woman, sometimes depicted as masculinized, but always as disturbed. The out-of-control career woman is regularly associated with feminism by narrative structures and visual conventions, and feminist critiques and principles are further diminished through this affiliation. Through this recurring cultural trope, Probyn stresses, the validating portrayal of “women’s issues” in the workplace or home is sustained through not only the subversion of feminist principles, but also the positioning of feminism as the “other” (1990, p. 128). The angry career woman resonates through the popular imaginary as the postfeminist embodiment of feminism, and, like the sexual-
ized professional, the new traditionalist, and the frustrated single female, this sym-
bol has a correspondence in the good/bad lesbian lexicon. Moreover, when the
angry career woman is masculinized, the commercial compromise between
femininity and feminism metamorphizes into the good/bad lesbian dichotomy.

It is important to note that on television (as in society at large) feminist is
frequently equated with lesbian, and this equation is maintained by the emphatic
situating of female characters as normative heterosexuals. As Bonnie Dow stresses,
"The still powerful romanticization of heterosexuality, the nuclear family, and
motherhood" is central to postfeminism (1996, p. 91). The lesbian–feminist
conflation looms large in the genealogy of popular euphemisms and produces and
regulates long standing media and social stereotypes. Through this discursive col-
lapse, Douglas writes, "the result is we all know what feminists [and, lesbians]
are. They are shrill, overly aggressive, man-hating, ball-busting, selfish, hairy,
extremist, deliberately unattractive women with absolutely no sense of humor
who see sexism at every turn" (1995, p. 7). The depiction of bad (and un-chic)
feminists, and by association lesbians, as undesirable and unattractive, and as
angry and militant, works in concert with and serves to mollify the contradiction
that women can be equal and successful on television only if they are sexualized.

In other words, as Douglas argues, strong, successful, and sexually attractive
women cannot be feminists. And by extension, especially when portrayed in oppo-
sition to the new traditionalist, feminists cannot be sexually attractive. Thus,
the conjoining of lesbian and feminist is not only a central subtext of postfeminism,
where it works as an appeasing mediator, but also a cornerstone of the good/bad
lesbian dichotomy. This is well evidenced in recent changes in lesbian visibility—in
lesbian chic. Lesbians may be in style, but the proliferation of suggested lesbian subject positions is clearly delineated through the good/bad lesbian di-
chotomy. To further evoke the postfeminist connection, some have even termed
the good/bad lesbian dichotomy, the lesbian chic backlash.

Both academics and activists critique the image bank of contemporary les-
bian visibility—the good/bad lesbian dichotomy—and share a concern that the
emphases on fashion, celebrity, and consumption are incompatible with political
goals and erase a long history of political struggle (Clark, 1993; Cottingham,
1996; Hamer & Budge 1994; Inness, 1997; Moritz, 1995; Walters, 2001). Many
activists believe that the apolitical emphasis on individualism will result in a loss
of gay and lesbian culture and community (Harris, 1997). Danae Clark argues
that lesbianism, in this glamorous "good" version, "is treated as merely a sexual
style that can be chosen—or not chosen—just as one chooses a particular mode of
fashion for self expression" (1993, p. 193). Like the depoliticizing of feminism in
postfeminist television, the lesbian chic promises of assimilation and equality are
constituted only through individual consumer lifestyles with no acknowledgment
of history, community, or politics. Furthermore, the recent formations of lesbian
visibility engender other forms of invisibilities such as the erasure of race and
class differences. Lesbian chic does not represent a full range of lesbian lives;
images of sexuality, class, age, and race might be left out or normalized through the good/bad lesbian dichotomy.

Others maintain that new renderings of lesbian visibility are just different formations of symbolic annihilation, stressing that so-called positive images of hip, stylish, and affluent lesbians are recycled versions of previous cultural stereotypes. The good/bad lesbian dichotomy is not new; it is historically positioned. Lesbian portrayals have been viewed previously as either pathologically present or epistemologically absent—as deviant presences constructed through stereotypes such as the manhatng butch; the neurotic, embittered spinster; and the oversexed femme-fatale (Sheldon, 1999); and as apparitional presences (Castle, 1993) meant to be read as lesbian through codes such as female violence (Rich, 1996) or female friendship (Straayer, 1995a). These depictions of lesbianism have permuted into the recycled images of the good/bad lesbian dichotomy, which is in a coextensive relationship with the symbols of postfeminism. These images are replayed through characters such as the masculinized career woman and the angry feminist; and through the aesthetics of privileged career women playing with temporary lesbianism, for the imaginary male spectator. In brief, both lesbian chic and postfeminism are regulated through a traditional, yet highly sexualized, feminine appearance and behavior that is constructed through consumer ideals, an erasure of difference, and by the oppositional positioning of unattractive and militant feminists. This commercially compromised equality is sustained through a depoliticizing emphasis on individual solutions to complex structural and institutional problems.

Postfeminism, Lesbian Chic, and Ally McBeal

The legal dramedy of Ally McBeal speaks to the contradictions of postfeminism through the litigation of cases involving matrimonial law, date rape, sexual harassment, and gender discrimination. Interoffice romances are rampant and the legal narratives are self-reflexively intermingled with the personal lives of the lawyers at the prestigious Boston firm of Cage and Fish. An excess of sight gags reveals the inner emotional states of the successful, affluent, and above all, stylish and attractive characters who perform song and dance numbers that veer into a gendered camp. Although the recurring female characters evoke feminist principles in their courtroom arguments, none identify as feminist, and they take their individual success for granted while simultaneously distancing themselves from feminism.

Ally McBeal is predicated on a distancing from feminism, which is partially maintained by the sexualized yet traditional femininity of the upwardly mobile Ally women. These markers evoke previous television incarnations of postfeminism and are well illustrated in the character of Ally McBeal (Calista Flockhart). A self-admitted neurotic whose personal problems frequently intrude upon her professional life, the Harvard-educated McBeal’s success is attributed to her flirta-
tious skills, toned body, and short skirts. In a fragmented mirroring of the new traditionalist and the unhappy single career woman, Ally yearns for marriage and children, yet she is an aggressive litigator and a liberated sexual adventurer. Like all of the female characters, McBeal is depicted through a sexualized femininity, which is accentuated by the extensive media documentation of the glamorous Hollywood style of the actresses who play them. Flockhart’s childlike appearance and increasingly thinner body are extratextually articulated to debates over commercially driven beauty ideals and body norms, while simultaneously diminished, in various McBeal plotlines, by refutations of feminist stances on sexual objectification, and through, as we will see, the visual othering of feminists.

Lesbianism is regularly the subject matter of the self-reflexive plot devices and humorous sensory excesses on Ally McBeal. Chris Straayer writes that the eroticization of codes such as female looking and female bonding “has stood in for lesbian content” (1995, p. 57), and the Ally women recurringly flirt with lesbian codes through an overt representational acknowledgment that can only be called a lesbian camp. They longingly gaze into each other’s eyes and constantly talk about lesbian sex. Ally and her best friend and roommate, Renée Radick (Lisa Nicole Carson), an African-American attorney, are depicted cuddling in bed in their jammies and eyeing one another’s reflection in the bathroom mirror. Two of the Ally women are partnered at a swing contest with the lead dancer, Ling Woo (Lucy Liu), a Chinese-American partner at the firm, attired in the male drag of a 1930s zoot suit and snazzy fedora. In one episode, Ally demonstrates to a female colleague how to savor a morning cappuccino through orgasmic ecstasy; in another she kisses a woman to scare away an unwanted male suitor. The movement of the subcultural codes of lesbianism into the manifest Ally arena reflects the cultural queering of lesbian identity. Furthermore, the regular guesting of celebrity lesbian icons such as Rosie O’Donnell and Anne Heche augments the overt lesbian acknowledgment.

Ally McBeal’s flirtations with lesbianism are a subset of postfeminist sexualized gender equality: the unhappy single career woman vents her frustration through flirting with lesbianism; lesbianism becomes part of the repertoire of the sexualized professional, while still maintaining the boundaries of the heterosexuality of the new traditionalist. Despite the well-publicized flirtations with lesbian chic on Ally McBeal, there are no regular out characters. Lesbianism is presented as a temporary adventure for the decidedly heterosexual characters, and as an individual lifestyle that can be chosen devoid of community, politics, or discrimination. Moreover, temporary lesbianism on Ally McBeal is related to the othering of feminism that regulates the good/bad lesbian dichotomy.

The program pits the lesbian chic of the Ally women against the demonized, political feminist as part of the repetitive Ally iconography. In opposition to the tight bright clothing and disheveled hairstyles of the Ally women, outside female attorneys are attired in dour plain clothing, frequently wearing glasses with their hair cut short or restrained in tight buns; their bodies are draped in shapeless
clothing and dark suits or portrayed as dowdy or overweight; their physical appearances evoke the frustrated career woman, the masculinized female professional, and the angry feminist. On *Ally McBeal*, we see the postfeminist symbols personified in the incarnations of these controlling, upright feminists who use feminist issues such as a critique of sexualized looking to proscribe gender appearance and behavior. This othering of feminism is apparent in the *Ally McBeal* narrative structures and visual conventions that diminish feminist storylines, vilify feminist characters, and, in turn, maintain the constituent terms of the good/bad lesbian dichotomy.

The good/bad lesbian dichotomy is a collapse of two cultural binaries that mean very different things—chic versus un-chic and good versus bad. The use of chic delineates a style that is cutting edge and hip; whereas the un-chic connotes a dated and unfashionable lack of style; both chic and un-chic are associated with visual or presentational codes such as appearance and dress. Examining the oppositional elements of chic versus un-chic is pivotal for distinguishing how the characteristics of chicness are just a piece of the broader opposition of good/bad. Through this distinction we can explore how good comes to mean sweet, accommodating, and deferring, whereas bad signifies rough, angry, and aggressive; good and bad become associated with interactional codes such as sexual behaviors or political positionings. Differentiating between the presentational codes of chic versus un-chic and the interactional codes of good versus bad has utility for deconstructing the oppositional nuances of the good/bad lesbian dichotomy. I will explore respondent engagements with these binaries—chic/un-chic and good/bad—through two themes that highlight the criticisms of lesbian chic and postfeminism: (1) beauty standards and consumer culture, and, relatedly, sexual objectification and the male gaze; (2) representations and erasures of difference.

**Chic Versus Un-Chic**

The queer insistence of *Ally McBeal* was most heightened in a highly publicized episode in which Ally and Chinese-American attorney, Ling Woo, trade lingering looks in the boardroom, stage a suggestive dance for a male line-up, and finally exchange a spec-ocularly provocative 40-second kiss. Yet, through excessive textual recuperation, Ally and Ling, who both exemplify the presentational codes of temporary lesbian chicness, proclaim ad nauseam that they are normal heterosexuals who customarily find lesbianism viscerally repulsive. In Ally’s words, “The idea of kissing another woman grosses me out, Ick!!” Although all 11 *Ally McBeal* interviewees expressed an enjoyment in seeing two female characters kiss, these pleasurable constructions were mediated by critiques that recognized the televizual history of lesbian kisses, which, in turn, validated the reputation of lesbian spectators for savvy deconstruction. As Laura said: “Because of the patriarchy, they’re trying to reach women as consumers . . . but I’m still happy to see lesbians kiss on the little screen in spite of the ick.” And, Danielle stated: “It’s
definitely, absolutely hot to see women kissing. But, it [the kiss] wasn’t for me, it was for men, to imagine. It’s close, but no cigar.”

These two examples demonstrated a complex awareness of the consumer appeals and narrative constraints of the Ally/Ling kiss—the encoding negotiations that coordinate the constituent terms of the good/bad lesbian dichotomy. Laura, like most participants, was aware that she probably was not being imagined by the advertisers on Ally McBeal. She further perceived, through an acknowledgment of the recuperation of “ick,” that the patriarchal inclusion of chic lesbianism exploits lesbian experiences of representational exclusion. Danielle reported an eroticized pleasure in her identificatory desire for the characters. This was mitigated by Danielle’s observation that the kiss was probably not constructed with her in mind via her consciousness of an extended social audience that included heterosexual men. The Ally/Ling kiss was partially created as a cultural product for the imagined co-audiences who might be invested in similar expressions of sexual liminality. Yet, of particular note in the communal McBeal lexicon, was Ally’s declaration that “gay women, for whatever reason, love me. They’re attracted to me!” Such overt representational salutes coupled with the program’s campy excess point to the tension between respondents’ heightened media savviness and their intense desire for increased visibility. This tension speaks to changes in lesbian cultural positioning, and to the potential for subverting the chic/un-chic lesbian binary.

The presentational codes of chic are depicted in the amalgam of traditional and sexualized femininity that constitutes the appearances of Ally and Ling. Their long, disheveled hair and their low cut, short skirted, and tightly fitted designer clothing emphasize their thin, well-toned bodies. The visual accoutrements of physical appearance and glamorous style are geared toward displaying the upscale affluence associated with postfeminist gender equality and sexualized lesbian chicness. Respondents surveyed chic Ally and chic Ling and found them appetizing or annoying for disparate reasons that were frequently attached to definitions of what a “real lesbian” looks like. Although the temporary lesbians were measured as “hot,” “sexy,” and “beautiful,” their real lesbian authenticity was found variously wanting—too femme, too straight, too thin, too rich, too male-oriented, too dressed-up, too young, too apolitical, too privileged, too White, too upper class. These responses reflect the criticisms of consumer stylized lesbian chicness, but also exemplified the deep investment of many viewers in “having real lesbians play real lesbian characters.” This investment is manifested in the search for the fictive essentialized “real me” that hinges on a model of fixed identity (McRobbie, 1994).

Lesbians have a historical relation to real that complicates the understanding of a fixed lesbian identity (Esterberg, 1996; Faderman, 1991; Walker, 1993). For lesbians, the signification of dress and style has been central in presenting self and in recognizing others in ways that, as Reina Lewis notes, are “rarely experienced by heterosexuals” (1992, p. 94). Lesbian identity in the 1970s and 1980s
explicitly linked appearance to political ideologies that coupled the omnipresent lesbian uniform—flannel shirts, men’s pants, work boots, cropped hair, and no make-up—with a feminist rejection of patriarchy, capitalism, and consumerism. This politicized aesthetic, Arlene Stein (1992) writes, configured an “antistyle” that symbolized “a rejection of American capitalism and a refusal to use the female body in subservient ways” (qtd. in Esterberg, 1996, p. 275). The presentational codes of lesbian-feminism constituted everyday communal practices of performing what was perceived as a homogeneous identity that still looms large in contemporary renderings, both subcultural and mainstream, of lesbian. The model of fixed lesbian identity is problematized by two significant notions of queer theory—that identity is malleable and performative (Butler, 1990), and that subcultural identity is constructed in interaction with the dominant culture (Sedgwick, 1990).

Respondents measured themselves against chic and real in ways that illustrate the tenets of queer theory. Although one identified herself as the lipstick lesbian of consumer chic, and another as “against chic,” most described themselves as falling somewhere along the chic/un-chic continuum. Several characterized their style through the ethnographic subcultural codes that one woman dubbed “The J Crew Uniform.” In contrast, Alice determined, “I wish lesbians would dress better. Everybody looks like they’re on a rugby team.” Many were conversant in the vocabulary of gender bending and unisex clothing, which they described as the signposts of fluid identity. Chris, a self-identified “high femme,” said, “I love seeing lesbians who look like me! I’m so tired of being told I pass for straight.” Chris’ pleasure in gendered performance was validated by the feminine chicness of the Ally characters, and was expressed through the observation that she often had not always recognized herself in previous versions of lesbian that rejected femininity on political grounds.

The marking of lesbian identity was extended through the ways in which recognition or nonrecognition of self as “real lesbian” hinges on a signification of the body as illustrated by Chelsea’s gaydar: “You can see it in her [chic Ling]. It’s in the body. That one’s gay from the get go.” Some respondents criticized the body norms of chic, commenting on Calista Flockhart’s “disappearing body” through discussions of “lookism” that were experientially plugged into feminist ideologies about not being subservient to men. On the other hand, the negative chicness of Ally’s increasing thinness gave voice to some audience members who might not have recognized themselves or found objects of desire in previous portrayals of lesbianism. For instance, Karla put forward that she was happy to see “an athletic and powerful” lesbian body in counterpoint to what Susan Bordo (1993) has called the stereotypical lesbian’s “unmuscled girth.” In chic Ally’s body, Karla recognized a potential for the transgressive denial of traditional femininity that she experienced in her own lanky dancer’s body. This example disrupted the naturalness of the conflation of chic with femininity, and thus problematized the rejection of feminine chicness that is a cornerstone of both a fixed lesbian identity and the chic/un-chic binary.
Some expressed mixed feelings about changes in lesbian codes. Mary linked the unfixing of subcultural identity—“what a real lesbian looks like”—to the unfixing of communal identity: “Ten years ago it was very homogeneous. It was like the dykes downtown dressed the same and had the same haircut. Then a year or two later you had lipstick lesbians, so femininity was okay. You had to make all these adjustments.”

Although other respondents expressed a dissatisfaction with the fragmentation of community—with “adjustments”—I was surprised to find that there was not a clear correlation between age and belief systems about constructed gender or sexual identities in opposition to the widely held perception that age is a major divisive factor in lesbian communities (Duggan & Hunter, 1995; Franzen, 1993; Green, 1997). Instead, responses suggested a tension between personal and communal practices that was paralleled in a tension between the desire for changes in the expression of lesbian mainstream portrayals and the desire for changes in the expression of lesbian everyday identities. Everyone I interviewed agreed on one thing: They would like to see more portrayals of lesbianism with elaborate storylines, better acting, and sophisticated aesthetics; the narrative and visual excesses of *Ally McBeal*—noted by respondents as “quirky,” “kinky,” “eccentric,” and “contradictory”—fit the bill of representational complexity.

The contradictory tensions of viewer practices and desires disrupted the naturalness of the rejection of lesbian chic in relation to a fixed communal subcultural identity, and illustrated the queer tenets of a performative identity that is constructed in interaction with the dominant culture. There are, however, significant limitations in portrayals of lesbianism fabricated through only the aesthetics of feminized beauty and consumerized style, and in the celebration of performative identity and textual camp as reception strategies. As Marian, who strongly rejected lesbian chic as “not for me,” simply said: “They [chic Ally and Ling] don’t look like real lesbians. I think they are stylized”; a comment that she later articulated to limiting clothing purchases through a rejection of “capitalism and the patriarchy.” There is some truth in the belief that the lesbian–feminist antistyle has cost the consumer industry money (Douglas 1995, p. 268). Yet, as one respondent, Alice noted, “these types of clothes [J Crew] do not come cheap.” The fixed model of the lesbian as beauty culture refugee romanticizes lesbians as a homogenous subculture, and does not account for the pleasures that many lesbians take in the images and fashions of consumer culture (see Lewis & Rolley, 1996), nor for the ways these speak to some who might not have recognized themselves or their objects of desire in previous versions of *lesbian*. For many respondents, however, the qualifiers of lesbian chic were highly problematic when considered in relation to the presentational codes associated with the passé and unfashionable un-chic.

This is exemplified on *Ally McBeal* by a recurring character, Margaret Camero (Wendy Worthington), who is narratively identified and visually positioned as the un-chic lesbian incarnate. A feminist sociologist whose aggressive reputation proceeds her, Camero expertly testifies for a progressive politics of motherhood. In
one episode, she argues for opposing counsel that working mothers are discriminated against by the rigorous requirements of the corporate world. Camero’s penetrating testimony is interrupted when senior partner and resident chauvinist Richard Fish asks her point blank if she is a manhating lesbian. On another occasion, Ally runs out of her office shouting “I am not a lesbian!” Upon smashing into Un-Chic Camero, chic Ally screams and turns white (literally, through digital effects). Camero’s progressive testimony is delegitimized through the collapse of her feminist politics with her lesbianism and with her appearance. On Ally McBeal, Camero is mocked and vilified through what might be described as an ethnographic portrait of lesbian-feminism—her man-tailored clothing, her bowl shaped hairstyle, her ample girth, and the ways in which, as we shall see, the presentation codes of her un-chicness become associated with the interactional codes of her feminist politics. Camero looms large in the lesbian imaginary; not only is she the un-chic incarnate, but she is the permanent lesbian.

Many respondents were “horrified” or “mortified” at the ways in which Camero reproduced and regulated long standing un-chic lesbian stereotypes. Chelsea stated, “What’s looked at as the real lesbian is fat, bad hair, and bad clothes. The real lesbian is repulsive and the substitute is edible.” However, Laura had a mitigated response:

The look itself is not at all unattractive to me. I mean, she had some attractiveness as a character, but mostly she was put on as a big old dyke. You know, as a stereotype. It was the way they contextualize the look. The way they interpreted the look. But in that environment, where she’s put in stark contrast to the beautiful, thin young women, it’s meant to be an ugly image.

Many acknowledged that they saw versions of Camero on the streets and agreed that she did represent one version of “what a real lesbian looks like.” Others unabashedly admitted that they themselves looked more like Un-Chic Camero than Chic Ally or Chic Ling. Participants expressed a contradictory pleasure in the recognition and misrecognition of other as self that elucidated how the desire to see more complex depictions interfaces with the desire to see bonafide lesbians. Gina further problematized the un-chic lesbian trope through this corporeal identification: “I hate it. This shows the negative fantasy of the lesbian body. It’s the lesbian body out of control. Because it’s my body, but it’s not. It’s the exaggeration of the lesbian body since he [Kelley] has nothing that plays against it.”

Gina’s ambivalence exemplified the performative quality of televisual representations of the real as well as of daily life identifications. The exaggeration of un-chic, which is heightened through Camero’s deviation from the femininity of the regular Ally characters, constitutes another version of lesbian camp. As Ian Ang argues, such depictions reflect “a form of excess in some women’s mode of experiencing everyday life in our culture... that may signify a recognition of
the complexity and conflict fundamental to living in the modern world” (1985, p. 158).

What can the masculine appearing, dressing, and behaving Camero tell us about lesbian engagements with consumer culture? In contrast to the ever changing fashion parade of the Ally women, Un-Chic Camero wears, in three out of four episodes, the same dark, dour, and dated suit—with unflattering calf length skirt—with the same blue and white pinstriped shirt. Can we imagine her in different attire? Although Margaret Camero is certainly not a “Mode Woman,” there might be some options. Laura had an interesting take: “If they had intended to paint her in a positive way, she could have been a very positive, strong woman. Strong lesbian look. You know, get rid of the little suit, put her in a pants suit. Let her be an assertive looking butch who could be very cute. She probably is very cute. She’d look damn cute [laughs].”

The idea of giving Camero a textual makeover suggests that there might be a type of character movement where the chic/un-chic divide fluctuates through the interactions of text and audience. Another respondent, Mary, mentioned that she sees ads for Gap clothing on Ally McBeal, and that as a large sized professional woman she is highly irritated because Gap carries a plus size line that is only available on-line: “What are they afraid of, that customers will run screaming out of their stores if they see a size 18?” Mary further suggested that it would make all the difference to put Camero in nice silk pants such as the ones she herself buys on sale at Lord and Taylor’s.

TV characters are constructed to mirror the products promoted in the advertising. Although television may construct dubious lesbian consumer pleasures, the admittedly ambivalent, yet pleasurable, recognitions of the authenticity of Camero’s permanent lesbianism collapsed the idea that respondents were accepting the textual and cultural chic/un-chic binary—many enjoyed precisely the campy engagement with the real and the un-chic. There are limits, however, in how far we can go in deconstructing this character through the chic/un-chic binary because the lines are drawn so clearly between the temporary lesbianism of Chic Ally and Chic Ling and the permanent lesbianism of Un-Chic Margaret Camero. This boundary is set more strongly when we consider the presentational codes of the chic/un-chic in relation to the interactional codes of the good/bad binary.

**Good Versus Bad**

Sweet, accommodating, and deferring, Good Ally’s behavior frequently veers into a childlike demeanor that is augmented by Flockhart’s pubescent body. At times McBeal exhibits an assertiveness that seems commensurate with a feminist agency. This transient boldness, which might be seen as straying from traditional femininity, is mitigated through the character’s focus on love, romance, and fantasy. Good Ally is apolitical, and she subtly mocks feminism: In one episode, McBeal self-reflexively
confesses, “I dreamed I was on the cover of Time as the symbol of postfeminism”; in another, the character scornfully ridicules extratexual feminist concerns, which have been expressed about Flockhart’s dangerously thin body. Good Ally’s erstwhile agency is emptied out from any association with feminism through the conjoined contingencies of an apolitical naughtiness and a feminine niceness.  

Chic Ally is a sexual adventurer, whose temporary lesbianism is associated with her presentation for the male gaze, but also, as we have seen, for the pleasure of lesbian viewers. However, Good Ally’s sexualized chicness is contingent on her apolitical niceness. Ally wants to be assertive, but concurrently wants to be seen as a nice woman. When Ally kisses a woman to deter a distasteful male pursuer, she continues to be friendly and flirtatious, unable to let go of the possibility that she might be closing some doors by rejecting this man. The presentationa l codes of Chic Ally’s sexualized appearance and upscale style are paralleled by the interactional codes of Good Ally’s new traditionalist yearning for marriage and children, and by extension for heterosexuality (although marriage and family are problematized on the program). The recurring naughty, but nice interactions when coupled with Ally’s good, and thus apolitical, feminine behavior mitigate the potential for the depiction of a progressive female sexual agency and of a nonrecuperative lesbianism. This depoliticization happens through and reinforces Ally’s heterosexuality and Ally’s naughty, but always/already niceness becomes a safe badness with clear limitations set by the character movements through the chic/un-chic and the good/bad binaries.  

Respondents’ search for the “real feminist” was as contradictory as the search for the “real lesbian”, and was negotiated through the interactions of feminism and postfeminism. Several participants connected liberal feminism with postfeminist classifications: “Ally is a real feminist”; “She is very independent and powerful,” and “She has a good career and is a good role model.” Others acknowledged the postfeminist disarticulation of feminism and described Ally’s feminism as “extremely limited” or “identified only with White middle class careerism.” Alice noted that Ally was “absolutely apolitical!” and Chris stated, in an ironic commentary on postfeminist gender equality, that “she [Ally] is feminist in that she has it all.” Is it a limitation of television that postfeminist chic can only be seen as recapitulating an apoliticized goodness, and subsequently, as emptied out from progressive feminist meaning? Can a chic lesbian be bad? Can a chic lesbian be political? Chelsea described a potential for inverting the codes of feminine chicness and goodness:

I love being able to feel like a marauder. Using all the feminine wiles I can to get what I want. Men look at me all the time, but I know I am using those female products to get what I want—other women. I know I’m not supposed to. I know the capitalist, patriarchal drill, but that seems like such a lose-lose proposition. They [feminine codes] just make me feel good.
Chelsea’s reflexive misbehavior was an alternative version of naughty, but nice. Female sexual agency was not heterosexualized—Chelsea stated that her displays were not available to men: “Men look at me all the time, but they can’t have me.” Through this displacement, bad lesbian was affiliated with chic lesbian. Chelsea’s sophisticated response could be interpreted as a proto-typical postfeminist individualistic empowerment that is devoid of any political meaning. Nevertheless, there was a distancing (although dissimilar to the distancing of Camero) from traditional femininity that disrupted the naturalness of equating chic with good. Chelsea’s commentary complicated the belief that genuine lesbians (and feminists) are beauty culture outsiders whose choice of attire and demeanor make it clear that they are not subservient to men. This belief has been a structuring principle of the personal versus collective tensions of lesbian politics that are provoked by the model of unfixed lesbian identity. Moreover, the disarticulation of chic from good illustrated how lesbians read against the suggested positions of consumer appeals in complex ways such as reconstructing their own versions of femininity or masculinity. This disarticulation further explicated the queer tenets of a performative identity that is constructed in interaction with the dominant culture.

Such responses raise questions about sexual objectification and the male gaze that relate to the criticism of sexualized images of the female body under lesbian chic and postfeminism: Is it different if another woman is objectifying a woman? How is the female or lesbian gaze different from the male gaze? (see, Evans & Gamman, 1995, for an overview). Although beyond the scope of this discussion, it is important to note that respondents described experiences with ongoing community tensions that related to these questions (Duggan & Hunter, 1995). It is, perhaps, another binary, that sexual objectification is always bad, and that women and, especially, real feminists, do not sexually objectify; this binary has been complicated through almost 30 years of visual theory. Chelsea’s misbehaviors might appeal to the imaginary male spectator, but they were unavailable in ways that disrupted the heterosexual/homosexual boundary.

What can the character movements of the desexualized Margaret Camero tell us about sexual objectification and the male gaze? It is through these that the chic/un-chic and good/bad binaries are collapsed in the presentational codes of Camero’s appearance. Through this collapse, un-chic becomes part and parcel of the interactional association of bad with feminist politics. Because Un-Chic Camero is manifested through the disparagement of feminists and the delegitimation of feminism, Bad Camero’s smart, logical, and assertive behaviors become always/already equated with the vilification of the excessively militant, overly strident, and sexually undesirable feminist. When Richard Fish interrupts Camero’s astute testimony, he does more than ask her if she is a manhating lesbian: “Isn’t it true that you want to be a man?” Fish chortles in an excess of male chauvinism, “you look like a man!” In counterpoint, when Ally is assertive or argumentative, her behavior is seen as quirky or naughty, but never unfeminine. These contradictions
reveal the constituent terms of the good/bad binary through evoking the lesbian-feminist conflation. The presentational codes of Bad Camero, along with her permanent lesbian status, divorce her from femininity. This desexualizes the character, and concurrently associates her with maleness.

Bad Camero’s negativity is heightened through the desexualization of feminists under the postfeminist adage that equates female success with sexualized femininity. The movement between presentational and interactional codes simultaneously delegitimizes her politics. On Ally McBeal, it is unfathomable that anyone would desire a woman like Margaret Camero, let alone sexually objectify her. When she sues her insurance company for coverage of in vitro fertility treatments, a series of Richard Fish jokes are hooked onto the premise that sperm would not “take” in Camero’s body. Fish snorts, “just imagine the lines!” if Camero were to try conventional intercourse. Still, the portrayal of the masculinized Camero as lesbian mother—she eventually adopts a baby—is a radical image that is typically culturally unavailable. When good becomes attached to Camero through the association with motherhood, it begs the question: Can an un-chic lesbian be good? This question ruptures the chic/un-chic and good/bad divide, and temporarily changes the recapitulation that conflates feminist politics with bad.

The contradictory search for the legitimate lesbian and the genuine feminist continued. Some respondents accepted Camero’s negative positioning, and variously defined her as an “overt feminist,” and as an “old time 1970s lesbian.” Others read against Camero’s vilification through strong feminist identifications: as Marian said, “the character was horribly misogynist.” Others subverted the good/bad binaries and rejected the delegitimization of Camero: Alice stated that “she is a smart opponent who fights and wins [the exchanges with Fish].” Several participants noted the Camero as lesbian mother motif with recognition of a progressive image that “takes up space in a positive way.” One woman, Chris, expressed, albeit with some ambiguity: “I thought they sort of presented her as empathetic, because of the character complexity. Not just a bullydike.”

It is important to remember that some viewers thought Camero had the potential to look “damn cute.” A few found Camero desirable, partially because of the deviation from femininity; and several reconfigured Camero’s antistyle as a highly-valued butch aesthetic that is seldom seen. As noted, some participants reconstructed their own self-presentations so as to not fall into easily recognizable categories of heterosexual female or male. Not surprisingly, the characteristics of good lesbian are those allied with femininity, and with the more feminine appearing and acting femme, while bad hooks up with the butch lesbian, and is negatively associated with masculinity through a rough appearance and aggressive behavior. Although not an interpretation available to all respondents, Camero does suggest the potential for an eroticized butch lesbian.

Camero’s deviance from femininity made her the lesbian norm, at least as far as characterizations of her legitimate status; this relation to realness transformed the terms of the chic/un-chic and good/bad binaries. It is the temporary lesbians,
the Chic Ally and Chic Ling, that are transgressive in relation to Un-Chic Camero's permanent lesbianism. This elaborates on the signification of body performativity because it has been aberrant in some versions of lesbian identity to be svelte and beautiful—to be chic. In contrast, in the heterosexual world, it is Camero's "unmuscled girth" that is deviant, even grotesque. Thus the terms of the chic/un-chic and the good/bad become contextual: Camero is positioned as grotesque, but to many lesbians she is the real thing. The chic/un-chic and the good/bad binaries are denaturalized in the acceptance of Camero as real or as the norm in the fixed lesbian lexicon; in turn, Ally and Ling become transgressive. The binaries are further inverted when the antierotic of Camero becomes desirable, which in turn, suggests complications for understandings of sexual objectification.

Racializing the Binaries

Character movements are intertwined with racialized othering on Ally McBeal and with respondent discussions of diversity and stereotypes. Ally McBeal constructs a multicultural world in which differences no longer matter, and are in fact purposefully ignored. "In my naive dream," David E. Kelley states, "I wish that the world could be like this" (qtd. in Braxton, 1999, p. 28). Despite the inclusion of two women of color, Ling Woo and Renée Radick, difference and discrimination are never acknowledged. Like gender equality under postfeminism, race relations are presented as done deals. This nonissue approach subtly maintains a White heterosexuality that is sustained through the interactions of the chic/un-chic and good/bad binaries. What counts as bad on Ally McBeal is often articulated by way of the exoticized codes of the non-White characters.

The movements of Chinese-American attorney Ling Woo are manifested in what Cynthia Liu has termed the "twin legacies" of the Dragon Lady and the Lotus Blossom: the villainess and the victim (2000, p. 24). Chic Ling embodies a sexualized consumer femininity and an exoticized racial othering. A fierce temptress with a vast repertoire, Ling performs a "hair trick" on her boyfriend, Richard Fish, which connotes the sexual secrets of the Orient that are so attractive to White men. Angry, harsh, and anti-male, Bad Ling personifies the not-to-be-trusted outsider who carries the legacy of the archetypal Asian Dragon Lady as shifty spy, and she is emphatically disliked by the other Ally women who scream when she enters a room accompanied by the Wicked Witch theme from The Wizard of Oz. The Dragon Lady legacy is reinsured when Bad Ling, through the special effects that constitute part of the program's excess, emits dragon-like sounds and breathes real fire. In contrast to Good Ally who argues recurrently for love and fantasy, Bad Ling is a dangerous and brilliant legal adversary. When she is sued (by a feminist group) for owning a mud wrestling club, Ling employs the postfeminist defense—"sex is a weapon"—that it is a woman's right to use whatever ploys she has, especially her sexuality, for monetary advancement. Like the Dragon Lady, Bad Ling
traffics in the sexually taboo—in another episode, she is brought up on charges for running a male escort agency.

Yet Ling does not like conventional sex, which could be interpreted as a cultural reminder of the delicate, blushing, and innocent good Asian woman. At the same time, Ling’s desexualization has a negative attribution that crosses the chic/un-chic and good/bad divide. Chic becomes analogous to bad, and takes on both positive and pejorative connotations depending on the association with boundaries of femininity and heterosexuality. When Ling is flirting with temporary lesbianism, she is still sexually available to the male characters, and thus there is a sexualized bad chic. This contradictory hypersexualized and hyperracialized bad chic is enhanced through the taboo of interracial desire. At other times, Ling is negatively de-sexed: first, by her scornful demeanor, which distances the character from traditional femininity; and second, by her dislike of conventional sex, and of men in general, which breaks down the heterosexual boundary. However, this is a temporary negativity because sexualized chicness is still attached to the character, partially because ultimately Ling is heterosexual (unlike Camero); and partially, although in contradiction, because of the exoticized bad chicness associated with racialized othering.

Because of the scarcity of popular depictions of non-White recurring female characters, respondents were highly verbose about Ling, and about the interracial Ally/Ling kiss. Pam stated, “So, there was that kind of aspect of watching the Ally McBeal thing, that was like wow, this is happening on a prime time major network! And that this was happening between a White character and an Asian character.” One respondent, Karla, related that she and her other Asian-American friends enjoyed watching and criticizing the campy, stereotypical aspects of Ling:

Many people see Ling as this really progressive character. Because she’s not a victim. And we think it’s very interesting and fun to see how the character works against that because it’s the Dragon Lady in this modern form. And so much a part of that is that exoticizing thing she does with her hair.

Jane Feuer (1999) suggests that culturally scarce characters such as Ling might transcend critiques of the unfashionable notion of positive images. The personal and communal pleasures invested in Ling validated Feuer’s hypothetical argument: That complex and infrequent depictions were highly desired by differentiated viewers. These positive experiential identifications were enlarged on by respondent awareness of the history of raced stereotyping and by their search for the authentic Asian lesbian through the contradictory dimensions of difference. Marian astutely comprehended that [Kelley] “does not show Chinese lesbians because he wants to be multicultural or wave a Rainbow flag.” In an evocation of cultural competency, Karla commented, “I liked it that Ling is strong and not a victim who mixes up her L’s and R’s, but nobody ever thinks I look like that.”
Karla's appreciation of Ling's strength inverted the good/bad binary through the intersecting subversions of traditional femininity and of the one-dimensional submissive Asian victim. In an interesting commentary on the ways that underrepresented viewers might follow the extratextual movements of an actress, Karla recalled seeing Lucy Liu on ER playing "the victim of some war, from a refugee camp," and noted how inconsistent this was with the actress's martial arts expertise in contemporary action films that included Charlie's Angels. And Pam described an amalgam of experiential and extratextual knowledge that articulated lesbian chic with Asian chic: 24

There are becoming a lot more Asian women characters passing through film and television now. Like the lesbian passing through. Asian chic? It's an 'in' type of stereotype. And it's still that piece of it that's nice, but it's still not real. And like anything else, it will pass.

These identificatory matches and mismatches highlighted how marginalized viewers reread stereotypes through the desire to see some version of self as real. Participants refused some dimensions of interpellation, while simultaneously transforming others, and made use of Ling to turn negative stereotypes on their heads. Feuer stresses the interactive dimensions of identifying and writes that because of "visual oppression, representation is the first step towards liberation" (1999, p. 198). Even if somewhat recuperable by raced stereotypes, the character of Ling interferes with recuperation, especially when read by a woman of color, or a viewer who does not fit into conventional versions of femininity.

Although the Ally/Ling kiss portrays a highly desired, yet culturally taboo same sex interracial romance, Ling was problematized for embodying otherness. However, Ling's contradictory outsider status is the site of a destabilization of heterosexuality, which suggests openings for differentiated viewers. Chris was thrilled by the narrative and visual hinting at a suggestion of a bisexuality—Ling's—which is rarely allotted airtime due to the cultural necessity of maintaining the heterosexual boundary. Danielle commented on how she appreciated the extension of a butch aesthetic through Ling's assertive body language and aggressive sexuality, that she linked intertextually to favorable comments about the episode where Ling cross-dressed and danced with another woman. A cross-dressing Ling becomes a chic butch in counterpoint to previous depictions where chic has been associated only with femininity and passivity, and un-chic with masculinity and aggressiveness.

Subverting the Binaries

African-American attorney Renée Radick's movements across the chic/un-chic and good/bad divide are overtly manifested by way of the tension between two racially marked stereotypes: the hypersexed, exotic, scheming, and bad temptress
and the nurturing, amiable, gentle, loving, good mammy (see Bobo, 1995; hooks, 1992, 1996). Renée’s affluent success, class mobility, and sexualized otherness link up with chic, yet aspects of her appearance—her well-endowed figure, overt display, funky hairstyle, and campy dress—lean toward the un-chic. Renée does not have the presentational codes of light skin, straight hair, European features, and thin body of many Black (or bi-racial) actresses—such as Lisa Bonet (The Cosby Show) and Michelle Michael (ER) who have gained Hollywood fame. Moreover, the class and race lines on Ally McBeal are marked by the performance of the female bodies through shape, size, dress, and behavior. The only women who display a full cleavage are Renée, the one Black female, and Elaine, the one regular working-class character.  

Through the fluctuations of chic and un-chic, the hyperracialized Renée, like the butch Camero, is positioned as the embodied, even abject other. This not only distances Renée from traditional femininity, and normative heterosexuality, but when coupled with the codes of good and bad, equates her with maleness.

This association is heightened when Bad Renée argues with savvy acumen for postfeminist negotiations of gender and sexual politics, always one-upping her male antagonists. Even in the courtroom Renée proudly displays her ample cleavage—in push up bras, plunging necklines, and tight jackets—with a camp hyperfemininity that simultaneously reifies the primitive sexuality and aggressive behavior equated with the size and shape of Black women’s bodies. Bad Renée crosses other lines of proper femininity. Depicted as an exotic promiscuous seductress, she is charged with sexual violence for seriously injuring a date who would not take no for an answer, and Renée’s one fleeting alliance is with a married man. Renée has the maternal body associated with the mothering Black woman, but Bad Renée is decidedly not a nurturing character. Like Bad Ling, Renée is depicted as isolated, except for her temporary lesbian flirtations with her roommate. Ally McBeal. Renée’s character movements across the good/bad divide are heightened by the history of stereotyping women of color as hypersexualized, and as we have seen with Ling, this positions Renée as sexually aberrant. Unlike Ling, because of the raced markers of un-chicness, and the gendered markers of unfeminine behavior, Renée resides in a more permanent state of sexualized badness, that is not recoupable through her heterosexuality. In fact, at times, Renée is almost de-heterosexualized.

Respondents reported a communal and campy appreciation of the unconventional Renée’s negotiated authenticity. Esther stated, “Renée? She sings, she dances, she’s beautiful. She’s kind of like violent sometimes and very oversexed. Some of my friends think she’s this really great character, but she wears revealing clothes and she’s supposed to be this great lawyer?” Others related Renée to experiential identifications. Danielle stated, “She [Renée] just stand outs. When I was a child, I mostly knew women of African descent. You really look different if you’re the only Black woman of size in a room with White women.”

The casting of a full-breasted African–American visually embodies the subtle
reinforcement of a White, middle class norm and illustrates how the dimensions of identifying—the search for the genuine African-American lesbian—are complicated by an intersection with a history of stereotyped sexualized raced markers. Danielle further stated, “As Black people, we’re either visible or invisible. And we’re visible when there’s negativity and cliché, and we’re invisible on any other level.” And Esther noted, “When they show it, it’s not a Black producer, [there’s] this stereotyping. It’s like you either got your Mammy, or you got your Jezebel. And, you know, we don’t come in just those two roles. It’s so maintaining that kind of image.”

However, such depictions do have progressive dimensions even if they partially reinsure negative stereotyping. Renée might be seen as transgressive especially when read by a lesbian of color or a woman who does not fit into traditional versions of feminine beauty ideals and body norms. And, because of the overt character movements across the chic/un-chic and the good/bad divide, Renée’s unconventional behavior suggested other types of openings for lesbian viewers. For instance, issues of taking space were important to the construction of identifications. Chelsea said, “She’s not a stereotypically blond thin actress type. And I think she herself probably has to work harder [to] make it in Hollywood. I like bitchy women who don’t apologize . . . a fat woman with dark hair, who’s blowing someone over, or taking space for herself.” And Mary said, “If you’re loud or big, you are seen as too aggressive or too large, and taking up too much space.”

Issues of occupying space, and particularly of Renée’s spatial appropriation, were significant. Renée displays her proud cleavage recurrying, and argues through discourse on individualistic freedom for the right of women to exhibit their own bodies. Lewis maintains that a bodily performance such as Renée’s has the potential to be “de-objectified” through the model’s ownership of her self-display” (1992, p. 101). Although there is a subversion of the sexualized gaze inherent in Renée’s contestation, it also rings a postfeminist bell that equates female empowerment with sexualized chicness. Yet, for certain spectators, at certain times, there might be a need to embrace the variabilities of sexual objectification. Feuer (1999) reasons that such portrayals are so in demand by differentiated audience members that not only are negative stereotypes turned on their heads, but that negative aspects of sexual objectification are refused and transformed.

In one temporary lesbian scene, Ally confesses to Renée that Ling has asked her out on a date and that she is worried about her heterosexuality. Renée flirtatiously suggests that Ally is nervous precisely because “opportunity and curiosity might collide.” Her teasing commentary is conflated with the eroticization of the Ally/Renée relationship, and this is underscored through the aggressive performance of Renée’s full-bodied circuitous movement through the one-dimensional diegesis of the televisual screen. Gina reported, “I drooled over that scene. Partly because she was the Mama figure with the big bosoms. She was a strong, survivor, sort of like butch and femme in the same package.”

Renée’s breast display pointedly endorses the lesbian camp of female friend-
ship and complicates postfeminist versions of female desire and desirability through the denial of both traditional femininity and normative heterosexuality—"butch and femme in the same package." Gina's complex identification illustrated the importance of body performativity in constructing the multiple dimensions of identification and desire, and of aspects of sexual objectification in visually subverting narrative constructions of gender and sexuality. One might suggest, and one participant did, that Renée was "the only real lesbian on the program."

The movements of Renée through textual and cultural space subverted raced, sexualized, and gendered oppositions: A portrayal of hyperracialization does not always constitute a negative stereotype; a distancing from traditional femininity and heterosexuality does not always recapitulate desexualization. Furthermore, Renée's spatial appropriations were significant markers of the interactions of feminism and postfeminism. Issues of body size, physical space, and cultural power have been important to lesbian-feminist politics. This demonstrates how postfeminist tenets—empowerment through body display—can work hand-in-hand with feminist tenets—empowerment through body ownership. Although Renée's arguments and displays might be seen as buttressing a negative aspect of postfeminism, it is not so easy to dismiss the contradictory and unconventional Renée under the umbrella of a delegitimized feminism. Notably, several respondents allied Renée with Margaret Camero and categorized both as "positive feminists." The feminist classifications of Renée and Camero were interestingly similar given the dissimilarities of the positionings of the two characters, and suggested a reconfiguration of feminism and postfeminism.

Conclusion

I do want to acknowledge that the hegemony of the recuperative aspects of Ally McBeal is powerful, and that the depoliticizing of feminism and vilification of feminists are problematic. However, the queer insistence of Ally McBeal opens up possibilities for other expressions through shifts in long standing lesbian stereotypes. A dismissal of the program does not account for the ways in which lesbian viewers take up and transform these changes in suggested subject positions. Yet, I have been haunted by a question throughout this essay: Do viewer responses have any political efficacy? This raises larger issues that are beyond the scope of this analysis—about resistance and agency and about the personal and the political—that speak to significant research in feminist cultural studies (see, Dow, 1996; Haralovich & Rabinovitz 1999; Scodari, 1998; for overviews). Although my focus has been on complicating different dimensions of lesbian identifications, this article is part of a larger project that examines how anti-hegemonic readings translate into concrete collective practices. Also beyond this essay's parameters are the ways in which respondents defined the terms political or action or themselves as political or activists. Nevertheless, the ways that participants complicated the portrayal of feminists on Ally McBeal does speak to how oppositions such as apolitical/political are framed.
As noted, the search for the “real feminist” (and, perhaps, for the legitimate feminism) was as fraught with contradictions as the search for the “real lesbian”; both were negotiated through the discursive interactions of feminism and postfeminism. I found no fixed correlation between feminist identifications and age in contrast to my preinterview assumptions, and a media critique did not necessarily connect with a feminist identification. Furthermore, the use or disuse of the languages of feminism and postfeminism did not hook up with respondents’ own feminist identifications, or lack thereof. Instead, there was an interplay, not so surprising given that postfeminism stands on the shoulders of feminism, that complicates the typical critical and popular positioning of postfeminism as in a somewhat adversarial relationship to feminism. Respondents noted that differences in feminist identifications have been and were an ongoing source of communal tensions, and this was reinforced by fragmented understandings of feminism—expressed variously as “ambiguous,” “undefinable,” and “reframed.”

The fragmentation of both lesbian and feminist identities speaks to a breaking down of oppositions. It was this fragmenting—queering—of categories that first drew me to Ally McBeal, and this queering was a presence throughout respondent engagements with the constituent terms of the good/bad lesbian dichotomy. The division of chic/un-chic from good/bad has implications for unpacking the question of the apoliticizing aspects of lesbian visibility. In the broader good/bad lesbian dichotomy, politics become part and parcel of the dichotomy and that is very different than the depoliticized labeling of chic, which is framed only through the aesthetics of style. In other words, the binary of apolitical/political is perceived as recapitulating the undivided good/bad dichotomy. As we have seen, respondents disarticulated the terms of the good/bad lesbian dichotomy through differentiated lenses. The disruption of the presumed collapsing of the bad with feminist and the un-chic with political complicates the politics of lesbian identifications.

Some have suggested that recent changes in lesbian visibility might mean considering an expanded notion of the political that takes into account the political dimensions of self presentations and cultural images (Esterberg, 1996; Walker, 1993; Lewis, 1992). Arlene Stein writes that “we need a political language that acknowledges our diversity as well as our commonality, that embodies playfulness along with rage, and that faces outward as well as inward” (1992, p. 438). Many lesbian and gay activists believe that increased visibility will result in changes in public acceptability. It is further posited that this acceptance will be developed socially and politically in contexts such as the workplace and hate crime legislation. Furthermore, the presentation of lesbian selves in everyday life and in the media is a challenge to normative categories of sexuality and gender.

Although the discussions of lesbian authenticity could be interpreted as typical subcultural or oppositional readings, breaking down such oppositions as apolitical/political, chic/un-chic, and good/bad might also mean rethinking the ways we think about such readings. As Reina Lewis argues, “The problem becomes one
of relationships *between* meanings in which the viewer’s decoding activities may operate from a variety of positions each of which utilizes a different set of competencies that may be addressed by the text” (1992, p. 105). Respondents not only read *against-the-grain* of binary divides, but they read *across* the divides to transform the binaries of lesbian representation. They constructed their own amalgams of identities that subverted the oppositional terms of chic/un-chic and good/bad through developing “relationships *between* meanings” by bringing in “a variety of positions” and “different competencies” such as body size, personal style, and gender and race identifications. This does not mean that there is no determination, but rather that respondents made sense of *Ally McBeal* in different ways. It is through these differences that they constructed shared, albeit fragmented, social identities within a historical and cultural framework. Disrupting the naturalness of the good/bad lesbian dichotomy means also disrupting the notion of a fixed, subcultural lesbian identity. The queer insistence of *Ally McBeal* is a productive context for examining other dimensions of identifying because it exemplifies the expansion of the lesbian cultural lexicon.

Notes

1. I conducted 11 in-depth individual interviews between February 2000 and February 2001, asking questions about *Ally McBeal* and lesbian identifications. Each interview lasted at least two hours and following such feminist researchers as Press (1991) and Radway (1984), I utilized a conversational format with a reflexive awareness of interview politics. The participants were part of a sampling of 30 derived from a larger work in progress, and applying the method of snowball sampling, each was chosen serially, using consecutive interviews as a source for networking suggestions and potential respondents. The 11 *Ally McBeal* viewers were aged between 20 and 59, and 4 identified as working class, 6 as middle class, and 1 as upper-middle class. One was a high school graduate, 3 had completed some college, 3 were college graduates, and 4 had obtained graduate degrees. Eight self-identified as lesbian, 2 as queer or queer-identified, and 1 as bisexual. Nine reported that they were feminists. Two had been previously married, 8 were currently in relationships, 1 had grown children, 2 had young children, and 1 was trying to get pregnant. Two women identified as African-American, 1 as Korean-American, 1 as Japanese-American, 1 as Puerto Rican, and 2 as Jewish; all others self-identified as Caucasian. All respondents lived in the Northampton, Massachusetts area.

2. Most previous discussions of lesbian viewers are text based with a hypothetical, homogeneous audience and theoretical debates about how to fit spectatorship or reception into psychoanalytic, queer, or ideological frameworks. (See deLauretis, 1994; Doty, 1993; Henderson, 1999; Mayne, 1991; Nataf, 1995; Stacey, 1988; Traub, 1995; Whatling, 1997; White, 1991, 1999.) The limited inquiries into how actual lesbian viewers interpret popular cultural texts do not problematize the construction of lesbian identities; see, Straayer (1984); and Ellsworth (1986). Lewis’ (1992) study of changes in lesbian readings begins to explore the nuances of subcultural readings. What these studies do agree on is that lesbian viewers are savvy deconstructors who
read against-the-grain of textual hegemony to construct what are variously termed subcultural, resistive, or oppositional readings. Although it is beyond the scope of this project to address the mechanics of the encoding/decoding model (Hall, 1980), I do want to cite the importance of cultural studies, and feminist cultural studies in particular, for my methodological framework.

3. I acknowledge the complexities and instabilities involved in the term lesbian and in community, and I use both with an awareness of indeterminacy. The ways that lesbian is experienced, defined, and recorded are bound up with historical and cultural specificity. (For examples, see Beemyn, 1997; Faderman, 1991; and Traub, 1995).

4. Queer theory seeks to interrogate identity categories as a way to displace the traditional notion of what it means to belong to a particular group. In queer theory, identity is seen as constructed and fluid, and normative categories of gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation are problematized. Instead of two gender roles, or two sexual orientations, queer theory argues that a range of possibilities exists within and outside these categories. Of use is Rosemary Hennessy’s elaboration: “queer theory calls into question obvious categories (man, woman, Latina, Jew, butch, femme), oppositions (man vs. woman, heterosexual vs. homosexual), or equations (gender = sex) upon which conventional notions of sexuality and identity rely” (1993, p. 964). Queer theory also suggests that traditional models of gender and sexuality create a hierarchy in which some categories are privileged over others (Rubin, 1993).

5. Academic feminists have long suggested the need for a feminism that included race and class politics and a model of diffuse power rather than the broad umbrella of patriarchy (Press, 1991). Others note the need for a movement that speaks to young women who have grown up with changes in gendered economic parity and professional access (McRobbie, 1994).

6. Class currency refers to Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) significant discussion of how a politics of taste and aesthetics correlates with a politics of class position and privilege.

7. Beginning in the mid-80s, representations of lesbian took on different forms of popular visibility, as explicit images of and overt references to lesbians appeared in a range of cultural sites. Headlines such as “Lesbian Chic” (Kasindorf, 1993) and “The Power and the Pride” (Salholz, 1993) were touted in the national magazines, New York and Newsweek; same sex kisses were exchanged on the television programs Roseanne and Ally McBeal; and out lesbian stars, Melissa Etheridge and k.d. lang, were given prominence in gossip columns. Reaching a pinnacle with the coming out of Ellen DeGeneres in the spring of 1997, a heightened cultural conversation about lesbians produced the appearance that lesbians, to put it simply, were in style.

8. The notion of a “temporary” sexuality is from Chris Straayer’s (1995b) discussion of transgendered film.

9. The program is currently in the fourth season. This analysis utilizes examples from and publicity about the first three seasons.

10. An excess of behavior, style, and music has been traditionally associated with the textual slippages of the melodrama of soap operas and romantic comedies (Elsaesser, 1986; Fiske, 1987). Excess relates to camp, which has been a strategy used by gay men (and sometimes lesbians) to experience and negotiate mass culture through the use of an ironic humor (Creekmur and Doty, 1995). Camp disrupts, enlarges upon, and makes visible the mechanisms of gender and sexual identities (Robertson, 1996).

11. Kristen Esterberg writes that there are two different types of cues—"visual/presenta-
tional” cues and “interactional” cues—that lesbians use for everyday identifications of other lesbians (1996, p. 270). I have extended Esterberg’s distinction to televi
codes.

12. On television, lesbian sexuality has been traditionally understood to be hinted at through narrative ambiguity while subverted or limited through narrative recupera
tion (Moritz, 1999, p. 318).

13. The Ally/Ling kiss is somewhat overdetermined by the recuperative history of les
bian televiusal kisses: the LA Law bisexual kiss (1991) between Amanda Donahoe
and Michelle Greene, which was immediately followed by the reaffirmation that
they both liked men; the Picket Fences kiss (1993) between two teen girls, which
was shot in full lighting, yet aired in darkness so that viewers could only hear the
exchange; the Roseanne kiss (1994), which only showed the back of Mariel
Hemmingway’s head and a subsequent recuperative shot depicting Roseanne wip
ing her mouth on her sleeve; and the Ellen kiss (1997), which was decried by conser
vatives and related by many to the program’s subsequent cancellation. It is signifi
cant that Ally McBeal creator and auteur David E. Kelley was the producer and
writer on LA Law and Picket Fences.

14. I cite respondents only through confidential pseudonyms, and because Northampton
is a small city, I am careful not to out individual participants. Yet, I do not mean to
suggest that there was no relationship between the interactive trajectories of identities
such as race, class, or age. The sampling diversity does not represent a comprehen
sive sampling of western Massachusetts or of the Northampton lesbian population
and no claims were made about the correlation of respondent identifications with
audience readings.

15. This raises questions about whether or not lesbians are being constituted as a com
modity audience and if they are being pitched as such to advertisers. That discussion
is beyond the scope of this analysis, but what is important is how the Ally McBeal
flirtations with lesbian chic are positioned so as to appeal to audience members. See,
Chasin (2000) and Sender (2001) for comprehensive discussions of gay consumer
address.

16. The kiss episode aired on the Fox Network during the November 1999 sweeps week
and received the highest ratings ever, 17 million viewers, which were largely attribu
ted to the increase in male viewers.

17. Mode is a contemporary periodical geared toward the plus-sized female demographic
featuring large models in feminine, fashionable clothing.

18. I am indebted to Reina Lewis (1992) for her engaging discussion of a fashion spread
that negotiated the terms of “naughty, but nice” in a British magazine geared toward
the lesbian subcultural demographic.

19. Good Ally reifies the passivity that has been used historically to negatively associate
more feminine appearing lesbians, femmes, with acquiescence. Theapoliticized Ally’s
naughty, but niceness is in contraction to the bad (and highly eroticized) femme
fatale of film noir that has been historically read against-the-grain as lesbian, and
which has a parallel in Ling, partially because of the racialized othering of the char
acter.

20. Butch and femme identifications impacted strongly on participant discussions of
lesbian authenticity. It is beyond the reach of this article to discuss the historical and
contemporary significance of butch and femme role play, and how this is embedded
in the politics of lesbian style (and class relations). This role playing was rejected by lesbian-feminists in the 1970s and 1980s because it was seen as replicating traditional heterosexual gender relations. In the late 1980s, and through the 1990s, there has been a reclaiming of butch and femme, which some respondents saw as a transgressive strategy that worked against normative gender roles. See Faderman (1991); Nestle (1992); and Walker (1993).

21. Gender identifications were especially complex for respondents who identified through the modalities of female masculinities. For a sophisticated analysis, see Halberstam, 1998.

22. The antierotic of a character such as Margaret Camero is a phrase suggested by Lewis (1992).

23. I would like to briefly note the unmarked “Whiteness” of the character, Ally McBeal. It is interesting to consider how this unmarking becomes part and parcel of Ally’s naughty, but nice distancing from lesbianism in the previously mentioned scene when Ally screams and turns white (literally, through special effects) when she crashes into Margaret Camero.


25. Unfortunately, it is beyond this article’s scope to discuss the complex class and age identifications of respondents.

26. Of particular note is the political activism of GLAAD—the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation.

References


Cottingham, L. (1996). Lesbians are so chic: That we are not really lesbians at all. New York: Cassell.


