

**Birth of the She-Devil: Lesbian
Depictions in American Cinema (1999-
2003)**

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The question of women's sexuality and the existence of "lesbians" have remained a topic of debate since the 19th century.¹ By the 1930's however, lesbianism was no longer an implausible idea but a legitimate identity that petrified a heteronormative society. Maurice Chideckel, author of *Female Sex Perversion: The Sexually Aberrated Woman As She Is* (1935), provided a framework for the lesbian identity: "[women's] homosexuality was a "monstrous craving by [...] frantic unhappy women."² Despite the increasing visibility of gay women since the 1930's, interpretations of lesbians from

Chideckel as well as other medical professionals such as Sigmund Freud harbored fears surrounding the lesbian identity. These "fears" of women's sexuality carried on to the end of the 20th century, but in a new format. They instead began to appear in mass media and, more specifically, film.

Once popular movies began to diversify their characters and themes, previously unrecognized identities became visible to American audiences. More specifically, depictions of lesbian members of the LGBTQ community opened American media consumers to new ways of thinking, yet at the same time, they furthered their prejudices depending on what was displayed on the screen. For example, the late 1990s cult classic *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* produced positive on-screen queer representation that created a safe space for

¹ The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, ed., "Female Homosexuality," *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

² Sherrie A. Inness, *The Lesbian Menace: Ideology, Identity, and the Representation of Lesbian Life*

(Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 24.

gender and sexuality exploration. The complex sexuality of Willow Rosenberg, an awkward nerd with burgundy hair, unraveled within the first four seasons of the show. As main characters such as Spike and Buffy resisted traditional notions of sexuality, other characters, Willow, explored her same-sex desires.³ Not only did the show challenge ideas of gender and sexuality, but it also served as a positive lesbian representation.

While on-screen lesbian representation began to pick up speed, it didn't guarantee accurate depictions of the community. Often, depictions of lesbians during the 1990s were inaccurate and reinforced existing stereotypes. Even with the newfound character diversity of late 20th century films like *Bound* (1996), most movies left lesbians in supporting roles and used them as a catalyst for white

protagonists who conformed to gender expectations. Supporting characters did not require any complex developments in their backgrounds and were a simple way to add diversity to any given production.

Unfortunately, this underdevelopment left marginalized characters vulnerable to inaccurate depictions and stereotypes that quickly defined them as individuals.

At the time, lesbian characters were finding a space for themselves in popular movies, and the feminist movement of the 1990s surged with fresh conceptualizations of gender. This new era of feminism, widely influenced and led by lesbians, asked women to question the gender roles imposed on them by a patriarchal society. Grassroots movements, namely the Riot Grrrl movement, promoted ideas of equality and freedom for women and minority groups. In contrast, more visible parts of the feminist

³ Nicole Grafanakis, "The Queer Influence of Buffy the Vampire Slayer," *The College of New Jersey Journal of Student Scholarship* 22 (2020).

movement simply argued for better pay and freedom to have a career as the movement had in the past. These differing goals caused a divide in the movement that author and political activist bell hooks declared to be the reformist feminism vs. radical feminism. While reform feminists asked for widely applicable rights, most lesbian activist stood on the side of radical feminism as they demanded that the oppressive, 'white supremacist' system be torn down. As institutions were challenged, fears of radicalistic disruption were reproduced on-screen by stereotyping lesbians as antagonists. These factors led to the characterization of lesbians by their style of dress, ideas, and motivations, which were all reduced to being driven by their sexuality.

This essay analyzes depictions of lesbians in film at the end of the 20th century as it relates to the third wave feminist movement of the 1990s. More specifically, it argues that stigmatized

depictions of lesbians in American cinema reproduced the underlying anxieties of the third wave feminist movement. Through the analysis of two films: *Election* (1999) and *Mean Girls* (2003), as well as the feminist theory of bell hooks, this essay explores the fears and anxieties of the revitalized feminist movement. Both films served as a backlash against the feminist movement by using skewed depictions of lesbians to further establish negative emotions towards the movement. These political and sociological anxieties of the feminist movement developed into exaggerated characteristics within lesbian supporting characters. As a result, stigmatized depictions of lesbians delegitimized their role as leaders of the third wave feminist movement.

The Feedback Loop of Film and Culture

During the late 20th century, films spurred emotion embedding themes that relate to what an audience is going through

in their own lives, regardless of the movie genre. In a time full of social and political advances, the 90s film industry allowed for the reproduction of reality on the big screen. From capturing presidential sex scandals to groveling in the facts of the fatal AIDS epidemic, the industry never ran short of muses. *Election* (1999) and *Mean Girls* (2003) explore the struggles of women protagonists against lesbian feminist antagonists. Storytelling in 90s film, even when fictional, touched on the more profound sociological ideas and movements of that era. However, using film to capture the social issues of the world around us is not a new concept.

Based on the novel *The Clansman* by Thomas Dixon, D.W. Griffith's 1915 debut of *Birth of a Nation* was an epic retelling of the American Civil War and Reconstruction

era.⁴ Although it was a revolutionary Hollywood blockbuster that drastically changed the way films were used as a medium, it also was the beginning of film capturing sociopolitical topics. *Birth of a Nation* was riddled with racist characterizations of African Americans that juxtaposed positive portrayals of the Ku Klux Klan⁵. The movie created a deep divide in the nation between those who believed the film was a phenomenal blockbuster and those who demanded it not be shown. A 1916 Oregon newspaper applauded the Ku Klux Klan as 'white-robed saviors' and that the depictions of Black peril must be seen and felt to be appreciated.⁶ An article in *The Denver Star* titled 'Birth of a Nation Must Not Show in Denver' discusses the film's racial implications and negative social impacts on

⁴ "Popular Reactions to 'Birth of a Nation': Topics in Chronicling America," Research Guides (Library of Congress).

⁵ Dick Lehr, "The Birth of a Nation," *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

⁶ "East Oregonian : E.O. (Pendleton, OR) 1888-Current, April 28, 1916, Daily Evening Edition," News about Chronicling America RSS (University of Oregon Libraries; Eugene, OR).

Black people. The article stated the movie's ideologies and the anxieties it risks reproducing by projecting these negative images about Afro-Americans that selectively mirror the world around them.

This instance demonstrated the immediate effects that film has always had on society. The widespread distribution and viewing of the film directly correlated with the questioning of Black individuals based on the negative depictions of Afro-Americans in the movie. However, these ideologies and prejudices did not come solely from watching the movie; in truth, they were embedded in the minds of many Americans; the film was only a projection of the existing ideologies. Likewise, American cinema at the end of the 20th century captured the fears of the new age feminist movement. Through their depictions of lesbians, films have created a narrative

rooted in their decades long concern of the feminist movement.

Feminism: Transitioning from Second Wave to Third Wave

Although it is difficult to zero in on the exact moment that third wave feminism began, it's generally recognized as a resurgence in women's rights activism during the 1990s.⁷ Women's rights activism, otherwise known as feminism, fights for social, economic, and political equality. More specifically, feminism advocates for gender equality as well as freedom of gender expression, sex, and sexuality. The feminist movement is one of the oldest movements worldwide and is defined by eras that can be divided into waves; furthermore, each wave had specific goals and concerns related to the broader message of equality. The third wave movement encompassed the 1990s, but its influences came decades before.

⁷ "Feminism: The Third Wave" (National Women's History Museum, June 23, 2020).

Although the feminist movement dates far before the women's suffrage movement of 1848, for this paper, the second-wave feminist movement will be used as a starting point.

Betty Friedman's *The Feminine Mystique* of 1963⁸ is considered the start of second-wave feminism as it explores the indoctrination of systematic sexism in American women. Friedman's critique in *The Feminine Mystique* claims that women's basic human desire for growth was severely stunted. As she conducted her studies on women, she coined the term "feminine mystique" to describe the supposition that women would be fulfilled from their marriage, family, sex lives, and housework alone. The arguments in Friedman's work situate themselves on the idea of femininity as a driving force. American women had a dream of being one thing: the perfect housewife. Anything outside of that duty

was inherently unfeminine. Women were applauded for their femininity so long as they placed the responsibilities of childbearing and pleasing their husbands at the forefront of their lives. However, Friedman's interviews of housewives proved that the real American woman did not feel fulfilled in the way that mass media and 'experts' said they did.

Second-wave feminism aimed to dismantle any ideas that placed men and childbearing at the top of the list of women's aspirations. Pioneers of this movement, such as Friedman, caused a ripple effect in feminist rhetoric. Through this, third-wave feminism came into the spotlight. While scholars argue when third-wave feminism began, or if it is over, there is a consensus that second-wave feminism ended in the 80s. Third-wave feminism occurred in the mid-1990s and was led by the generation born when Friedman's *Mystique* was

⁸ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (London: Penguin, 2010).

published. The pioneers of this era, mainly lesbians, benefitted from the trials and tribulations that those before them had gone through. These activists were able to benefit from any advancements made by those before them, but they were also able to objectively critique the mistakes of second-wave feminism from a place of greater understanding.

Third-wave feminists of the 1990s questioned and deconstructed the ideas that mainstream media had projected about topics such as gender, femineity, motherhood, sexuality, etc. Feminists of this era grew up watching the economic and professional expectations around women change drastically over time. The third-wave movement allowed women's real-life experiences, thoughts, and feelings to be more visible than ever before. Popular readings such as the *Riot Grrrl Manifesto* made powerful statements on the perceived

intelligence of women and encouraged the micromovement of Girl Power. Although the feminist movement finally found a place in mainstream media, a destabilization of the movement was brewing under the surface. While the social pillars of womanhood and gender expectations were once concrete, a divide between fundamental beliefs within the community was coming to a head. bell hooks' *Feminism is for Everybody* clearly defined third-wave feminism and provided the framework to understand it in a modern-day setting. Feminism was not just about a woman's right to vote or have access to safe abortions. The purpose of feminism in its rawest state was to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression for all.⁹ Not only was feminism inherently political, but it was also revolutionary. Feminists questioned the patriarchy as it is a system of domination meant to oppress people repeatedly.

⁹ bell hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2015), xxi-xxi.

What caused the destabilization of the movement was the divide between the two parties: the revolutionist/radicalized and the reformist. This divide began following the civil rights era as white women wanted to fight for class freedom as it allowed them to maintain a level of white supremacy. They didn't want a black man to receive better pay before them as white women did. Reformists were white feminists who primarily viewed equality with men in the workplace to be the main objective of modern-day feminism. This purposefully overshadowed the revolutionary fundamentals that aimed to dismantle the patriarchy and oppressive systems. Reformism made class mobility their goal and sought to benefit from workplace equality. This side of the movement was mainly headed by white women who didn't want to lose their already stable race and class privileges. To keep the rhetoric of

feminism without losing their benefits, they had to rethink the politics at the base of third-wave feminism. Politics were slowly removed from the heart of the movement as the reformist began to find power in the existing social structures that radicalized feminists couldn't be due to their distance from white supremacy.¹⁰

Reform feminists were interested in silencing mainstream patriarchal forces but only to the extent that gave them freedom from male domination within the comforts of the existing systems. The reform also gave them the ability to rely on women of the lower class and marginalized positions to do work that they didn't want to do—removing the political foundations of feminism, allowing for the existence of multiple definitions of feminism. Feminist rhetoric was soon used as a tool to change the economic status of privileged white women. It used feminism and internalized

¹⁰ hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody*, 4.

sexism as a crutch to demand reparations and pin women as victims of society.¹¹ While reformists believed that white supremacy, capitalism, and class systems could be remolded to better fit their ideas of women's liberation, they demanded equal rights for women in the existing class structure. Radical feminists believed that change could not take place in the current system. Fundamental change could only allow for new models of equality and liberation. As privileged white women adapted reformist ideas that kept racial and class struggles separate from their visions of feminism, they moved up economically to benefit from classist power. Their ability to receive the media's attention allowed their version of feminism to be what was adopted, leaving the politics of radical feminists to fall into the background.¹²

Intersections of race, class, and sexuality showed that the institutional

systems in society placed specific individuals at the bottom. Lesbians and other marginal identities based on race or ability found themselves in an unwanted position due to their experience of hardships. They knew better than anyone what it was like to exist as an oppressed group in a male-dominated, patriarchal, and white supremacist society because at no point did they benefit from these conditions. Lesbians had experience in freedom fighting to gain the right to live and exist in a society not made for them. They knew the existing socio-political structure would not work for them regardless of how much reform took place.¹³

The split in feminist politics became the most visible with the help of mass media. Films were reproducing the characteristics of reformists and radicals within their own fictional characters. However, how purposefully these ideologies

¹¹ hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody*, 5

¹² hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody*, 37-39.

¹³ hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody*, 40.

were embedded may not be as clear, given that many people do not have feminist theory tucked away in their back pockets. But one can infer that society repeatedly accepted lesbians to be at the bottom of the socio-political totem pole. Ideas and prejudices attached to women's sexuality were found at the butt of most "jokes," and any conversations that challenged depictions to be more than merely comedic devices were pushed aside. The message that remained clear and consistent was that lesbians were outcasts, predators, and unhappy.

Lesbian radical feminists disrupted the oppressive systems in a way that reformists did not because their marginalization did not allow them to benefit in any way. A more palatable form of feminism that reformists brought forth only further encouraged the ostracization of Black women and Lesbians. These themes were reproduced in some of the most

popular movies at the turn of the century. *Election (1999)* and *Mean Girls (2003)* serve as two films that demonstrate the patriarchal, anti-feminist ideals projected onto lesbians during this period of influence. Both films found a unique way to uphold sexual stigmas that ostracized lesbians and reproduce the anxieties of the public that lie beneath the surface.

Election (1999)

Alexander Payne's 1999 *Election* is a dark comedy that follows Tracey Flick, an overachieving student, on her journey through a high school class president election. Jim McAllister, a popular social studies teacher with a personal vendetta, attempts to sabotage Flick's chances of winning by encouraging the school's famous football star to run against her. As Paul, the football star, fumbles through electoral politics, his younger sister Tammy decides to run as well after her former lover

becomes entangled with Paul. The relationship between Tammy's love interest and Paul motivates her to enter the election to spite her brother for ripping away her lover. Throughout the film, Tammy serves as the underdog in both the election and in her social life as she navigates her teenage life exclusively being attracted to women.

At the pep rally, all three presidential candidates are expected to give speeches declaring their stance on issues and what they can bring forward if they're elected. Tammy is the last of the candidates to speak and is immediately met with cynicism from the crowd due to her reputation as an outcast in school. Despite the initial lackluster response, once she begins to vocalize her 'radical' political position that declares the electoral process as a waste of time, students start to rally in her favor. Tammy's desire to disrupt the system and revolution riles the

crowd of students and infuriates the principal.¹⁴ Following this speech, she's apprehended by the school's authoritarians and threatened with expulsion.

Although Tammy Metzler doesn't overtly mention her sexual identity in the film, her existence as a character in this world is based on her lesbian identity. What drives her to run for the election as well as end her candidacy is due to her sexuality. Tammy's desire to be romantically involved with women is the catalyst for the small amount of development that the character experiences. Considering that Tammy is a supporting character, it is peculiar that her existence in the film's world causes ripple after ripple, from her initial decision to run for president up until the end, in which she takes the blame for Tracey's poorly executed venges. Prior to her run for president, Tammy was a loner who walked

¹⁴ *Election* (Paramount Pictures presents, 1999), 40:36.

the halls daydreaming about her former love interest, who also served as her best friend.

While her lesbian identity already ostracized her, Tammy's radical position in the candidacy pushed her further away from socialization. Tammy was immediately punished for her rebellious speech despite the support she rallied from the crowd. Her authentic perspective of the school's politics rustled feathers and went against the status quo. Because Tammy already existed as a piranha due to her lack of heterosexual participation in the patriarchy, anything she said or did was inherently political. Running for class president as a woman pushed back against the normalcies associated with gender in politics. Additionally, her juxtaposition to her opponent Tracey demonstrated a clear contrast between the roles they fit into socially, coupled with the status quo of politics and gender normalcies.

When examining the characters Tammy Metzler and Tracey Flick at first

glance, they seem to differ in many ways. From their style to their mannerisms, they are entirely different characters. However, what constitutes the core elements of Tammy's character emanate from her lesbian identity. The intersection between her sexuality drastically changes how she views herself and her role in the institution. This leaves Tracey as a contradicting female character whose heterosexual identity defines her prominent traits.

By simply running for candidacy, both Tammy and Tracey demonstrate their desire to let women hold some of the political power that men often dictate. However, other aspects of their identity play a significant role in how either of them decides to express their feminist-centered desires for political power. Tammy's 'radical' approach homes in revolution while Tracey looks for reform. A switch of power from the hands of a male student to a female one would not be enough to grant

Tammy any benefit because of her layered identity. While both Tammy and Tracey fall under the category of feminist, their political viewpoints differ vastly based on the benefits that either party can receive from the oppressive system.

The divide between Tammy and Tracey mirrors the fractioned feminist movement that emerged in the 90s. Though feminism was a significant movement in the 90s, it was best received was a capitalist-friendly culture movement. However, what was brewing underground was a radical and political fight. Tammy Metzler's "rebellious" and revolutionary politics aligned with the messages embedded in the "Riot Grrrl" movement of the '90s, which contrasted with the palatable mainstream feminism that Tracey represented. The Riot Grrrl movement breathed fresh air into the lungs of the radical feminist theory that was at the heart of feminist rhetoric. The movement promoted resistance and a

reawakening of women's empowerment that acknowledges intersectionality. Riot Grrrl was a mixture of the Do-It-Yourself punk scene and a grassroots feminist revolution that lesbians and other queer women widely led. It broke away from the mainstream form of sociopolitical feminism shown on screen and reiterated radical ideas so they could be understood and connected to everyday life.

Like the main punk scene, Riot Grrrl ideologies emphasized anti-capitalism and individualism. The movement empowered feminine youth to reclaim their power as radical political agents. Even the term "Grrrl" was a deliberate rebranding of the word "girl" that symbolized a reconfigure of the traditional idea of women. Their goal was to bring women together without erasing their voices and various perspectives of lived experiences. The movement promoted resistance in the form of an awakening in which the realities of oppression, violence, and harassment were

endured by women everywhere. The rebellion used zines to help create a hive mind outside the music scene and publish think pieces that kept the movement going.

The Riot Grrrl manifesto found in the second issue of Bikini Kill challenged normalized and oppressive ideas of femininity in a way that teens and young women could relate to their lives. Marxist revolutionary vernacular within the manifesto further emphasized the anti-capitalist and anti-reform themes that strategically powered the movement. The manifesto ran two pages in length and discussed the need for sexual, intellectual, racial, and gendered freedom:¹⁵

BECAUSE we wanna make it easier for girls to see/hear each other's work so that we can share strategies and criticize-applaud each other. BECAUSE we must take over the means of production in order to create our moanings. BECAUSE viewing our work as being connected to our girlfriends-politics-real lives is essential if we

are gonna figure out how we are making impacts, reflects, perpetuates, or DISRUPTS the status quo.¹⁶

By reworking the traditional anti-capitalist rhetoric of Marx's manifesto, the Riot Grrrl manifesto called for a revolution that tore down the oppressive patriarchal system that plagued them. Additionally, it relates itself to everyday life experiences that are relatable to the teenage girls and young women that the movement is aimed toward. The Riot Grrrl movement reimagined modes of resistance that actively challenged the socialized norms and restrictions of womanhood. Simultaneously, the movement emphasized the differences in the experiences of womanhood due to race, age, sexuality, and class. Tammy Metzler's speech that called for revolution and destruction of the school's constricting political system was a reflective version of

¹⁵ Natalya Lusty, "Riot Grrrl Manifestos and Radical Vernacular Feminism," *Australian Feminist Studies* 32, no. 93 (March 2017): 219-239.

¹⁶ Kathleen Hanna, "RIOT GRRRL MANIFESTO," Riot Grrrl Manifesto (BIKINI KILL ZINE 2).

the revolutionary manifesto that fueled the movement. Her vocalized frustrations were as loud as those within the movement because she was a part of the movement; Tammy was a Riot Grrrl. Furthermore, her lesbian identity and authentic expression pulled away from the socialized norms of womanhood in the same way that the movement encouraged women to do.

Reform feminist ideals, however, are what made headlines around the world. This publicized depiction of feminism swept media outlets throughout the decade. Reformists also received criticism about advocating for women's rights, mainly due to a trend negating the need for women's rights dating back to the suffrage movement. Nonetheless, the most progressive advancement of feminist theory remained underground and circulated within the grassroots movements. Visible reformist movements that remained in the public eye

were spearheaded by heterosexual, gender-conforming white women who wanted change but not a systematic change. They used feminism to leverage themselves as victims of the system to benefit from gender politics without disrupting other aspects of society that already profit from it. Tracey Flick is the model reformist and exemplifies all the controversial characteristics of the subgroup. She refuses to make any legitimate critiques of the oppressive forces in the school system and only acknowledges the need for an exchange of power from the previous president to her. Within her speech, she emphasized some of the concerns other student's faced concerning poverty and racial discrimination but offered no pragmatic approach to tackling these fundamental issues.¹⁷

The World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 invited 189 Member States of the United Nations to solidify an intended

¹⁷ *Election*, 37:28.

blueprint for women's equality worldwide. The conference focused on 12 critical concern areas such as "Women in Poverty," "Education and Training," "Violence Against Women," etc., and featured a multitude of public figures, including Hilary Clinton. Her famous speech coined "*Women's Rights are Human's Rights*" has gone down in history as one of the most memorable speeches on women's issues. Though this speech has been referenced many times in women's studies across the nation, the address is far from revolutionary. Hilary Clinton approached her speech in a similar fashion to Tracey Flick. She leveraged the movement's rhetoric to rally support, but she had nothing more to offer than that. She maneuvered around the concept of intersectional identities and the effects on women's living status worldwide,

ideas that radical movements embedded within their doctrine.

Clinton's speech addressed mutilation, poverty, sexual violence, and healthcare. Still, she did not acknowledge the root of these critical issues for each of these critical issues: oppressive systems that target individuals with intersecting identities. Yet, she still shined a light on these topics by using women's voices in unfortunate circumstances despite her distance from any of their experiences. In her speech at the conference, she stated, "As an American, I want to speak for those women in my own country, women who are raising children on the minimum wage, women who can't afford health care or childcare, women whose lives are threatened by violence, including violence in their own homes."¹⁸ These circumstances faced by women all over America are not issues

¹⁸ Michael E. Eidenmuller, "Hilary Rodham Clinton Remarks to the U.N. 4th World Conference,"

American Rhetoric: Hillary Rodham Clinton (American Rhetoric).

because of womanhood, as other parts of her speech suggest, but instead a direct product of a larger, more complicated problem.

Like Tracey, her powerful speech acknowledged a need for a change but did not critique the driving forces behind the failed sociopolitical systems in place. Her methodical use of marginalized issues was an attempt to show compassion and understanding but ultimately position herself in a place of power as a leader. Regardless of this, the conference remained in the hands of marginalized women who held conversations and brought up issues when the floor was open. This conference demonstrated that it was the grassroots, underground, marginal women like Tammy who were the driving force of “change” that the feminist movement strived for.

In *Election*, Tammy ultimately gets suspended by her own choice, motivated by her lesbian desires. Regardless of her

‘revolutionary’ ideas, the film constantly reduces her to a lesbian, mirroring the views of lesbian leaders of the movement. On the other hand, Tracey is saved despite all odds; she is both the hero and the villain in the movie. Though she has admirable traits, she’s characterized as ‘bitchy’ and illogically driven by emotion. Both Tammy and Tracey are victims of stigmatized ideas of women who deem themselves feminist: pushy, irrational, and lesbians.

In *Election*, Tracey finds herself sitting in the office of Mr. McAllister after being called in for questioning following the vandalization of the candidates’ posters. Immediately, Tracey accuses Tammy based on her previous statements about destroying the electoral system.¹⁹ Despite the signs being the topic at hand, his resentment for her causes him to stray and mention issues of the affair she had with his colleague. As he scolds her, the camera switches between the

¹⁹ *Election*, 54:29.

two characters, Tracey looking up at him with a child-like look in her eye and McAllister looking down on her. This scene illustrates the power dynamic that he has tried to uphold throughout the movie, in which McAllister consistently tries to make Tracey feel small. Furthermore, this moment emphasizes the patriarchal-domination theory dictated by hooks which forces women into submission.²⁰ However, as Tracey's insults throw McAllister into a shock, the camera zooms into their expressions, and the power dynamic between them begins to level out a bit more.

Though McAllister is still the dominating figure as a teacher vs. student, his attempts to lessen her quickly lose power. While it may seem as if Tracey has 'won,' the insults she spewed at him regarding his wife and a variety of other personal topics quickly turn her into an unlikeable character and evokes a feeling of

pity for the audience toward McAllister. She becomes the villain more than ever before by standing up for herself and exerting control over the conversation. Soon after, Tammy confesses that she committed the act, although it was indeed Tracey, and McAllister hesitantly takes her word. In a scene just a few minutes later, Tammy sits in the living room with her parents as they tell her she's going to 'Sacred Heart,' an all-girls catholic school. To this, she smiles because it was what motivated her to wrongfully confess to a crime she didn't commit.²¹

Tammy knew she was already a target of the school principal for her disruptive and radical speech, so he did not hesitate to rid of her. The key idea of this scene and of Tammy's character within the movie is the connection between her politics and her lesbianism. In multiple scenes, her political drive is based on her lesbianism,

²⁰ bell hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody*, 98.

²¹ *Election*, 1:04:21.

and there is no separation between those two pieces of her character—conceptualizations of lesbian dreams of an all-women’s school date back to psychological theories of sexuality from the turn of the twentieth century.

The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman, published by Sigmund Freud in 1920, described his analysis of a young woman who was placed into therapy by her parents due to concerns about her being a lesbian.²² This paper influenced the connections between lesbianism as a label and abnormality, which further affected the view of single-gendered environments. Sherrie A. Inness states that perceptions of women’s single-gender environments as abnormal and contributing to lesbianism have been an effective strategy throughout the 20th century to curtail female

empowerment.²³ These spaces were a safe space for anti-patriarchal and pro-feminist ideas to grow without male-dominated influences. “Lesbianism” was a term used to spread fear within women’s colleges, and the visibility of lesbianism at these institutions in media was an attack on single-gendered spaces. Furthermore, the presence of lesbians in these spaces matters less than the power behind the ideological constructs that link lesbian abnormality to safe, women-centric spaces.²⁴ Tammy as a lesbian who is eager to go to an all-girls catholic school for reasons related to her sexual being embeds these constructs into her character.

Tammy’s attendance at an all-girls high school reproduces these harmful stigmas toward lesbian individuals who entered and led women-centered spaces. It

²² Sigmund Freud, “The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman (1920). Part III,” *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 1971.

²³ Sherrie A. Inness, *The Lesbian Menace: Ideology, Identity, and the Representation of Lesbian Life* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 39.

²⁴ Inness, *The Lesbian Menace*, 39.

was no coincidence that Tammy, as a rule-breaking political figure like other women in grassroots political feminist movements, was reduced to her sexuality. The film actively portrays lesbians within the movement as abnormal products with only their sexual orientation as a driving force for their life choices and opposition to the patriarchal system. Tammy Metzler's lack of character development allows the audience to only latch on to her sexuality as the only part of her identity. This underdevelopment allows for the reproduction of sexual stigmas that plague the lesbian community and the third-wave feminist movement.

Though Tammy Metzler as a radical lesbian feminist is the focus, Tracey's characterization as a reform feminist does indeed play a role in Tammy's development. While Tracey attempted to throw Tammy under the bus multiple times throughout the film because of her piranha status, both characters suffered. Tracey's rise to power

may have been a 'win' as she does ultimately win the presidency; she ends as the villain. Even though McAllister, the male-dominating figure, consistently belittles her, with each grasp at reclaiming her agency, she is depicted as overbearing and unlikable. Tammy Metzler and Tracey Flick, as two opposing characters of the feminist movement, both leave the audience with a bad taste in their mouth, while McAllister and Paul Metzler are the underdogs that overcome the 'challenges' thrown at them.

While movies such as *Election* that featured lesbian characters were more visible than before, lesbian representation was still a fresh concept. Mainstream films continued to reproduce stigmatized ideas of lesbians while attacking feminist ideals to push back on the growing feminist movement. However, the portrayal of this phenomenon varied widely in each movie. By the early 2000s, current day classics such

as *Mean Girls* (2003) brought in a fresh, new audience: teen girls. Although the high school setting was the same, unlike *Election*, *Mean Girls* created a battleground solely between female students. Nonetheless, the visibility of patriarchal ideas still ran rampant while isolating the lesbian character.

Mean Girls (2003)

Mean Girls, directed by Tina Fey, features a young and naïve Cady Heron. Cady is a transfer student from Africa that comes to an American high school. Here she learns the ins and outs of popularity, social hierarchies, and prejudices. Her first two friends, Janis and Damian, are social outcasts that everyone in school labels as gay. Throughout the movie. Janis and Cady muster up elaborate plans to take down the most popular girl in school, Regina George. Though soon enough, Cady takes that spot and begins to mutate into one of “the

plastics.” Janis Ian plays a pivotal role in the film as she constantly critiques the social hierarchy of the school. Although her peers don’t take too well to her commentary, she does not fail to push against the formalities of the social systems within the school that leaves those who are not straight, white, and conventionally attractive at the bottom of the pole. Although Janis does have a vendetta against Regina George, her desire to take her down seems to be more than that.

Janis’s appearance fits the standard depictions of lesbians within media during this time period. Throughout the film, she is insulted and consistently accused of being a lesbian, especially when she speaks out against those in “power.” Her desire to deconstruct the hierarchy in school also seems to stem from the exhaustion of being “othered.” Like other third-wave feminists, her radical ideas and her sexual ambiguity are not welcomed in that social system. However, by the end of the film, she kisses a

boy and is suddenly let into the sphere that she was once barred from. The question is not whether she is truly gay because the audience can only speculate; instead, it is a matter of making sacrifices for acceptance and social mobility. Although Janis Ian's sexuality is questionable, the consequences of publicly expressing one's sexual identity has always plagued members of the queer community. From celebrity figures on television to members of the military, being open about sexuality came at a risk.

The ostracization of queer individuals has been a continuous phenomenon in the United States and across the world. Members of the LGBTQ community were purposefully "othered" and pushed out of social spaces. In the 1990s, discourse on sexuality was more prominent than ever due to the AIDS epidemic sweeping the gay community. However, discussing one's sexual preferences publicly was deemed inappropriate in every setting

and the resulting consequences were never positive. Ellen DeGeneres's hit TV show *Ellen* changed television when the main character, Ellen Morgan, came out as a lesbian in 1997. This was the first-ever prime-time sitcom to have a member of the LGBTQ community as the main character. Although that one-hour-long special gained 42 million viewers, ratings immediately plummeted after, and the show was canceled. *Ellen's* cancellation further illustrates the possibility of consequences that comes with being open with sexuality.

Although the cancellation of the sitcom was harmless, simultaneously, a larger plague was cast over the queer community. Members of the LGBTQ community universally face struggles with concealing their identity or coming out in ways that Ellen Morgan and Janis Ian had. When Bill Clinton passed the Defense Directive 1304.26, popularly known as "Don't Ask Don't Tell" (DADT) in 1993, he

infringed upon freedom of choice for gay individuals looking to serve in the military. This exclusionary policy restricted lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities from any form of military service and directed those military applicants were not allowed to be questioned about their sexual orientation. The legal policy determined that homosexuality was not compatible with military service, and any persons who engaged in homosexual activity or stated that they were gay were to be immediately discharged.

Despite the purposeful concealment of their sexualities, lesbian, gay, and bisexual service members were frequent targets of harassment while serving. Sexual stigma, a phenomenon that encapsulates negative attitudes toward the gay community as well ideas of their “inherent inferiority,” allowed for policies that singled

out non-heterosexuals to stay active.²⁵ DADT penalized deviancy from heterosexual conventions and enabled violence due to prejudices and anti-LGBTQ hate. Enacted sexual stigma allowed negative belief patterns regarding closeted servicemembers into circumstances that will enable verbal or physical harm.²⁶ Servicemember’s inability to speak out against the targeted violence without consequences created a system with a lack of protection for closeted individuals. Due to LGB servicemembers' invisibility, attacks were minimized as isolated acts of harassment instead of a collected pattern against the collective community.

The ostracization of targeted individuals coupled with scant visibility systematically suppressed LGB servicemembers' voices and placed them in danger. In more ways than one, the policy

²⁵ Derek J. Burks, “Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Victimization in the Military: An Unintended Consequence of ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’?,” *American Psychologist* 66, no. 7 (2011): 606.

²⁶ Burks, “Victimization in the Military.”

prohibited openly gay individuals from receiving proper benefits and care that their heterosexual counterparts had access to. The policy went as far as interfering with provider-patient relationships as military doctors could be compelled to tell commanders personal patient info regarding sexuality. The stigmas surrounding non-heterosexual individuals promoted both heterosexuality and patriarchal standards. Section 654 of Title 10 states, “The presence in the armed forces of persons who demonstrate a propensity or intent to engage in homosexual acts would create an unacceptable risk to the high standards of morale, good order and discipline, and unit cohesion that is the essence of military capability.”²⁷ Here, the U.S. government tries to uphold the patriarchal norms of heterosexual male-dominated power. They argue that allowing homosexual individuals

into the military taints their high standards of “morale” and “good order.” The existence of LGB members in military space is considered an attack on the social norm that maintains a familiar hierarchy of power and heterosexism.

Allowing LGB service members into the military demonstrated a sign of weakness and broke down the heteronormativity that serving in the military was thought to radiate. DADT’s prohibition of speaking out about one’s sexual identity created invisible victims used by dominating servicemembers to validate ideas of the patriarchy. Violence against male soldiers served a dual purpose of validating perpetrators' masculinity and emasculating male victims if they appeared weaker, submissive, younger, or feminine; all traits commonly associated with homosexuality.²⁸ Although this policy was a

²⁷ “TITLE 10—ARMED FORCES § 654,” govinfo.gov (Authenticated U.S. Government Information, March 18, 2021), <https://www.govinfo.gov/help/uscode>.

²⁸ Burks, “Victimization in the Military.”

‘compromise’ to the previous 50-year ban on homosexuality in the military, it instead is a direct result of a need to reinforce the male-dominated supremacy that holds society.

Challenging homophobia and gender roles have always been a pillar of the feminist movement. Radical lesbians’ input has allowed for a push back against the heterosexism that the patriarchy creates and seeks to reinforce. Revolutionary feminist dialogue has continuously encouraged sexual freedom for youth, especially in the wake of discriminatory policies against the LGBTQ community. True sexual liberation is the ability to express oneself without relying on patriarchal modes of sexual freedom as it creates hierarchies of power.²⁹ The violence and silencing of LGB military individuals attempt to force members who are radically breaking away from societal

and gender norms back into the power dynamics that serve white male supremacy. In September 2010, Judge Virginia Phillips acknowledged that the order violated the first and fifth amendment rights of LGB individuals and issued an injunction barring the government from enforcing policy.³⁰ The DADT policy was a direct attempt to strip away LGB individuals' fundamental rights to uphold the power structures. Phillips notes that “the sweeping reach of the restrictions on speech in the don't ask, don't tell act is far broader than is reasonably necessary to protect the substantial government interest at stake here.” Furthermore, she concludes, “the act's restrictions on speech are broader than reasonably necessary to protect the government's substantial interests and serve

²⁹ hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody*, 89.

³⁰ Richard Adams, “Judge Overturns 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' Ban on Gays as Unconstitutional | Richard AdamsT,” *The Guardian*, Sep. 10, 2010.

to impede military readiness and unit cohesion rather than further these goals.”³¹

DADT infringement on the rights of LGB soldiers only further demonstrated the systematic harm done against marginalized groups that challenged heteronormativity. Leading lesbians of the revolutionary feminist movement have stood up against the dominating patriarchal models that have resulted in the further oppressive, ostracizing forms of punishment in a supremacist society. Female thinkers such as Janis Ian and Judge Phillips do not fail to question and push against injustices that silence and harm outsiders. The repeal of DADT in 2011 was a symbol of the feminist theory and sexual liberation that radical queer leaders of the feminist movement stand for. The motivation behind dismantling the systems that placed brought DADT into existence mirrored the motivation that Janis Ian had to destroy the

social hierarchies that prevented outcasted individuals like herself from self-expression without criticism.

In *Mean Girls*, the high school teacher Ms. Norbury (Tina Fey) is placed in charge of restoring peace to the school after the ‘Burn Book’ is released by Regina George to the public. She uses multiple methods to motivate the girls attending school to relate to each other to create unity. Her final effort aimed to create a compassionate and open environment by requiring the girls to write out apologies for people they’ve hurt in their lives. Neither of the two ‘Queen Bees’, Regina nor Cady, decide to voice an apology to the group; however, Janis decides to get on the table and give her apology instead. Once Janis Ian hops on ‘stage’ to begin her public apology, Regina George vocalizes, “Oh my God, it’s her dream come true, diving into a big pile

³¹ Bill Mears, “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ Policy Ruled Unconstitutional,” *CNN*, Sep. 10, 2010.

of girls.”³² Janis becomes frustrated at the laughter and decides to scrap her apology. Instead, she reveals the extent of her successful mastermind plan to bring down Regina George while simultaneously exposing Cady’s role in aiding her. Janis ends the reveal with an apology and sarcastically states her motivation behind the act: she had a “big lesbian crush” on Regina George.³³ To this, all the girl’s cheer, and Janis crowd surfs into a sea of admiration.

Janis’s master plan was to tear apart the ‘Plastics’ and bring down Regina George as the leader of the social hierarchy. Her desire for destruction and revolution ties to her lesbian character traits, as she presents herself as what the public widely associates with the lesbian identity. However, Janis never confirms her sexuality within the movie, and her peers genuinely view her as a lesbian who has a desire to throw the

social system in place into disarray. Although the ‘Plastics’ made life difficult for everyone in school, she was the only one who attempted to change that. Regina geared the focus toward her to distract from the anxieties that her existence brought about. It legitimated her arguments against the issues with the social hierarchy.

Though the film focuses on the conflicts between women, issues of the patriarchy still play a significant role. Hooks emphasizes that patriarchy is a standardized system of domination that is perpetuated and maintained.³⁴ As a privileged heterosexual woman, Regina benefits from keeping the system of domination even though its root is sexism. Due to their relation to men, heterosexual women hold a position of power over LGB women within a sexist system of domination.³⁵ While ‘conscious-raising’ groups led by marginalized women

³² *Mean Girls* (Paramount home entertainment, 2003). 1:15:03.

³³ *Mean Girls*, 1:15:44.

³⁴ bell hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody*, 7.

³⁵ bell hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody*, 10.

confronted internalized sexism and shifted their focus to tackling the more significant issue of male domination, others remained victims of it. Janis's characterization as a lesbian only made it easier to "other" her and reproduce the model of dominance within the school.

By the end of the film, all of the conflicts between the characters have been worked out, and everyone has become cordial at the very least. However, when the camera cuts to Cady sitting down with her group of friends, Janis is pictured kissing Kevin Gnapoor, a member of the mathletes.³⁶ This seems out of character for Janis because, throughout the movie, she fits the exact traits of how lesbians were often depicted, and she often grimaced at the idea of men. While an audience member could interpret this as a fight against ideas projected onto her, the causation for this

scene runs much deeper than that. Instead, it is a metamorphosis from her false and circumstantial lesbian identity into a happy woman. Inness quoted Dr. Maurice Chideckel and his claims that homosexuality is "an abnormal perversion, a monstrous craving for the unnatural...by unhappy women".³⁷ In a heterosexual society, the idea of a lesbian figure only exists in the absence when a male is not present in one's life and ultimately deprives them of heterosexual pleasures.³⁸ In *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, Susan Faludi relates the idea of female unhappiness to the pushback against the second-wave feminist movement. Her thesis states, "American women were unhappy because they were too free; their liberation had denied them marriage and motherhood."³⁹ The thought process of the 90s and, coincidentally, the late 80s was that

³⁶ *Mean Girls*, 1:32:32.

³⁷ Inness, *The Lesbian Menace*, 24.

³⁸ Inness, *The Lesbian Menace*, 28-29.

³⁹ Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (London: Vintage, 1992), 113.

feminism bred lesbians but ultimately still left them unhappy and longing to trade in their liberation for marriage and motherhood.

What seemed to be the determining factor of womanhood was their proximity to men, and lesbians were the furthest from men that one could get. What mattered was not her sexual identity but the polarization in the two versions. Like other lesbian feminists of the era, Janis refused to dim the light on issues she saw within the social hierarchy, mainly as it affected everyone who was not popular, heterosexual, white women. Although she was a victim of sexual stigmas, she remained grounded in her stance against the dominating systems. However, with the shedding of her lesbian identity, her political rhetoric was also shed, and she immediately fell into the role of a reformist. There was no indication that she was the same Janis Ian as she once was; the cure to her “unhappiness” was a

heterosexual relationship. Her political needs were no longer a question because she found love in the arms of a man.

This ‘silencing’ of the inherent politicalness of her lesbian identity served the same purpose as the silencing of DADT victims. The intent was to erase their homosexuality and restore order to heterosexual norms. When LGB individuals were hidden within the military, it allowed for a sense of safety from the ‘abnormal’ behaviors of gay people. Furthermore, this invisibility and silencing of voices allowed for harm toward LGB individuals to carry on with no advocates. Janis Ian’s metamorphosis also meant no longer a threat to the systems because she now socially and politically benefited from her proximity to men.

Janis Ian’s identity will always be up for debate, but the ideas behind her character remain clear; her unhappiness was the reason for her disruption. Her change in

character based on her sexuality painted a clear message for women of the era, lesbian leaders of change were not to be idolized. Female villains were women who refused to adhere to heteronormative ideas of womanhood and failed to give up their independence. Janis's anger regarding the political systems only resulted in the chaos that was restored once she filled her time with heterosexual love.

The third wave feminist movement that emerged in the mid-1990s was a resurgence of feminism with additional objectives of the movement. Third wave feminism actively opposed the patriarchy, capitalism, and white supremacy in hopes of achieving true sociopolitical equality. The radical feminist movement, widely led by lesbians, challenged patriarchal systems that imposed heterosexual normality on to women. However, as the feminist movement of the 1990's grew, the fears and anxieties of second wave feminism resurfaced through

media production, leaving film as a vessel for projecting the apprehensions. By the end of the 20th century, lesbians acted as supporting characters under the guise of expanding representation, but instead, they play a much darker role. Depictions of lesbians in film at the turn of the century were used to reproduce stigmatized ideas of lesbians due to their leadership within the feminist movement.

This scholarship allows for questions to be raised regarding the impacts of film and media within society as a mode of spreading subliminal sociopolitical ideology. Additionally, it questions the oppression of queer communities through the creation of stereotypes that are widely inapplicable to a subset of the community such as lesbians. Having said that, this research is worth expanding upon given that queer depictions in media has not been thoroughly explored. Although scholars such as Patricia White,

author of *Uninvited*,⁴⁰ and Vito Russo author of *The Celluloid Closet*⁴¹, have done groundbreaking research on the topic, there are still connections to be made regarding the selective portrayals of queer individuals within the late 20th century moving into the 21st century as it relates to larger sociopolitical ideas.

⁴⁰ Patricia White, *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 2000).

⁴¹ Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (New-York: Harper and Row, 1981).

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