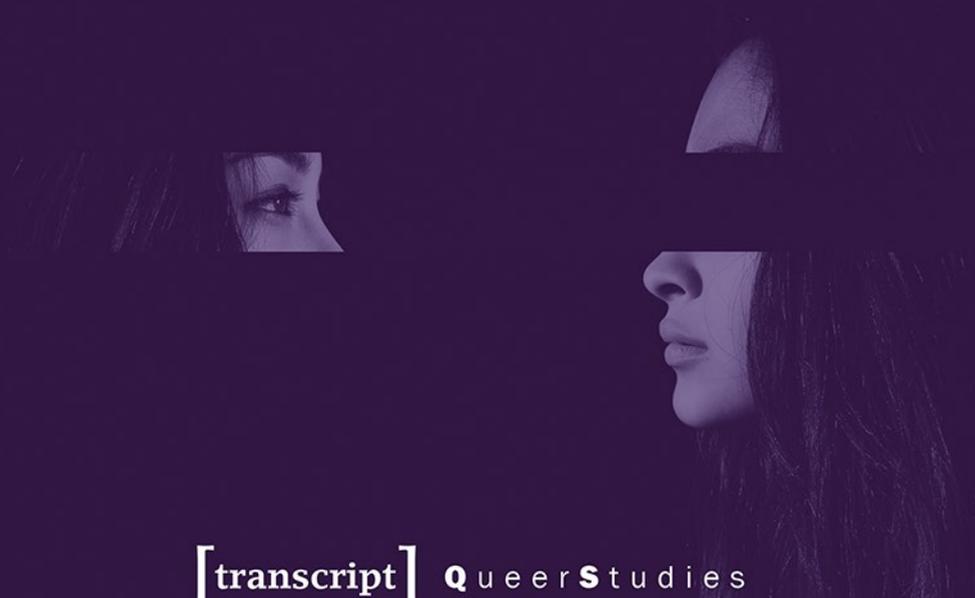JULIA OBERMAYR

FEMALE IDENTITIES IN LESBIAN WEB SERIES

TRANSNATIONAL COMMUNITY BUILDING IN ANGLO-, HISPANO-, AND FRANCOPHONE CONTEXTS

From:

Julia Obermayr
Female Identities in Lesbian Web Series
Transnational Community Building in Anglo-,
Hispano-, and Francophone Contexts

Lesbian Web Series narrate female-centred stories, strengthen identity construction, and generate transnational communities beyond cultural barriers. Julia Obermayr explores the first definition of a new format, the first representations of lesbian women in US-American, Canadian, and Spanish web series from 2007 and onward, as well as their reciprocal effects regarding identity construction and community building of their transnational, mainly female, audience.

The analyzed corpus comprises scenes taken from Venice the Series (2009) and its backstory »Otalia« on the soap opera Guiding Light (1952-2009), Seeking Simone (2009), Out With Dad (2010), Féminin/Féminin (2014), Chica Busca Chica (2007) and its cinematic sequel De Chica En Chica (2015), as well as Notas Aparte (2016).

Julia Obermayr (Dr. phil.), born in 1981, did her doctorate at the University of Graz and in LGBT+ archives in Los Angeles, Toronto, Montreal, Madrid, and Barcelona. In 2019 she received the 14th Scientific Award of the Austrian-Canadian Society for her research on female identities in Lesbian Web Series. She specializes in cultural studies, lesbian/LGBT studies and diversity, minority identities, and female representations in audiovisual media, mainly in Romance speaking Europe and the Americas.

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Memory Spaces (Events, Archives, Gay Villages)

- The Dinah Events, e.g. Battle of the Lesbian Web Series, *Second Shot* screening and Q&A, Palm Springs.
- ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, Los Angeles.
- LGBT exhibition at the Historical Society, Long Beach.
- GLBT History Museum's exhibition, San Francisco
- CLGA – Canadian Lesbian & Gay Archives, Toronto.
- Inside Out LGBT Film Festival, Toronto.
- Archives gaies du Québec LGBT screenings Image+Nation in 'Le village', Montreal.
- Casal Lambda Centre de Documentació, events, screenings and archive, Barcelona.
- Festival Internacional de Cinema Gai i Lèsbic de Barcelona, Barcelona.
- 18º Festival Internacional de cine lésbico gai y transsexual de Madrid, Madrid.
- África LGBT (exhibition)/ screening/ Q&A with three LGBT refugees (Sierra Leone) at UCM, Madrid.
- Pride Events (e.g. LGBT Immigration Canada), Toronto and Montreal.
- Gay villages, San Francisco, Toronto, Montreal, Barcelona, Madrid.

Funding and Awards

Moreover, I am particularly thankful for the spontaneous and dedicated support of strangers (members of the LGBT communities in the US, Canada, and Spain) who

have not only provided useful information or moral support but who have housed me as a couchsurfer in Long Beach and driven me to LGBT exhibitions (thank you, Tina and Tonya), provided me with a full-day ride from a conference in Niagara Falls to Montreal for free (merci, Jocelyn), or filled me in on useful subcultural terminology and literature on a napkin in a lesbian bar (thank you, bar tender in Barcelona).

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Preface

Lesbians apply a revolutionary way of thinking that can be beneficial to all actors within our society fighting for equal rights and justice.
Patricia Curzi (ILGA[1] 2013)

We live in turbulent times where the Internet stimulates shifts towards more inter-activity and participation, although often acted out from behind some sort of technical device. Despite swarm intelligence and masses of content within our reach the real connection from human to human needs to happen beyond computer screens. When talking about Lesbian Web Series, online communities and real face-to-face interaction mingle as fans organize fan meetings with their web series creators. In this sense, transnational community building of web series and other online shows reflects typical aspects of new ways of storytelling on the Internet. What makes Lesbian Web Series unique, however, is their female-centred focus, not only regarding the protagonists but also in terms of community building. As today's film industry is still obeying a great variety of patriarchal structures, web series operate independently within digital realms, giving women the opportunity to re-claim space for their own storytelling. Before discussing further details on female identities, it needs to be stated that Lucille Cairns' position on avoiding the term 'lesbian' cannot be shared. She argues that

> [t]hroughout this study every effort will be made to avoid logico-linguistic sole-cisms like 'lesbian film' or, indeed, 'French/ francophone lesbian film'. To anthro-pomorphise a cultural artefact by ascribing it a human and nationalised sexual identity is patently absurd. However, these solecisms do serve as a useful form of shorthand, and I will occasionally have recourse to them in order to avoid a hyper-trophe of admittedly clumsy circumlocutions such as 'lesbianthemed [sic] text' or 'lesbian-connoted text'.
> (Cairns 2006: 3).

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1   ILGA stands for International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (former International Lesbian and Gay Association).

Due to the erasure and ignorance of their history for women in general but lesbian women in particular, who faced the blatant lack of significant denominations and concepts of identity construction, Cairns' views cannot be ascribed to. Naturally, a film (or a web series) itself cannot be 'lesbian' in the sense of taking on human qualities. However, if only the term web series was used, this could be misunderstood as a generalization comprising all web series and not explicitly referring to Lesbian Web Series and their specifics like in the present study. Considerably different from Netflix or Hulu-streamed online shows that resemble TV series in quality, budgets, length of duration, etc., Lesbian Web Series represent more LGBT community involvement, closer interaction with fans, and a much smaller but ever more dedicated audience[2].

Censorship in terms of erasure, as mentioned above, not only affects print media or the film and television industry but also plays a role in the new media economy. Regarding certain areas of research, even in academia we are far from having an all-access pass to information. Information is power. Exchange of information therefore is the gateway to creating powerful new ideas and building new communities. Since in Austria we do not have access to a great a variety of internationally published information, one has to step out of his or her comfort zone and collect it. LGBT archives[3] contain pieces of history (and herstory) which for over hundreds of years have been eliminated, banned or remained unpublished and hidden.

Lesbian Web Series break free from storytelling between the lines as theses female identities are represented as a given fact, not an elliptic space that leaves room for interpretation, for 'lesbian reading', even though there is no doubt about different receptions depending on (sub)cultural knowledge and resonance in oneself. Truth be said, the coming out narrative emerges in a web series every now and then, mostly depending on the age of the characters. Web series about teenagers show what most teenagers do: they are trying to figure out their identity, develop a sense of belonging, and discover their sexuality. However, the coming out narrative plays a more crucial role in actual community building processes when women come together and share their stories as an integral part of lesbian subcultures.

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2   The lack of and hunger for lesbian images makes lesbian communities dedicated viewers. This phenomenon also applies to lesbian-themed books (published by small LGBT presses) which "sell for decades" (Innes 1995: 33).

3   Protecting and conserving lesbian sources poses a variety of difficulties. In the past, biographers and family members frequently omitted traces of lesbian history based on social pressure, shame, and legal consequences. Additionally, some female authors such as Virgina Woolf self-censored their work out of fear of being incarcerated like fellow author Radcliffe Hall (cf. Simonis 2009: 41).

As an Austrian researcher with only a small amount of budget (despite the funding received) to travel, collect data, and visit libraries that offer LGBT content, I am aware of the fact that I am denied access to many articles that do exist on lesbian images in media and popular culture in general. Lesbian Studies, let alone LGBT Studies in a broader sense, have not been institutionalized in Austria so far and still figure among Gender Studies (often disguised as a Queer Studies section) or a variety of other interdisciplinary studies. Particularly, the Romance Language departments seem to lack research and classes focusing on LGBT or Queer Studies in Hispano- and Francophone contexts, compared to the American Studies departments where Queer Studies[4] have at least been somewhat included into the academic discourse. Lesbian Web Series do not only evoke social advancement in cultural and identity-related aspects but also a more central positioning of transmedia texts in popular culture. Moreover, patriarchal structures in academia facilitating the devaluation of female cultural production in all its multitude have to be questioned and challenged.

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4   "Lesbian and Gay Studies is a system of inquiry that examines the roles of same-sex desire across and among cultures and histories. Queer Studies views sexuality not as a stable category of identification or as merely a series of physical acts, but sees desire itself as a cultural construction that is central to the institutionalization and normalization of certain practices and discourses that organize social relations and hierarchies. Together, the two constitute a field whose best work often weaves together both types of analysis. Lesbian/ Gay/ Queer Studies insists on a pluralistic, multicultural, and comparative approach in its negotiation within national, racial, ethnic, religious, economic, gender, and age-defined communities. More than a response to this demographic imperative, this field actively seeks to collapse fields of inquiry, to reveal contradictions and confrontations within and among disciplines, and to suggest a new model for academic study within the university. Its development has paralleled the fields of women's studies and race studies, emerging as a separate area of inquiry in the 1980s, although much work was being done by individual scholars prior to that time. The various names of already institutionalized programs in the field – 'Sexuality Studies', 'Queer Studies', and 'Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered Studies' – reflect the plurality of the field's methodological approaches. The field traverses the arts, humanities, and the social sciences, including literary theory, film theory, cultural and social history, psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science, theater, economics – as well as the natural sciences – biology, epidemiology, immunology, genetics. Its antecedents can be traced back to the emergence of 'sexology' as a legitimate field of academic investigation and scholarship in the nineteenth century. Sexology coincided with the institution of many now-traditional scientific and humanistic disciplines within the academy. The rationalization of knowledge into discrete disciplines corresponded with the construction of 'the homosexual' within these newly emerging discourses as a crime, an illness, a person, and a problem to be solved. In Lesbian/ Gay/ Queer Studies, heterosexuality and homosexuality are viewed as identities and social statuses, as categories of knowledge, and as languages that frame what we understand as bodies; as such, the domain of inquiry transcends traditional disciplinary constructs and demands new forms of scholastic endeavors." (CLAGS 2015).

In summing up, Lesbian Web Series introduce a great variety of strong in-depth female characters, and offer a diverse perspective on subcultural identity constructions across national borders. This is mostly due to another interesting aspect offered by this corpus: the medium itself. The medium is rather new, it is still searching for rules and definitions while at the same time enabling creative freedom far from censorship standards TV series have to face. New web series festivals have started to emerge worldwide within the last years and are already about to steer the entire film industry into a different direction. Interestingly enough, the economic crisis led to cultural cutbacks in media industries, and thus, influenced the migration from television shows towards the web.

Introduction

I think, the way forward with women is with women. I think that's how we do it.
(Wayne Callies at Comic Con 2012, [07:25 min.])

Admittedly, this introduction has been a constant rewriting process as LGBT politics keep changing frequently on an international scale, especially within the last decades. When looking at the economic and also artistic power of the film industry in the US, it becomes clear that also in terms of LGBT history and representation in the media, its influence functions not only on a national level but reaches out to numerous LGBT people across the globe.

It has only been a few decades from the Lesbian and Gay Movement to marriage equality – and back in some places. No right can be taken for granted, in particular not as women, and certainly not as lesbian women, as dependence on patriarchal structures is still prevailing. When conducting research on Lesbian Web Series, it became very obvious that the 'personal is political'. The discourse on lesbian identities and narratives is still not fully considered self-evident within the main academic fields and has provoked numerous scholars to oppose this project in dubious and homophobic ways. It was a conscious decision to leave the term 'lesbian' in the book title and not to eliminate it only for easy access to research funding. Contributing to lesbian erasure whilst wanting to promote lesbian visibility was not a compromise one should be willing to make. To operate from within this discourse field, from within this hierarchy where women's matters – and hereby particularly those with additional axes of difference that deviate from the norm and still have yet to enjoy an equal amount of academic attention – means to be fully aware that, even if not intended, political and social norms play an essential role in the preparation and funding process before even being able to start the actual work.

‘Lesbian’ vs. ‘Queer’ Approach

Susana López Penedo's (cf. 2008: 13) book *El laberinto queer. La identidad en tiempos de neoliberalismo*[1] sums up best the different angles of Queer Theory as well as queer activism and queer reading in academia. She points out how the term ‘queer[2]’ used in a self-descriptive way as an identity mainly relies on sexual practices[3] to deviate from the norm (not only the heterosexual norm but also non-fetish sexuality, etc.) and how ‘queerness’ focuses on the individual rather than the collective. This makes queer[4] activism even more complex as activism works better in groups, united for similar causes over a longer period of time. Queer activism in this respect is seen as working together only momentarily for a common cause in which each participant has an individual interest. Furthermore, queer activists harshly criticize the Lesbian and Gay Movement for not sufficiently recognizing the differences of e.g. race, class, and ethnical backgrounds among lesbians. Omission of these aspects through generalization happens as a result of invisibility (cf. López Penedo 2008: 141, cf. Simonis 2009: 66). However, visibility can be created more effectively in groups making an appearance as lesbian activists more successful and more lasting than individually-centred queer activism.

Queer Theory proposes hybridization (cf. López Penedo 2008: 19) as an approach towards (individual) identity, looking at the differences of each individual respectfully which at the same time making it harder to form a collective, which is, however, necessary at times to establish e.g. equal rights among a mostly heteronormative society. Moreover, queer theorists renounce the category of identity as they understand it as an exclusionary one because it supposedly only focuses on one identity variable of an individual (thereby neglecting other intersectional components). Queer Theory, as explained by López Penedo (cf. 2008), therefore is not suitable for a closer analysis of lesbian identity in Lesbian Web Series. Certain aspects, however, can be read through the lens of queerness, e.g. in terms of power relations and hierarchies between certain characters. On the other hand, to analyze identity itself, a queer lens is not favourable due to its individualistic identity approach. Moreover, as the queer focus lies on actual sexual practices, the aspect of identity formation based on feelings and a sense of belonging (and collective identity) without any sexual experience is not acknowledged in this approach.

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1   Engl. *The Queer Labyrinth. Identity in Times of Neoliberalism.*
2   Originally, the term ‘queer’ was used as an insult against members of the LGBT community but reclaimed by some of its members for self-identification purposes and to convey a positive meaning of pride against homophobia (cf. López Penedo 2008: 18).
3   These sexual practices however are the product of socio-historical processes (cf. López Penedo 2008: 13).
4   The term ‘queer’ was once on the list of "derogatory and hateful terms" similar to "nigger" (GLAAD 2012: additional page x, no number) and has drastically changed its meaning over the course of the last 20 to 30 years. ‘Lesbian’ still remains the most constant, accepted term.

Sociohistorical Proveniences of Lesbian Identities

The development of a positive identity for lesbian women started when lesbian representations were no longer almost invisible aspects of cultural life of the heterosexual mainstream. Examining historical details of the emergence of these images and how they have changed after important incidents such as the Christopher Street Day (CSD), also called Rainbow Parade or Pride events today, was required for this study. Today the CSD is celebrated worldwide to remember the riots that took place in the bar Stonewall Inn in New York's Christopher Street in June 1969. The extremely violent police action against homosexuals in this gay bar marked the beginning of Gay Prides[5] in the US. As a starting point of the Gay Movement, the CSD has also become an important date to be preserved in the collective memory of lesbians, supporting a positive identity compared to the mainly negative psychological approaches which had been labelling lesbianism as an "illness".

In the 1970s and 1980s the Feminist Movement strengthened the position and claims of women in general and therefore also contributed to the emerging Lesbian Movement seeking visibility in society. But it was only in the year 2005 that Canada and Spain legalized same-sex marriage in contrast to the US where the federal government has only recognized it under the Obama administration in 2015. Such governmental decisions strongly influence the constructions of identity of lesbian women living in those countries, and deeply affect their private lives.

Field Research in the US, Canada, and Spain

Due to the transnational and transcultural nature of this research field and due to the fact that lesbian memory spaces such as LGBT archives and museums mainly exist outside Austrian borders, it was essential to collect necessary sociohistorical and cultural data in each of the – in their early beginnings from 2007 onwards – main Lesbian Web Series' production countries: the US, Canada, and Spain. Moreover, for understanding in what ways attending LGBT social events[6] positively affects shaping lesbian identity, it was crucial to take part in LGBT film festivals,

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5   Politically motivated parades where people demonstrate for equal rights beyond the heteronormative discourse and discriminating laws.

6   "[H]aving gay friends and attending gay social events appeared to reinforce positive gay identity, which in turn predicted self-esteem, psychological well-being and adjustment. Similarly, Miranda and Storms (1989) found that self-labeling as lesbian/ gay was related to satisfaction with lesbian/ gay identity which in turn was associated with psychological adjustment. It is noteworthy that achieving a positive minority identity is not only important for LGBs: having a positive *ethnic* identity has also been shown to predict psychological well-being in ethnic minorities (Martinez & Dukes, 1997)" (Luhtanen 2002: 88).

screenings, panel discussions, and Pride[7] events to study symbolic acts, the sub-cultural practices of subtexting as well as the application of lesbian symbols.

For these purposes, writing a field journal was primarily used when attend-ing Pride events (in Montreal and Toronto), visiting gay villages (in San Francisco, Montreal, Toronto, Madrid, and Barcelona), LGBT/ Queer film festivals (the Inside Out LGBT Film Festival in Toronto, the LesGaiCineMad in Madrid, and the Festival Internacional de Cinema Gai i Lèsbic in Barcelona) and an open-air screening (in Montreal's gay village, organized by the Archives gaies du Québec), the lesbian so-cial event The Dinah (including the Battle of the Lesbian Web Series and Dinah Film Night, including the screening of *Second Shot* in Palm Springs), and LGBT-related archives, bookstores, and exhibitions (the Historical Society in Long Beach offered an exhibition on local LGBT history, the ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives in Los Angeles had no available exhibition during the archives consultation, the CLGA – Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives including an LGBT exhibition in Toronto, the Casal Lambda Centre de Documentació including lesbian film screenings and the Librería Cómplices in Barcelona, as well as the A Different Life Librería in Madrid's gay village Chueca).

The Significance of Representation

Without a doubt, web series are increasingly 'coming out' right now. Due to the strong media representation of gay teenagers' suicide attempts in North Amer-ica in 2010, not only lesbian gay bisexual transgender (LGBT) related organizations have recognized the importance of public representation. A single video by the US-American author Dan Savage and his partner released in 2010 initiated campaigns such as the It Gets Better Project to encourage young people to come out and to build a strong identity. By 2011 the campaign had already managed to gain interna-tional attention. The Canadian social democrat Jack Layton, e.g. contributed with a bilingual video message, or Canadian LGBT organizations[8] such as the Ontario Rainbow Alliance of the Deaf submitted its video in Sign Language, all cooperating in the movement against homophobia. The invisibility of lesbian life, deeply rooted in its history, is finally starting to change into an international visibility of lesbian

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7   Pride events worldwide reflect the political situation of each country concerning rights for LGBT people. While in Croatia rocks were thrown at people attending Pride and they were yelled at in 2011, Russia totally eliminated Pride in 2012 after numerous violent incidents over the preceding years. Spain on the other hand has shown a great amount of support for its LGBT community in recent years, e.g. when a priest hissed the rainbow flag on top of his church during Pride events and the media has constantly stimulated the current discourse on Pride events in Madrid.

8   López Penedo (cf. 2008: 90) recognizes the significant role the first gay and lesbian organi-zations have played and are still playing in creating and shaping LGBT communities.

women because of, among other factors, the web and its social network options to unite, exchange, and grow into a transnational community.

This project aims to prove that Lesbian Web Series reflect and employ common symbols which transnationally represent lesbian cultures through their characters. These symbols support and represent its 'collective memory' ('cultural' and 'communicative memory'; cf. Halbwachs 1935/ 1950, Assmann 1988, 2005) and are therefore imperative for the lesbian community which comprises and produces essential cultural artefacts. The technical quality of the Lesbian Web Series corpus may vary but at their core they contribute to visibility regardless of storyline or artistic talent. These female-centred online series tell their stories of identity processes, inclusion, belonging, and love – deeply human-rooted emotions.

This research opts for an interdisciplinary perspective on the recent phenomenon of Lesbian Web Series, investigating how this new format facilitates the construction of lesbian identity and its representations through immediate transmedia storytelling and the visibility of lesbian life in a positive light. Opposing the lesbian death trope by replacing it with a variety of complex, strong, and independent female characters, web series shift the common image of lesbian women from the margins into the centre of society. Formerly depicted as the mentally ill, or more recently as side characters that only last a few episodes, lesbian women are now protagonists at the driver seats of their storylines.

Female identity construction is considered as a fluid process, rather than separated linear stages, and while identity is oscillating in and out of lesbian communities, expanding online, web series strengthen coming out narratives which finally bring both characters and audience alike onto a stage of identity stabilization. Transnational communities build temporally around Lesbian Web Series due to the high agency of their audiences. Interaction is crucial within this participatory culture, provoking engagement, nourishing subcultural production, stimulating identity formation, and vice versa.

Lesbian Web Series' key aspects comprise audiovisuality, authenticity, fictionality, narrativity, seriality, transnationality, and transmediality. Furthermore, they originate in the video platform YouTube due to the emergence of the first web series in 2007, which already presented a female protagonist (although not specifically lesbian). The Spanish web series *Chica Busca Chica* (2007), *Apples* (2007), and the US-American invention *Girl Trash!* (2007) quickly followed suit, while almost simultaneously in other parts of Europe, Latin and North America also productions started for *Anyone But Me* (2008), *B.J. Fletcher Private Eye* (2008), *Seeking Simone* (2009), *Venice The Series* (2009), *Plan V* (2009), *Girl/Girl Scene* (2010), *Out With Dad* (2010), *Féminin/Féminin* (2014), *Notas Aparte* (2016), and many more. Lesbian Web Series have now turned into a transnational phenomenon with series emerging in Italy (*LSB The Series*, 2013), Australia (*The Newtown Girls*, 2012), and recently in France

(*Les Goudous*, 2016), New Zealand (*Pot Luck*, 2016), India (*The Other Love* Story, 2016), Belgium (*La théorie du Y*, 2016), and Great Britain (*Different For Girls*, 2017).

The Spanish *Chica Busca Chica* and its movie sequel *De Chica En Chica*, *Notas Aparte*, the US-American *Venice The Series* and its soap opera 'backstory' Otalia (edited from *Guiding Light*), the Anglocanadian *Out With Dad*, *Seeking Simone*, and the Francocanadian *Féminin/Féminin* form the main corpus to encode strategies of lesbianism in their opening scenes. Furthermore, to demonstrate that lesbian mirror scenes had already been existing plentifully on television before the emergence of web series, we will also take a look at respective scenes on the US-American show *Fringe*, the British drama *Lip Service*, the Canadian fantasy drama *Lost Girl*, and the German soap opera *GZSZ*.

By means of summarizing the effects Lesbian Web Series have on their audiences, we will further broach the lesbian gaze, community building mechanisms, and audience migration from the television towards the web drawing on the example of the musical memory motif on the US-American soap opera *Guiding Light* and the Lesbian Web Series *Venice The Series*.

Lesbian Web Series narrate identities in a digital transmedia online space, connecting all of the abovementioned countries (and more) through their ways of streaming, distribution, audience engagement, and their efforts to increase accessibility (often free of charge). Some fans even claim they have saved their lives.