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Lisa Ben and Queer Rhetorical Reeducation in Post-war Los Angeles

Katelyn S. Litterer

University of Massachusetts Amherst

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Lisa Ben and Queer Rhetorical Reeducation in Post-war Los Angeles

A Dissertation Presented

by

KATELYN S. LITTERER

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

September 2020

English
Lisa Ben and Queer Rhetorical Reeducation in Post-war Los Angeles

A Dissertation Presented

by

KATELYN S. LITTERER

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English Department
DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to the most fascinating woman I know. I am blessed and honored to share your story, Edythe Eyde, Lisa Ben, Tigrina.

What is remembered, lives.
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First and foremost, I want to thank my chair, Dr. Rebecca Dingo, for guiding me through the process of writing a dissertation. I feel incredibly lucky to have worked with you, and I have learned much about research, writing, and revising that I will carry with me to future writing projects. Thank you for your patience and kindness as I navigated the process of dissertating with chronic pain and illness, and thank you for your support from the beginning of my decision to pursue starting a business versus going on the market—you helped me to feel very empowered! I’ve had a lot of fun working with you!

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ABSTRACT

LISA BEN AND QUEER RHETORICAL REEDUCATION IN POST-WAR LOS ANGELES

SEPTEMBER 2020

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“Lisa Ben and Queer Rhetorical Reeducation in Post-war Los Angeles” combines historiography and queer rhetorical analysis to examine the ways that discourse circulated and rhetorically educated audiences and readers about homosexuality in post-war Los Angeles, California (and the wider United States), a time and place that was influenced by dominant discourses around censorship, morality, and nationalism. I examine historical documents, such as newspaper articles, song lyrics, films and plays, and magazine articles, and I put these in conversation with multiple texts by one woman: Lisa Ben. Ben is a figurehead in this dissertation because she endeavored to rhetorically reeducate readers and audiences about the sexological and homophobic discourses that circulated in her lifetime (1921-2015). By arguing that Ben performs queer rhetorical reeducation through generating and circulating texts that both critique and disrupt dominant discourses around “the homosexual,” my dissertation engages queer rhetorical analysis to extend feminist recovery efforts and thus reads Ben’s writing as a move to rhetorically educate readers in the context of strict rules for discourse circulation about sexuality.
I argue that Lisa Ben interrupts the dissemination of dominant discourses about homosexuality by circulating alternative texts that expose and critique power within discourses about normality and abnormality, offering a queer alternative to such messages, and putting that alternative into circulation. Finally, I extend this queer rhetorical reeducation to today, imagining how I and other queer historians, rhetorical scholars, and creatives may carry the torch of queer rhetorical reeducation in the future by historicizing Lisa Ben and her rhetorical contributions.
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CHAPTER 1

RHETORICS OF HOMOSEXUALITY: EDUCATION, CIRCULATION, AND SEXOLOGY

Introduction

When my friends and family ask me what “rhetoric” means, I usually default to the well-worn Aristotelian definition: the art of persuading someone. As a rhetorical scholar, I am fascinated with rhetoric’s power to educate and influence both individuals and masses. For example, every semester I taught Composition to undergraduates, I secured my pedagogical authority by teaching my students the ancient-yet-still-useful rhetorical appeals of ethos, pathos, and logos. These rhetorical appeals seemed irrefutable to my students, as if they were comparable to mathematical equations they might learn in their Statistics class. I convinced my students that proper application of these appeals could rhetorically persuade their audiences, and I proved this by grading how well they replicated the appeals in their writing for invisible audiences we both agreed they were writing to convince (while we were both keenly aware that I was the ultimate audience). At the end of each semester, my students left my class with my permission and encouragement to construct convincing arguments, but even more so (I hope), with awareness that rhetoric is everywhere, within every text and conversation, and that as a result they're consistently being bombarded by people or organizations that want to rhetorically convince them to think, act, buy, or perform in an intended way.

My simultaneous suspicion and awe of rhetoric’s power to educate extends beyond my role as a teacher to motivate this dissertation. In this document, my captivation with rhetoric’s siren song coalesces with my commitment to recovering,
preserving, and circulating queer history, specifically of one lesbian rhetor, writer, and musician: Edythe Eyde. Before I go further, I would like to acknowledge that Eyde preferred to be referenced in writing by her pen name, Lisa Ben, and thus I will use that name in my dissertation. Ben’s mid-twentieth century oeuvre is perfect subject matter for a dissertation fueled by an interest in rhetoric’s power to educate audiences for two key reasons. First, dominant, pathologizing discourses about homosexuals rhetorically circulated across genres during the 1940s-1960s.¹ Second, Ben was keenly aware of the ways in which that discourse educated its audiences via rhetoric, and thus she composed her own texts about homosexuals as a critical, alternative reeducation for her homosexual audiences. While queer and feminist rhetorical scholars have looked at examples of rhetorical education in alternative discourse practices, they have not yet specifically looked at how someone queered rhetorical reeducation.

As a historiographer of rhetoric, I am interested in studying the ways that Ben constructed and circulated her texts and their messages. Through this dissertation’s analysis, I uncover valuable knowledge about how one lesbian rhetor utilized writing and rhetoric to simultaneously circulate homosexual content and undermine the monopoly dominant discourse held in popular and professional texts, including literature, films, songs, journalism, and other widely consumed messages. My study of Ben’s queer rhetorical reeducation methods extends previous rhetorical scholarship and offers rhetorical scholars a new understanding of rhetorical education practices within historical and contemporary contexts.

¹ I define discourse as evaluations of evidence and constructions of knowledge or ethos within circulated discussions and publications.
**Who Was Lisa Ben?**

Ben was a lifelong writer. She was born on November 7, 1921 in San Francisco and was raised as an only child by an insurance salesman father and homemaker mother on an apricot ranch in Los Altos, CA. Ben became fascinated with creative writing (in particular science fiction) and playing the violin at a young age, and she continued to hone her talents as a writer and musician throughout her entire life. She attended two years of undergraduate study at Mills College, dropped out, and then continued her studies at a local business college (Gershick 42, 43). In 1945, lured by its busy science fiction community and desiring to move away from her overbearing parents, Ben relocated to Los Angeles. Under the penname “Tigrina” or “Tigrina the Devil Doll,” she served as secretary for the Los Angeles Science Fiction Society, wrote poetry, fiction, and “filk” (science fiction music), and edited science fiction journals. Although Ben didn’t enjoy working as a professional secretary, she held that career until she retired. This enabled her to earn and save enough money to purchase her own house, which she lived in with numerous cats she had rescued. Ben’s love for felines threads through her archived papers, ranging from stationary with specialized cat themed stamps to poems and comics with kitty characters to a photo of Ben’s cats at a movie studio audition.

In the 1940s, Ben worked as a secretary for the RKO movie studios. Ben told Zsa Gershick in her interview for *Gay Old Girls* that her boss had stated “‘I don’t care what you do, as long as you look busy. If you get your work done, then you can type personal letters or anything like that, but I don’t want you sitting around reading books or

---

2 While I don’t focus on it during my three main body chapters, I will discuss Ben’s science fiction in my conclusion when I discuss the ways her history continues to circulate.
magazines…” So I devised this little magazine…” (48). The magazine Ben is referring to is *Vice Versa*, the first recorded lesbian magazine in the United States. The title *Vice Versa* is practically synonymous with Ben’s name in queer histories, and queer historians have praised *Vice Versa* as a precursor and model for later lesbian magazines. Ben wrote nine issues from June 1947 through February 1948, typing and running copies through her typewriter with carbon copy paper to produce a total of 12 copies per issue. At first, she circulated copies of *Vice Versa* at the If Café, a lesbian bar, and via mail, but ceased after being warned by a friend that she may get in trouble with the law if she was caught mailing copies (49-50). While Ben may have been unaware at first of the possible repercussions to circulating *Vice Versa*, she encourages other lesbians in the July 1947 issue to keep the magazine “just between us girls!” and she maintains anonymity throughout all nine issues, referring to herself as a reviewer or editor instead of listing her name (Ben, “Just Between Us Girls” 2).

Along with writing science fiction, poetry, and *Vice Versa*, Ben created lyrics and music. While she wrote and scored original songs, she is remembered most for producing gay parodies of popular songs, which she performed in lesbian and gay clubs to homosexual and heterosexual audiences. Additionally, Ben joined the Los Angeles chapter of the lesbian organization Daughters of Bilitis (D.O.B.) in the 1950s and wrote for *The Ladder*, the D.O.B.’s publication that ran from 1956-1972. Although it is often noted that Ben developed her pseudonym when she wrote for *The Ladder* (her first choice for a pseudonym for her writing, “Ima Spinster,” was rejected by the D.O.B.), she told Gershick

---

3 For example, see Kate Brandt’s “Lisa Ben: A Lesbian Pioneer” and Eric Marcus’s “Edythe Eyde a.k.a. Lisa Ben.” I will cover this connection of *Vice Versa* to contemporary magazines in my conclusion.
that she created “Lisa Ben” when she had the opportunity to record her music at Capital Records and she wanted to protect her privacy (65).

As this brief reading of her oeuvre shows, Ben was a multitalented, creative, and critical writer, singer, and songwriter. Although she has been the subject of some queer histories, she has been woefully understudied in academic scholarship. What we do know of Ben often remains segregated by the fields of science fiction, LGBTQ journalism, and lesbian music. Ben is entirely unstudied in the field of Rhetoric and Composition, outside of my article for the interdisciplinary Journal of Lesbian Studies, “‘The Third Sex is Here to Stay’: Rhetorical Reconstructions of Lesbian Sexuality in Vice Versa.” While my body chapters in this dissertation focus explicitly on Ben’s creative and critical responses to the circulation of dominant and alternative discourses, my conclusion will extend a study of Ben’s writing to examine the ways we construct her story and history now.

Methods and Methodologies

The ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives in Los Angeles holds Lisa Ben’s papers, which include not only copies of Vice Versa, but also Ben’s creative writing, correspondence, and a wide variety of objects and papers, ranging from her leopard print guitar case to records of Ben’s engagement with local radio shows where she both answered and contributed word puzzles. I interacted with Ben’s archive as a 2018 LGBTQ Research Fellow, funded by the ONE Archives Foundation, Inc.

Ben’s fascination with the power of writing enabled her to generate reading and listening materials for gay and lesbian audiences in the face of pathologized rhetoric within the public sphere. In reading the rhetorical functions and circulations of Ben’s creative and
critical writing and songs, I argue that Ben’s texts served to rhetorically reeducate lesbian (and potentially heterosexual) audiences with an alternative narrative of homosexuality to the ones they encountered in popular media and dominant narratives. By paying attention to the ways Ben’s texts and their rhetorical messages circulate, I propose a new theory of rhetorical reeducation via queer analysis and circulation practices. I refer to this practice as queer rhetorical reeducation because it queers the ways that discourses function rhetorically to educate audiences about sexualities and genders. In practice, queer rhetorical reeducation extends rhetoric beyond the act of composing a text to include the practice of circulating alternative messages and ideas.

Before I delve into examining rhetorical reeducation, I’d first like to briefly review the concept of rhetorical education. In Refiguring Rhetorical Education: Women Teaching African American, Native American, and Chicano/a Students, 1865-1911, scholar Jessica Enoch writes that

[the] relationship between rhetorical education and civic engagement is indeed a pronounced one inside the history of rhetoric, but it is also one that is both complex and problematic. Although many scholars have accentuated the empowering ways that rhetorical education teaches members of a community to participate and enact change, others have highlighted how this kind of instruction also works to sustain asymmetrical power structures and further alienate already marginalized members of the community. (6)

Similarly, Cheryl Glenn reminds us in the introduction to Rhetorical Education in America that “rhetoric always inscribes the relation of language and power at a particular moment, even as it concerns itself with the audience for and purpose of literate acts, with the actual effects of discourse, and with real possibilities rather than ideal certainties” (x).

The relationship between power and rhetoric can of course be manufactured in educational spaces, such as classrooms or universities, but rhetorical scholars have also noted the
functionality of rhetorical education in unexpected public and private spaces. For example, Nan Johnson writes about middle-class women’s rhetorical education via letter-writing instruction manuals in her chapter “Parlor Rhetoric and the Performance of Gender in Postbellum America,” stating that “[the] parlor rhetoric movement did the cultural work of promoting rhetorical literacy while simultaneously reinscribing a cultural agenda to limit the rhetorical space of women’s lives” (109). In my dissertation, I examine the ways that rhetorical education transpires not only via traditional methods, such as books or lectures, but more poignantly via entertainment and journalism.

My study of queer rhetorical reeducation employs a confluence of queer and feminist historiography, rhetorical analysis, and circulation studies. I utilize foundational tenants of feminist historiography—recovery and gender analysis—in my archival and digital studies of Ben’s texts. Feminist historiographers of rhetoric have long re-thought and re-examined key terms and topics in the field by “re-doing” them with an attention to gender, class, race, and intersectional lenses and methods. While I aim to recover Ben’s multi-layered history in one project, I employ a queer rhetorical lens to contextualize Ben’s texts and those with which they interacted (i.e., medical texts, magazines, films, songs, etc.) among discourse in post-war Los Angeles, ranging from the 1940s through the 1960s.

Finally, in discussing my methods and methodologies, it is necessary that I acknowledge that I am writing through the prism of whiteness in my analysis of Ben’s queer rhetorical reeducation in the context of mid-century. Ben overlooks race in her criticism of sexology, surveillance, and identity, and as such, I am not deeply addressing the way racism interacted with the sexological and eugenic discourses that Ben critiques. While I limit my study in this dissertation to Ben’s perspective of discourse as a white,
middle-class lesbian, I envision future studies that further contextualize and complicate the discourses she critiques in relation to race in post-war Los Angeles and the wider United States.

**Queer Rhetoric**

This dissertation utilizes queer rhetorical analysis as outlined in Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes’s “Queer Rhetoric and the Pleasures of the Archive”:

> Queer rhetoric is self-conscious and critical engagement with normative discourses of sexuality in the public sphere that exposes their naturalization and torques them to create different or counter-discourses, giving voice and agency to multiple and complex sexual experiences. …queer rhetorical practice focuses in particular on sexual normalization and the regimes of discursive control through which bodies are disciplined and subjectivities reified as “straight” and others “bent.” (“Introduction”; emphasis original)

Alexander and Rhodes’s queer rhetoric unsettles the ways that readers and audiences engage with discourses about sexuality or gender as “normal.” Queer rhetoric asks participants to acknowledge the existence of hierarchies, oppression, and the ways discourse functions rhetorically to label heterosexuality normal and homosexuality or gender non-conformance abnormal. Additionally, queer rhetoric is generative, extending beyond critique to actual creation of counterdiscourses.

I will use the term *queer* in my dissertation to refer to the action of exposing, critiquing, and disrupting sexual and gender normativity. While the word “queer” had been utilized to mean “homosexual” by the time period I study in my dissertation, other terms were more widely used and circulated across genres—“invert,” “third sex,” etc. Sometimes these terms were meant as slurs or to categorize and pathologize homosexuals, but sometimes they were utilized specifically by homosexuals to describe themselves. It is
important that I not anachronistically apply the word *queer* as an identity marker to times at which it did not carry the same meaning, unless it is marked as such. I also must acknowledge the challenge in contrasting “queer” with “normal.” Jean Bessette reminds us in “Queer Rhetoric in Situ” that we should be careful to read normativity and abnormality onto rhetorical instances in the past. She writes, “[identifying] and imagining alternative possibilities for living depends upon their difference from an often prefigured understanding of normativity that precedes, exceeds, and produces the specific rhetorical context” (151). In other words, we should not apply a binaristic queer/not queer lens to the histories we study. As such, I think it would be a disservice to rhetorical and queer historiography to discount Ben’s rhetorical contributions that may argue seemingly *nonqueer* arguments about lesbians being “just as normal” as heterosexuals.

Studying the circulation of rhetorical reeducation is important because ideas that were meant for particular audiences sometimes end up making their way (albeit often tweaked or altered) to other audiences. For example, readers of professional and alternative texts and literal audiences of films, songs, and plays learned about “the homosexual” through circulated discourses. Most often, the circulated discourse portrayed lesbians in a negative light, a recurring theme in my later chapters. Some circulated ideas or messages were explicit, such as pathological medical classifications or legal punishments for breaking moral laws and codes, but some were more implicit, such as portrayals of lesbians as violent in movies or songs. Because explicit discourses were dominant and widely circulated via implicit means (such as journalism, music, and films and plays) they were often read as *normal*, and thus they held sway over audiences who performed normative gender and sexual behavior. In other words, readers and audiences were likely to read
heterosexual and gender-conforming behavior in texts and in real life as “the way things are.” In doing so, they may not have critiqued the ways that texts function as *rhetorical* or *educational*.

**Queer Rhetorical Reeducation**

The action of “reeducating” is not neutral. When we imagine reeducation of homosexuals, we might conjure up violent acts such as gay conversion therapy, meant to “reform” a homosexual person by forcefully “turning” them heterosexual. Indeed, during the time period I study, we might argue that psychoanalysis served to reeducate homosexual clients by curing their homosexuality—or at least providing a reason for their deviations. Similarly, a reeducation via rhetoric can be dangerous: a skilled rhetorician might slyly convince audiences of an opinion by invoking fear or other manipulative logic, which could be further reinforced by a rhetorician’s ethos or support from dominant institutions.

That being said, marginalized groups can *also* use rhetorical reeducation to expose and disrupt oppressive rhetorical education. Rhetorical scholar Tamika L. Carey’s *Rhetorical Healing: The Reeducation of Contemporary Black Womanhood* examines the ways that the theme of “healing” has functioned to reeducate Black women via self-help publications, literature, films, and plays. For example, nonfiction essays and televised interviews serve to explicitly reeducate readers about self-help topics, whereas fiction more implicitly offers models for healing through character description and actions. Carey’s rhetorical study breaks down the impact that these multiple genres had on audiences and readers, showing the particular rhetorical moves that writers and directors have employed.
to guide Black women consumers to have a particular perspective on their healing experiences.

By arguing that Ben performs queer rhetorical reeducation through generating and circulating texts that both critique and disrupt dominant discourses around “the homosexual,” my dissertation engages queer rhetorical analysis to extend feminist recovery efforts and thus reads Ben’s writing as a move to rhetorically reeducate readers in the context of strict rules for discourse circulation about sexuality. Specifically, I argue that Ben performs queer rhetorical reeducation by critiquing and exposing pathologizing discourse within seemingly “normal” films, songs, and other circulated messages. For example, she labels the use of medical language in films propaganda, names her lesbian sexuality as perfectly normal and something with which she was born versus acquired, and repurposes heterosexual storylines with gay and lesbian characters and content. By circulating her own counterdiscourses for others to read alongside or in place of texts with heteronormative and/or pathologizing content, Ben undermines the discursive monopolization previously held by dominant ideologies about homosexuality.

**Circulation Cycles**

Because I am interested in how Ben’s writing and music altered rhetorical portrayals of the homosexual, I read her texts alongside dominant medical, popular, and legal texts. I will argue that Lisa Ben dislocates the dissemination of dominant discourses about the lesbian by circulating alternative texts that expose and critique power within discourses about normality and abnormality, offering a queer alternative to such messages, and putting that alternative into circulation. This third point (circulating alternative
messages) is key to my theory, because queer rhetorical reeducation works through circulation by offering audiences an alternative example of text or song that both exposes the power dynamic within normative discourse and also exists alongside such texts. Audiences have the option to take up the message and contribute to its further circulation alongside or in place of the previously uncontested dominant, normative discourse. While Ben’s texts might not always be read as educational, I read them as “alternative sites” that “are important because they are set apart as spaces where LGBTQ people can develop the rhetorical and literacy practices necessary to counter rhetorics that support their oppression and discrimination” (Cavallaro).

In order to trace discourse’s circulation and recirculation, I focus on the ways that texts serve to circulate messages and ideas. This focus is drawn from the research of rhetorical circulation scholars such as John Trimbur, James Porter, and Laurie Gries. Trimbur argues in “Composition and the Circulation of Writing” that we should expand our conception of composition and circulation to include delivery practices. He asks that we view circulation as a cycle “that links the production, exchange, and consumption of writing” (190). He also argues that “delivery can no longer be thought of simply as a technical aspect of public discourse”; instead, “[it] must be seen also as ethical and political—a democratic aspiration to devise delivery systems that circulate ideas, information, opinions, and knowledge and thereby expand the public forums in which people can deliberate on the issues of the day” (190). I will argue in my dissertation that Ben’s delivery practices function to circulate “ideas, information, opinions, and knowledge” about homosexuals that counter the normative, dominant ones circulated in popular and medical discourses.
James Porter discusses digital circulation practices in “Recovering Delivery for Digital Rhetoric,” but his analysis is applicable to other forms of circulation. For example, Porter says that composers make “rhetorical decisions” to choose the “most effective way to distribute a message” (214). He describes distribution as “the decision about how you package a message to send it to its intended audience” and he reads circulation as “the potential for that message to have a document life of its own and be re-distributed without your direct intervention” (214). Note that Porter highlights the life of a particular message in these descriptions, similar to Trimbur’s call for democratic delivery of ideas. While Porter focuses on the circulation of messages within cyberspace, I apply his theory to rhetorical decisions to give an idea a “document life” through circulating a text by hand or by voice. For example, Ben writes in Vice Versa that lesbian readers should circulate the magazine to other lesbians once they have read the issue. By typing up instructions for circulating Vice Versa by hand in 1947, Ben suggested a circulation path for the ideas within that could navigate restrictive censorship laws. Interestingly, xeroxed copies of Vice Versa have found themselves archived in the ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, continuing the tactile circulation of Ben’s messages and ideas from homosexual readers in the 1940s to homosexual readers and researchers.

While we can read Ben’s intended audiences within her explicit circulation instructions, the actual recirculation of her ideas may have been much more complex. Laurie Gries reminds us in Still Life with Rhetoric that rhetoric consistently shifts. She argues that “...once unleashed in whatever form it takes, rhetoric transforms and transcends...”

Note that we do not have access to reader responses outside of that which Ben includes within Vice Versa or has shared in interviews. I will attempt in my dissertation to acknowledge this difficulty in reading the rhetorical effects of Ben’s writing, and I will use methods such as triangulation to imagine reader responses.
across genres, media, and forms as it circulates.... Rhetoric also moves in nonlinear, inconsistent, and often unpredictable ways within and across multiple networks of associations” (7). Gries’s rhetorical study in *Still Life* focuses on the circulation of an image (the Obama Hope painting), and so the movement she discusses differs from the tactile and aural circulation I mention in my dissertation. Nevertheless, I am interested in the ways that Ben’s rhetoric transforms and is repurposed, an idea that will be central to my dissertation’s final chapter.

While these three scholars focus on different topics within circulation studies (classroom, digital, and iconographic), they all consider how ideas and messages circulate and morph through delivery, distribution, and through audience reception and re-circulation. They argue that rhetorical decisions affect multiple stages of the composition/circulation process, and I will also use this framework to study the circulation cycles of discourse about homosexuals.

**Chapter Descriptions**

In the latter half of this introduction, I briefly review the circulation of sexological discourse from dominant, medical texts to broader audiences, specifically examining the way sexological discourse easily morphs to the genre of a magazine article in the 1940s. I begin with this review in an effort to contextualize my studies of the circulation of sexological discourse in particular genres in the following chapters.

In Chapter Two, I expand my analysis to newspaper articles from the 1940s, examining journalists’ extensions of sexology to rhetorically educate the general reading public about homosexual threats via scare tactics, specifically by highlighting perversion
and praising a standard of normativity that was rooted in eugenics and nation building. Having identified the function of rhetorical education in these news sources, I then read Ben’s satirical response to such news accounts in *Vice Versa*, offering her story as a form of queer rhetorical reeducation to *Vice Versa*’s homosexual readers alongside the newspapers.

In Chapter Three, I turn my focus to rhetorical education within popular songs and to queer rhetorical reeducation within Ben’s parodies to those songs. Part of what makes Ben’s parodies so poignant in a study of rhetorical reeducation is that she performed them in public for homosexual audiences, sometimes with heterosexual audiences on the sidelines. My study of Ben’s public performance continues the feminist practice of recovering women’s creations as rhetorical performance. Ben’s music remains public, because we have access to recordings online and to lyrics at the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives. As I will explore in my third chapter, Ben’s music simultaneously functions as a public and counterpublic performance, in that her intention was to speak directly to homosexual audiences, often in gay bars or in private homes at parties for homosexuals.

In Chapter Four, I shift my focus to examine how films and plays rhetorically educated audiences about homosexuality, and I read Lisa Ben’s drama and film critiques as a method for highlighting the rhetorical application of medical ethos in the 1940s and 1950s. More specifically, I argue that Ben’s critical reviews of films and plays educated her homosexual readers by first providing them access to homosexual storylines and second by intentionally critiquing the ways that sexological discourse was circulated under the guise of entertainment.
In Chapter Five, my conclusion, I bring my study full circle by critically engaging with the rhetorical effects of circulating Ben’s history within a contemporary context where dominant and alternative discourses around sexuality and gender continue to have rhetorical implications. In addition to critically reading the ways Lisa Ben’s biography and story have been circulated—ranging from national newspapers to small queer podcasts, science fiction anthologies, bank commercials, and social media—I examine a range of journalism and entertainment, including “top-down” discourses circulated by corporations and government to commercials coopting homosexuality for rhetorical effects. My conclusion efforts to ask us all to remain cognizant of the ways rhetorical reeducation persists, with a hope that queer creators and scholars may continue to adapt Ben’s queer rhetorical reeducation practices for contemporary purposes.

**Circulating Sexology Discourse**

Although medical professionals had separate interpretations of the cause of homosexuality and how to handle it during the early to mid-twentieth century, both congenital (the belief that one has an ailment or illness from birth) and psychoanalytic (the belief that an ailment or illness develops as an emotional result to stimuli) sexological discourse appears in genres beyond those that were generating the dominant discourse in the first place (e.g., doctors, psychiatrists, medical researchers, etc.). I begin with a brief examination of these sexologies and then read how they function in educating readers outside of the medical fields via adaptations of medical discourse and circulation in popular and generalized genres. Opening with a study of medical discourse around homosexuality will enable me to recognize and trace the use of sexological discourse in my chapters on
news journalism, popular film and plays, and music in the 1940s-1960s for purposes beyond the initial scope and audience of sexology. Alongside this historical review of sexology in the latter part of this introduction, I examine a *Magazine Digest* article from 1948 that implores readers to reconceive their opinions of homosexuals via repurposing doctors’ publications, and I put this text in conversation with Lisa Ben’s critique of its use of rhetoric to perpetuate the classification of homosexuals as abnormal.

**Sexual Inversion: From Medical Texts to Popular Texts**

Throughout *Vice Versa*, Ben alternates between calling herself and her readers lesbians, homosexuals, and inverts. Her choice of term often pertains to the genre in which she is composing. The term “invert” is especially important to a study of the medicalized categorization of lesbians at the time. At the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth century, German sexology dominated studies of homosexuality. In classifying the female invert, sexologist Havelock Ellis claimed in *Studies of the Psychology of Sex* that women’s friendships could be expected to verge on sexual relationships in places such as prisons, boarding schools, or factories, where women were in same-sex environments for extended periods of time (128). While such “amusements” were assumed not to be “eminently innocent or wholesome,” Ellis suggested they should not be considered “radically morbid or vicious,” because “they are dominated by the thought that the true sexual ideal is a normal relationship with a man, and they would certainly disappear in the presence of a man” (128). Ellis thus created a dichotomy between “a merely spurious homosexuality and true inversion,” where the “true” invert chooses intimate relationships with women over men (128). While Ellis is often regarded as sympathetic to “true” inverts, it is important to
note the danger in this hierarchy, as it suggested that some lesbians could and would return to heterosexuality. My use of the label “sympathetic” refers to Ellis’s acknowledgment that homosexuality and inversion, while different then the norm of heterosexuality, was perceived as a social abomination. We see this perspective in Ellis’s “Commentary” introduction for the well-known 1928 novel, *The Well of Loneliness*:

> I have read The Well of Loneliness with great interest because—apart from its fine qualities as a novel by a writer of accomplished art—it possesses a notable psychological and sociological significance. So far as I know, it is the first English novel which presents, in a completely faithful and uncompromising form, one particular aspect of sexual life as it exists among us to-day [sic]. The relation of certain people—who while different from their fellow human beings, are sometimes of the highest character and the finest aptitudes—to the often hostile society in which they move, presents difficult and still unsolved problems. The poignant situations which thus arise are here set forth so vividly, and yet with such complete absence of offence, that we must place Radclyffe Hall’s book on a high level of distinction. (qtd. in Doan 6).

Ellis’s opinion of Hall’s characters acknowledges their differences from the accepted norm as well as the general “hostile” public perception of homosexuals. This sympathetic perspective on homosexuality is further emphasized by the discussion of inverts in sexological discourse.

Psychoanalytic theories of homosexuality challenged the congenital “born with” nature of Ellis’s theories, and as more psychoanalytic literature was published and read by clinicians and the general public, lesbians were increasingly cast as undesirable and dangerous within popular culture and dominant discourses. Medical and popular literature regarded some variants of psychoanalysis (for example, that propounded by Wilhelm Stekel and later Irving Bieber) as a cure for homosexuality. For this reason, lesbians reading this literature became aware of the ways that society may expect them to seek
treatment to be made “normal,” and some pathologized themselves as “ill” in an attempt to name their attraction to other women.

For example, a *Time* article from April 17, 1950, titled “The Abnormal,” praises psychiatrists Louis London and Frank Caprio’s text, *Sexual Deviations*. While “The Abnormal” critiqued the “Freudian patter” in *Sexual Deviations*, the *Time* columnist found that “their main conclusions make considerable sense” (88). These conclusions included: “No one is born sexually deviated…. Sexual inversion as a symptomatic disorder in both sexes is curable…. Sexually aberrated individuals can be treated [by] psychoanalytic psychotherapy” (88). While these findings may appear sympathetic to homosexuals’ experiences (there is hope for curing you of your abnormality), they perpetuated a dominant belief that inversion was an illness that should be cured. Lisa Ben repeatedly challenges this call for curing homosexuality throughout *Vice Versa*, but I would like to focus here on one magazine article in particular that aims to rhetorically reeducate its readers about homosexuality via sexological discourse, as well as Ben’s response to this move.

In the February 1948 issue of *Vice Versa*, Ben uses her personal experience to challenge anti-invert discourse in her article “Commentary on a Pertinent Article.” While Ben relies upon an essentialist view of homosexuality here—that it is just as normal as heterosexuality—I read her critique of pathologization as a queer rhetorical move revoking the impact of medicalization by denying its power in categorizing her as ill. Indeed, if publications labeled homosexuals as other than normal, Ben’s disagreement and labelling of herself as normal rhetorically reeducates her readers by offering them the possibility of
disagreeing, too. To read Ben’s critical moves as queer, I’d like to view them via Alexander and Rhodes’s argument that queer rhetoric names a constellation of discursive practices that emerge at different times for different groups in order to articulate resistance to regimes of sexualized normalization. Such strategies seek to remedy the impoverishment of our imaginations, of our sexual and gender imaginary, and to re-introduce into public discourse the imagination of bodies that exceed the normalizations of the juridical, political, medical culture that “fixes” things. (“Queer Rhetoric”)

In her commentary, Ben critiques anti-invert attitudes from medical journalism. She utilizes the concept of normality to defend lesbianism throughout Vice Versa (instead of critiquing “normality” in itself). Her rhetoric remains queer in that she challenges popular conceptualizations and “re-introduce[s] into public discourse” an alternative discourse surrounding inversion.

In “Commentary on a Pertinent Article,” Ben responds to the 1948 Magazine Digest article “Doctors Plead for the Homosexual and Lesbian,” which she deems “sensible, informative” and a “welcome change from the sensational and misinformed accounts which find their ways into the newspapers and prejudice the average reading public” (Ben, “Commentary” 7). She praises the Magazine Digest article for disproving commonly held beliefs that “inverts are criminals or persons of low intelligence,” that they are sex offenders, and that all lesbians are masculine (7–8). Instead, Ben notes that the article encourages readers to differentiate between “invert” and “pervert,” the latter carrying an overtly negative connotation.

Although the term “sex pervert” or “pervert” wasn’t always explicitly tied to homosexuality, we may read it to contextually infer homosexual offenders in news accounts. The image of homosexuals as threats to children circulated across genres and scopes of media, including laws, journalism, and entertainment. In 1927, the Wales
Padlock Law is enacted in New York in response to plays featuring drag and homosexual characters. The law meant to outlaw plays “depicting or dealing with the subject of sex degeneracy, or sex perversion” (“Belasco Theater (Originally Stuyvesant Theater)”). From 1930 through 1961, the Motion Picture Production Code (or Hays Code) ruled that “the sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld. Pictures shall not infer that low forms of sex relationships are the accepted or common thing” and it specifically noted that “sex perversion or any inference to it is forbidden” (Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, Inc. 7). An exception to this rule was the portrayal of homosexuals as violent villains (see my later chapter on film for more on this). In 1947, the year Ben publishes the first issue of *Vice Versa*, citizens saw the initiation of the “Sex Perversion Elimination Program” by the U.S. Park Police, which specifically “target[ed] gay men for arrest and intimidation” (Adkins). These are three examples of many instances where the use of masked language of sex perversion was used to categorize homosexuals as deviant, to control and circulate discourse about homosexuals, and to literally punish homosexuals and those who circulated positive discourse about them.

*Magazine Digest*’s “Doctors Plead for the Homosexual and Lesbian” acknowledges the commonly held public belief at the time that homosexuals were sex perverts and attempts to alter public disdain of homosexuals via summarizing sexologists’ writing for the general audience. The authors write:

> Medical men have sharply divergent views on the subject of homosexuality as to its prevalence, causes, and treatment. And people in general are so alarmed by the repulsive crimes committed by sexual psychopaths—who compose only a negligible percentage of the total numbers of homosexuals—that a rational public discussion on the subject is all but impossible…. Neither pity nor condemnation can help the homosexual. What can help him (or her) is an enlightened public opinion. (“Doctors Plead for” 25; emphasis original)
The authors utilize statements by American and European “medical authorities” to reeducate readers about homosexuals in the capacity of the following questions: “What Is a Homosexual?,” “Are Homosexuals Born or Made?,” “How Prevalent Is Homosexuality?,” “Are All Homosexuals Likely at One Time or Another to Become Sex Offenders?,” “Is Homosexuality More Frequent Among Men Than Women?,” and “Can the Sexual Invert Adjust Himself to Society?” (25-30). One poignant answer to the question about sex offenders comes from the text of Dr. E. A. Bennet:

…the social status of homosexuality implies that the invert is a danger to society. The seducer of boys and girls, be he (or she) homosexual or heterosexual, is clearly a social menace. The number of persons found guilty of such crimes form only a small percentage of the homosexual population. (qtd. in “Doctors Plead for” 28-29; emphasis original)

Although the article appears sympathetic to homosexuals in that it defends them from social stereotypes as child abusers, it still relies on eugenicist language of being afflicted with one’s homosexuality, of being studied as something different than the norm. “The homosexual” becomes a spectacle to be studied by doctors. For that reason, I am intrigued that Ben utilizes the term “invert” to describe lesbians in her response to this article, suggesting that she accepts the categorization of lesbians as inherently different from heterosexuals. However, I believe that unlike the doctors, she torques the meaning of the term for the benefit of homosexual agency in undermining pathologization. Her “Commentary” investigates the pathologization of inversion in two main ways. First, it introduces readers to a text that engages specifically with the science of inversion, thus providing them with ideas for questioning the criminalization of lesbians. Second, it offers readers an alternative method of responding to commonly held beliefs about invert—the use of personal experience as evidence. Through these two actions, Ben engages with the
dichotomy between public heterosexuality as "normal" and lesbianism and inversion as "abnormal," where abnormality is influenced by the ways that publicly held beliefs about inverts are rooted in fear of danger and violence. Through rhetorically positioning herself as a lesbian who rejects the label of perversion, Ben encourages readers of *Vice Versa* to agree with her view that lesbianism is not intrinsically abnormal.

She also urges readers to question the public perception that lesbianism is a consequence of exposure to bad influences that led to self-pity rather than a sense of blameless self-worth. For example, she writes:

> Although Magazine Digest's article is commendable in stating that many inverts are so born and do not later acquire these inclinations, I still feel that too much emphasis is put on the question of outside influence, particularly as concerns those who do not have masculine characteristics. Not only is this stressed in this particular magazine article but among the "gay folk" themselves. Those with a tendency to indulge in self-pity are all too ready to blame it on the environment, restrictions placed upon them in their early years or unpleasant childhood experiences. (9)

By critiquing the psychoanalytic belief that inversion is dependent on "outside influences," Ben encouraged her readers to imagine their homosexuality or inversion outside of medical classifications that encouraged "self-pity."

Ben’s critique challenged a common sense of shame in one’s homosexuality. To illustrate this, she entertained a question from her friend, a lesbian she deemed “an extremely intelligent and successful business woman and an avid student of psychology”: “To what do you attribute your Lesbian inclinations?” (9). Ben’s response is “Why, to nothing…. My feelings in such matters have always seemed quite natural and ‘right’ to me” (9). By rejecting the concept of “Lesbian inclinations” in favor of “feelings” that are “natural” and “right,” Ben counters scientific definitions of lesbians’ experiences and thereby disrupts the power that medical categorization holds over lesbian identity creation.
By refusing to attribute her lesbianism to her environment or childhood, Ben rejects a psychoanalytic label of abnormality and suggests that the invert actually positions herself as abnormal when she accepts stereotypes of inverts as mentally ill and in need of treatment. In rejecting developmental theories of “inclinations,” Ben suggests that “inward ‘psychological’ reflection, which enables us to understand ourselves better, also too often offers a convenient crutch with which to support a lot of half-baked theories” (9). That is, the more lesbians who fall prey to psychoanalyzing themselves, the more weight medical classification will hold over defining lesbian experience.

Finally, Ben critiques the author’s view “that although inverts are not criminals, they are, as he quotes one doctor, ‘an error in the development of the sex mechanism’” (Ben 9). Ben pushes back against classifying the invert as a “‘patient to be studied’ to the ultimate advantage of normal society” and critiques the author’s call to further examine the invert, asking:

“To their advantage…,” yes. But perhaps to our disadvantage? I, for one, consider myself neither an error of nature nor some sort of psychological freak. Friends of similar tendencies with whom I have discussed this article also refuse to regard themselves in this light. Most assuredly some of us might be cases of arrested development—surely it is preferable to be considered such rather than desperate criminals—but still is it not possible that we are just as natural and normal by our standards as so-called “normals” are by theirs? (9–10; emphasis original)

Through these examples, we see that Ben extends her critiques beyond the article itself to question the purpose of pathologizing inversion, and as a result, she performs queer rhetorical reeducation. By positioning herself as normal, she challenges biological classification of abnormality, and by calling on other lesbian friends she knows, she invites her readers into a community that accepts lesbianism as natural and protects it from pathologizing categorization.
Reading this *Magazine Digest* article and Ben’s response to it shows one example of sexological discourse trickling down from medical tomes to articles in a popular magazine. The article synthetized sexologists’ studies and statements and appropriated them in an effort to reeducate readers about how to handle homosexuality as a concept, as well as calling for future studies of these different groups of people. As I will show in my next chapter’s focus on newspapers, this interest in how to handle homosexuals as individuals, groups, or even as a concept, is rooted in the appropriation of sexological discourse to invoke fear and encourage a standard of safety and order via rhetorical education.
CHAPTER 2

THE ROLE OF JOURNALISM IN CIRCULATING DISCOURSE

Introduction

“When homosexuals were first discussed in Time and Newsweek in the late 1940s and ’50s, they were described as “aberrant,” “abnormal,” “abominations,” “corrupt,” “degenerates,” “degraded,” “depraved,” “deviants,” “dirty pansies,” “disgusting,” “evil,” “fairies,” “filthy,” “horrible,” “immoral,” “indecent,” “inverts,” “perverts” and “psychopaths,” “unnatural,” “vile” and “wicked.” Sometimes, these words issued from the mouths of sources—typically, government officials and psychiatrists. But, often, they came from journalists, themselves.”

(Bennett 3)

Building on the analysis of the *Time* and *Magazine Digest* articles in my introduction, I expand my analysis to newspaper articles from the 1940s, examining journalists’ extensions of sexology to educate the general reading public about homosexual threats via scare tactics. Having reviewed the rhetorical education within news journalism, I will read Ben’s satirical response to such news accounts, conceptualizing her piece of fiction as a form of queer rhetorical reeducation for the readers of *Vice Versa* who also were likely to be reading rhetorical scare tactics in the news. Ben’s satire creatively undermines the storytelling practices going on within newspapers at the time when she wrote *Vice Versa*, offering her readers a method for critiquing discourse circulation via circulating a queered account of the original, pathologizing version.

Homosexuals in the News

While my larger dissertation focuses on the ways that dominant, medical discourse circulates, this chapter narrows my study to the ways news journalists rhetorically educate their readers about homosexuals. My analysis of my findings was motivated by two
questions: first, how are sexological terms or theories, which were previously reserved for medical discourse, appropriated or changed as they become a part of public rhetoric via newspapers, and second, for what rhetorical purposes do newspapers discuss homosexuals, either as individuals or as a group. I read Ben’s satire as a response to the rhetorical education of news journalism, and her use of queer rhetorical reeducation helps me to answer these two questions.

My search terms included “sexology,” “sexologist,” “homosexual,” “lesbian,” “sex pervert,” “third sex,” “queer,” “undesirables,” and the names of known sexologists Alfred Adler, Havelock Ellis, Wilhelm Stekel, and Richard von Krafft-Ebing. I narrowed my search’s timespan to 1940 through 1950 for all terms except “sexology” and “sexologist,” which I expanded to 1900 through 1950. Finally, I focused on newspapers tied to Los Angeles, although I did perform a smaller search of large city newspapers, including the New York Daily News. I focused on Los Angeles because this is where Ben and her Vice Versa readers resided. Below, I reference selected articles that performed rhetorical education connected to homosexuality.

I examined the function of sexological terms in journalism from the times I studied because I believe the general reading public were being rhetorically educated via these texts to perceive homosexuals as a threat to national security and to individuals, particularly children. Because readers sought out objective reports in news journalism, we may assume that they trusted the journalists to protect their best interests. However, my reading of news sources from the time suggests that the journalists were employing rhetorical moves to generate fear within readers around homosexuality by highlighting perversion and praising a standard of normativity that was rooted in eugenics and nation building.
Mentions of homosexuality in news journalism show that journalists were assuming and thus creating and reifying a heterosexual readership. We know that not all readers were in fact heterosexual, because Lisa Ben pens a critical response to the journalists’ discussion of homosexuals. Ben challenges the assumption that all news readers are heterosexual and critiques the disparaging content circulated by journalists. Whereas the general heterosexual readership read such news articles to understand who and what homosexuals were, we could argue that Lisa Ben read the news to have a better understanding of how the general public understood homosexuals. Reading journalists’ representations of homosexuals through a critical lens for the ways news educated presumed heterosexual audiences informed Ben’s reeducation practices. An example of this is Ben’s choice to keep anti-invert attitudes in an important satire in *Vice Versa* (versus writing a utopic lesbian fantasy sans discord and violence), a move that rhetorically exposes the connection between medicalized terminology and violence and discrimination.

Why should we care about newspaper reports from over seventy years ago? It is important to recognize the way news journalism reported on homosexuals in the 1940s and 1950s because some news journalism continues to rely on similar rhetorics of sensationalism and fear. In the decades since Ben’s critique of the 1940s news there has been continual rhetorical positioning of homosexuals as threats to national security in journalism, including reports on the Lavender Scare, the HIV/AIDS crisis, the Defense of Marriage Act, and the Don’t Ask Don’t Tell Act. When I use the term “national security,” I refer to the act of nation building, where people considered “outsiders” are represented as threats to the United States and its citizens. For example, many early state-funded studies

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5 My dissertation’s conclusion will further examine instances of contemporary rhetorical positioning of homosexuality in journalism.
of homosexuals were said to have been in service of bettering the lives of American citizens. However, as Jennifer Terry writes in *An American Obsession*, these studies served to valorize and protect heterosexuals as normal by categorizing homosexuals as *abnormal* via the support of eugenics discourse. By tying their motive to protecting citizen’s safety and order, journalists were able to appeal to their readers’ desire to be “normal,” which implied commitment to the protection of their national, state, and local communities.

I noted key themes of safety and order in my study, particularly in terms of the potential dangers homosexuals posed to the public (meaning the normal, heterosexual, newspaper-reading public). This suggested to me that the perception of homosexuals as deviant, dangerous, or ill expanded from the realm of medical diagnosis and was repurposed and circulated by people such as lawmakers and police, who would have been invested in protecting civilian safety and order by upholding a status quo. My findings mirror those of researcher Lisa Bennett, who writes in her report “The Perpetuation of Prejudice in Reporting on Gays and Lesbians: *Time* and *Newsweek*: The First Fifty Years” that “underlying the earliest reporting about homosexuality…was an undisputed—and seeming unquestionable—premise that homosexuals were a problem” (3). In her reading of the 1940s through the 1950s, Bennett notes that

The sources cited for each study were (usually unnamed) officials who represented the institution to which homosexuals were presumably a threat: Army medical officers, for example, were cited in reports that homosexuals were a threat to the military; law enforcement officials in reports that homosexuals were a threat to public safety; and senators in reports that homosexuals were security risks to the government. In short, only one side was represented in any of these stories: the side of those in power. (4)

As my later analyses of Ben’s critiques and reviews will show, Ben is attempting to represent the side of the story that was often silenced or ignored by the vocal, powerful
speakers in the fields of government and medicine. Ben’s attempts to reeducate her homosexual readers via privileging lesbians’ statements about their own lives is particularly poignant when we consider Bennett’s finding of key themes across *Time* and *Newsweek* of diagnosing and treating homosexuality, for which the “chief source” was a psychiatrist (4). What this shows is that sexological perceptions of homosexuals as deviant were propagated by experts outside of the medical field via rhetoric, language, and report styles that fit each speaker’s field of expertise. Multiple selections from the newspapers I consulted in my study relied on the ethos of an expert, including referencing or quoting lawmakers or police. However, I discovered another rhetorical move that was unique to journalists: engaging with citizens as individuals who have agency and a duty to promote safety and order. As I will discuss later in the case of the journalist who went by the name “Petronius Jr.,” this commitment to the “normal” folks can hold a lot of rhetorical impact when the goal is to mark homosexuals as deviant or abnormal threats.

Because I did a keyword search in the newspapers, I was prepared to read the use of my terms within different types of articles and for different uses. I endeavored to read the rhetorical implication of homosexuality across contexts. While the newspapers ranged in the use of my search terms (i.e., in a letter to the editor, in an advertisement, in a classified, in a news story), I identified two rhetorical themes that normalized the call for safety and order: first, scare tactics, which occurred when authors linked homosexuals to other offenders, specifically child abusers; and second, a call for readers to take action, including the rhetorical positioning of author with reader as a combined “we” and the comparison between this “we” and authorities or perpetrators. Both of these practices relied on the effectiveness of presenting violence as potential to occur.
Although I choose not to investigate it fully, as my focus is on the role of scare tactics and calls for reader action, it’s important to note a third observation I made in my analysis of newspaper articles from this time: the use of advertisements for sexology via mail order sales and classifieds for local lectures. If sexologist Alfred Adler’s writing about homosexuals appears on the newsstand next to The Bible and Hamlet, then the literate reading public is led to believe that they should read it—that sexology is common knowledge. This small act is rhetorical education functioning like a well-oiled machine: both out in the open and quiet, delivering a lesson for readers to use to relate and classify homosexuals. I’ll explore the rhetorical effects of two startling advertisements for films with homosexual content in my later dissertation chapter on films and plays.

When a journalist performs one of the rhetorical moves I identified above—scare tactics, calling readers to action, or circulating sexology texts/lectures—they do so from the perspective of a reporter or of a newspaper editor, even if they choose to recirculate the ethos of experts like politicians or police, or of citizens themselves. While journalists may sometimes explicitly admit bias or allegiance to particular campaigns or outcomes, generally readers hope the news will be objective and factual. However, my research into the journalists’ mentions of homosexuality suggests a pattern of rhetorically positioning homosexuals as deviant. Ben acknowledges this in the January 1948 issue of Vice Versa, explaining her impetus for creating a satire where a heterosexual man encounters discrimination like a homosexual would in the late 1940s. In writing this satire, Ben invites her readers to process their emotions alongside her. She writes: “It was not my intention to write such a long ‘short story’, but I was rather irked by recent sensational newspaper accounts containing derogatory remarks about us. Indulging in these fantastic ramblings
provided a harmless release for my outraged feelings” (Ben, “The Whatchama-Column” 15). “Sensational” is a suitable word for describing the ways in which news journalism ramped up public disdain for homosexuals. The most effective use of sensationalism occurs when the writer emphasizes the potential for violence, however vague and nondescript that violence may be.

Education of the reading public functions most prominently through the rhetorical use of potentiality—specifically, the sensationalism of homosexuals as deviants who have and will commit crimes against the “normal” readers. By employing scare tactics, journalists turn up the dial of the possibility that homosexuals will commit violent crimes. In other words, being homosexual automatically presents potential for violence. By presenting potential dangers with vague locations, timelines, and types of violence, journalists invoke fear and a sense of action in their readers. This invites readers to fill in the vacancy with their personal worst fears about what homosexuals could do to them, their family, and their society. When this rhetoric of potentiality is rooted in discourses of eugenics and nation-building, rhetorical education takes place overtly, while the use of sexological discourse may remain quieter, implicit, or hidden. As a result, the reading public circulates sexological prescriptions of homosexuals as inverted, abnormal, and violent, and they do so in support of a state-sanctioned drive for security and order that they hope will benefit them as individuals. Fortunately, Lisa Ben saw through this rhetorical act of aligning homosexuals as offenders, and she undermines it repeatedly throughout Vice Versa. She does this directly via critiques of articles, and more creatively via her satire of sensational news accounts.
Scare Tactics: Linking

One key way sensationalism functioned in periodicals was through scare tactics. The phrase “scare tactics” is a vessel in which I place multiple rhetorical moves that aim to explicitly or implicitly put readers on edge or identify them as possible victims to homosexuals. The general reader was assumed to be heterosexual, and so we may read the use of scare tactics as a move to rhetorically construct and reinforce a heterosexual readership. Scare tactics often educated readers about the potentiality of vague yet violent threats, which I read as a rhetorical move to invoke fear in the reader. One of the key manners in which journalists employed scare tactics in the articles I studied was by grouping homosexuals along with other deviant individuals, including violent or unsavory delinquents, alcoholics, abusers, or mentally unwell people. This grouping method functioned by rhetorically equating homosexuality with these deviances.

In the *Los Angeles Times* December 14, 1947 issue, an article from Palo Alto (Ben’s childhood hometown) titled “You’re Wrong, Quiz Kids Do Get Smarter Later On” links homosexuality to other negative outcomes in an effort to dissuade readers from assuming extremely intelligent youth will result in abnormal adults. Referring to the research of Dr. Lewis M. Terman, who studied gifted young people across the span of 15 years, the article reports that children with high I.Q.s grow up to be “Superior to ‘Normal’: ‘His (or her) chances for successful marriage are equal or superior to the ‘normal.’…He is less liable to become insane, personally maladjusted, alcoholic, delinquent or homosexual” (5). In this one small sentence, the article teaches parents of high I.Q. children that their kids will not only succeed, but that their success is deemed such by avoiding the pitfalls of various negative outcomes—insanity, maladjustment, alcoholism, delinquency, and
homosexuality. We may read the act of aligning undesirable traits as less normal and less than superior as a eugenicist move. Disabilities researcher Lennard Davis acknowledges this method employed by statisticians to categorize people deemed “less”: “The problem for people with disabilities was that eugenicists tended to group together all allegedly ‘undesirable’ traits. So, for example, criminals, the poor, and people with disabilities might be mentioned in the same breath” (35). In the case of the doctor’s quote about “quiz kids,” grouping the homosexual with the psychopathically insane person, the socially irresponsible alcoholic, or the delinquent social deviant suggests that the homosexual shares either an inherent or a chosen unsavory nature that deems him or her unfit.

In a different context, the November 11, 1945 Los Angeles Times article “War Veterans Seeking Motherly Type Girls” groups homosexuals alongside others who struggled with war: “Among the first to break down, according to the authority, were homosexuals, confused isolationists and Middle Westerners who were surprised to find themselves in the middle of a war” (8). These three groups are linked together based on their inability to correctly perform their duties at war, and the article implies that they broke down earliest when confronted with war due to not fitting in as a standard soldier. While “Middle Westerners” may seem placid in its detailing of a literal geographical location, there is an implied deficiency that connects to eugenicist language around the Midwest being backward. While the Midwest here is presented in contradiction to nation-building (its members were unpatriotic, not masculine, couldn’t handle war), it also is read as in need of intentional nation-state building. Although noting an event two decades earlier, we read this call to educate Midwesterners about nation-building in Davis’s writing on “fitter families” contests: “In Kansas, the 1920 state fair held a contest for ‘fitter
families’ based on their eugenic family histories, administered intelligence tests, medical examinations, and venereal disease tests” (37). Davis quotes an actual brochure for the contest that describes the awards as “‘worth more than livestock sweepstakes. …For health is wealth and a sound mind in a sound body is the most priceless of human possessions’” (Kelves 62, qtd. in Davis 37-38). I read a similar implication in the news article that Midwesterners may be lacking in intelligence of how to process the war, and thus needed education on how to be a “good citizens.” Also, the article calls for “motherly type girls” to help support the veterans, suggesting that the men were similar to children in need of a parent figure. Similarly, the isolationists are confused and thus not in line with the shared goal of national security. In contrast, homosexuals receive no set location nor modifying adjective to describe their action, which suggests that their homosexuality itself made them unfit to fight and caused them to break down.

When I highlight the linking practice in these two articles, it is easier to recognize the rhetorical education in practice. The articles show use of rhetoric to present the homosexual as a person whose identity is undesirable simply through linking them to other people with negative attributes. While in the first example we may read “homosexual” as an adjective, we may also read it as an identity marker: the homosexual, the alcoholic, the delinquent. The author of the first piece does not explore actions committed by the people mentioned, so “homosexual” takes on a negative attribute simply through its position on the list of deviants. In the second example, the word homosexual functions not as an adjective, but rather as a categorization of an undesirable American man, the kind who would break down in the face of defending his country.
It is worth asking the purpose of presenting gays and lesbians as deviant and dangerous. In classifying homosexuals as outsiders, journalists (as well as doctors, lawmakers, and police) relied on the power of normality as a positive trait rooted in protecting and building a nation of fit, healthy, capable, and reliable citizens. Men who were perceived to behave like “men” and women who were perceived to behave like “women” were those who procreated and raised American families. As we see in the two examples above, equating homosexuals with other subnormal groups perpetuated popular eugenicist theories of a fit, powerful nation. People who were delinquent, alcoholic, or mentally ill were seen as a strain on American productivity, and linking homosexuals with these such unfortunate deviants rhetorically casts homosexuals as un-American. As I’ll show in my next analysis of the use of homosexual as an adjective descriptor, this classification gains momentum when it is tied to the threat of violence.

Scare Tactics: Homosexual as Adjective

Another way journalists categorized homosexuals was through using the word “homosexual” as an adjective to describe a deviant or dangerous individual. A particularly interesting example of this happens in the news reports on the well documented murder of heiress Patricia Lonergan by her husband Wayne Lonergan. Lonergan’s sexuality is repeatedly referenced when he is introduced to the reader. Note how his sexuality mirrors his other identity markers in the following three quotes from separate New York Daily News reports on his trial in 1944:

February 24, 1944: “In an unprecedented maneuver—his own non-appearance and the sending of an explanatory telegram from Canada, Edward V. Broderick, counsel for the homosexual defendant, turned the long-awaited trial drama into a farce of the Vanishing Lawyer” (Crosson and Robinson 3).


Lonergan’s identity as a homosexual is consistently foregrounded: he is a homosexual Canadian, homosexual defendant, homosexual cadet. This move is rhetorical, in that it primes readers to connect his crime with his homosexuality. Although a key argument in Lonergan’s trial was that police had physically coerced him to admit to murdering his wife, his sexuality was repeatedly highlighted in news reports about the murder. Thus, readers were presented with a news-sanctioned connection of homosexuality to violence. While Lonergan sought retribution in the court in reference to the crime of murder, the newspapers had already labeled him as deviant.

When we read the three *New York Daily News* examples together, we notice the trope of using homosexual as an adjective and can identify it as an intentional choice on the journalist’s part to teach readers to identify Lonergan by his sexuality. It is also important to note here that the newspapers mentioned above were not throwaway gossip magazines that may have been expected to dramatize a story for sales. While the writing may seem sensational or homophobic to readers looking back, at the time the rhetoric may have gone unnoticed by the general readership who were seeking an honest news report about the murder trial. As I’ll show later in my analysis of her satire, Ben was not this ideal, general, heterosexual reader—in fact, she endeavored to rhetorically undermine the hidden, dangerous acts in the news.
Scare Tactics: Child Abuse and Potentiality

One of the most powerful scare tactics was performed through invoking a fear of homosexuals as potential child abusers. This was evident throughout the newspapers I studied, and was particularly visible in clippings that mentioned sex perverts. Here’s an example of this tactic applied via linking from the article “State Moves to Halt Sex Crime Increase” from an August 15, 1946 issue of the Long Beach Independent. Quoting Attorney General Robert W. Kenny, the author writes,

Every police department has a relatively large volume of complaints involving underwear thieves, window peepers, exhibitionists and homosexuals. And each person so offending is a potential threat to the safety of children. Cases such as the foregoing are all too frequently regarded simply as nuisances to be disposed of as speedily as possible. This is a mistake. (9)

Here, Kenny rhetorically links homosexuals with individuals who perform unsavory deeds, and then further links this group of deviants to a shared potential threat to children. I emphasize the word potential here, because the scare tactic of child abuse functioned extremely well by focusing on the possibly of future danger. In stark comparison to the explicit acts of peeping in windows or stealing underwear, the potential future dangers remain vague: “a threat to the safety of children.” By leaving the type of violence (kidnapping, physical or sexual abuse, indoctrination, murder, etc.) and the timing or location open to the “potential” threat to children’s safety, Kenny emphasizes his argument that we need to crack down on homosexual offenders now so that they do not progress into child abusers. As a result, he rhetorically educates his readers not only in what people to fear, but also encourages them to not mistakenly ignore potential threats.

This rhetorical tactic of potentiality and vagueness was a standard for the Long Beach Independent’s writer Petronius Jr., whose “Fast Life” columns were decidedly
critical of homosexuals. This name is a pseudonym and references the Roman courtier Gaius Petronius Arbiter, who lived from AD 27 through AD 66. Petronius was known for his discussions of society and is said to have penned the satirical novel *Satyricon*. He is remembered for his remarkable death: when he was accused of treason, he chose instead to slowly commit suicide and spent his last day communing with friends and writing a letter that detailed the debaucheries of the prince. It makes sense, then, that the 1940s author chose the pen name Petronius Jr. to detail their societal critiques and warnings to the general public. Petronius Jr.’s short pieces often occur on page two, an early and regular placement in the newspaper that emphasizes the piece’s importance. In some “Fast Life” columns, the author offers critiques of local government and officials, yet in others offers direct disdain for homosexuals.

Rhetorically, Petronius Jr. goes beyond sanctioning public disdain of homosexuals to actually promote and model how to handle the problem of homosexuals in the readers’ midst. This form of rhetorical education has the effect of prompting readers to act. Petronius Jr. writes in the November 27, 1948 “Fast Life” column:

> A drive is under way to run homosexuals out of Long Beach…Chief of Police Al Slaight and City Prosecutor Ken Sutherland are cooperating to make the drive effective…Police report more perverts are drifting here since recent heat was put on them along Sunset Strip and in Santa Monica…*While most of these unfortunates are not considered dangerous, it is from their ranks the child sex murderers emerge.* Slaight and Sutherland can do much to run them out of town, but the drive can’t be really effective unless the courts are also willing to get tough. (2; emphasis added)

This one italicized sentence is brimming with rhetorical implications. First, homosexuals are also known as “perverts” and “unfortunates,” so much so that the adjective becomes a noun to describe them as a group of unwanted individuals. Second, when the journalist writes that not all homosexuals are “considered dangerous,” they do not explicitly name
whose consideration marks the homosexuals as dangerous or not. In fact, the short article opens by detailing the actions of two men with legal power, then turns to the broader group of “police,” and then discusses the consideration without attaching the act to an actual considerer. This vagueness contributes to the rhetorical effectiveness of the scare tactic, suggesting that the potential for danger may affect anyone. Third, the term “ranks” implies a systemic organization of homosexuals, as readers may have been used to hearing that word attached to the military, a decidedly intentional system with shared goals. Fourth, the phrase “child sex murderers” is both specific and vague: it implies sexual assault and murder, yet ramps up its fear potential by creating an ultra-threatening deviant whose identity is tied to the enmeshing of violent terms, almost like a fictional monster. And finally, Petronius Jr. offers their readers a black and white ultimatum: either the courts get tough, or homosexuals will remain in Long Beach. Without explicitly calling for it, Petronius Jr. rhetorically employs scare tactics to do three things: invoke fear of homosexuals in the reader, put pressure on courts to “get tough” on homosexuals, and put pressure on the reader to hold the courts accountable.

We see a similar transfer of responsibility to the readers in the article “Citizens Share Guilt” in the January 14, 1946 issue of the Los Angeles Van Nuys News. This short article packs a punch:

A fearfully haunting facet of the gruesome Chicago kidnapping and murder of 6-year-old Suzanne Degnan is the press dispatch statement that police, in the course of their investigation, had “taken into custody several known sex perverts.” Such a fact emphasizes the necessity of drastic measures for curbing activities of potentially criminal “known sex perverts.” If a community harbors a “known sex pervert,” then the citizens of that community, in the final analysis, are shamefully guilty of exposing their children to the proximity of these outcast personifications of subnormality, and therefore are indirectly guilty of a cardinal sin. (1)
Like the Petronius Jr. example stated above, this short piece is rhetorically rich. It takes scare tactics further than the previous examples, transforming the potential guilt a parent might feel if their child were assaulted by a “known sex pervert” into a present call to action to rid the community of the threatening offenders. The author garners ethos early on via the mention of a press dispatch and police statements from Chicago, which suggests that the problem of sex perverts is a nation-wide threat. The repeated use of quotation marks to describe “known sex perverts” reinforces the authority of the statement as a direct quote or specialized phrase. Similar to the previous two examples, this author uses the phrase “potentially criminal,” suggesting that more murders of young girls could occur. That is, unless someone does something about it. In this case, that someone is the citizens themselves, who are preemptively blamed for harboring people who are known to be sex perverts and exposing their children to such criminals, which the author says makes them “indirectly guilty of a cardinal sin.” Just as Petronius Jr. had employed the vague yet terrifying classification of homosexuals as “child sex murderers,” this author calls sex perverts “outcast personifications of subnormality,” a phrase that calls up images of degenerate or unintelligent monsters and greatly ramps up an “us versus them” mentality—we can almost imagine here the citizens with flaming torches and pitchforks, chasing the outcasts from their community and saving their children and the day.

In these three examples, the rhetorical effectiveness of the scare tactic is dependent on invoking fear in the reader. However, unlike a direct police report of a specific crime, as in the Lonergan murder trial, these threats remain potential and vague, which emphasizes the readers’ responsibility in protecting their children and themselves from the threat homosexuals might bring to their communities. The sensational description of potential
threats transfers responsibilities to the citizens, therefore circulating the conception of homosexuals as deviant child abusers, even though this fact was statistically untrue, as we saw in the *Magazine Digest* example that I shared in my dissertation introduction. Despite some authors offering alternative messages, scare tactics that relied on potentiality were often tied to a suggestion that readers should respond, act, and/or circulate the discourse in their own circles.

**Us Versus Them**

Another rhetorical move that takes place in news journalism is journalists aligning themselves with the readers as citizens with common interests in promoting a safe and orderly community. Such newspaper pieces serve two rhetorical goals: first, to create a shared “we” or “us” between the newspaper and the readers, which enforces an “us versus them” dichotomy between readers/journalists and those who are abnormal, dangerous, or who threaten to disrupt the status quo; and second, to perform a “call to action,” which appeals in some places to the readers themselves and sometimes to those who are positioned outside or against the newspaper/reader community for the purpose of calling for change. These methods of reeducation function to teach readers how they should respond to the scare tactics and potentiality I mentioned above.

We see such a call for change in the September 22, 1947 *Los Angeles Times* report “Outbursts at Juvenile Hall.” Written by David Bogen, then Superintendent of the Los Angeles Juvenile Hall, the article lists concerns and updates on current disruptions in the Hall. Bogen’s role as Superintendent influences his call to uphold order both within the Juvenile Hall and within the outside society through the separation of delinquents from the
general population of readers. One of the article’s strongest arguments is based in public fear of homosexuals and reinforces an “us versus them” mentality that separates readers, children, and even some girls in the facility from homosexuals. This article is particularly interesting as an example of rhetorical education due to the scaffolding Bogen constructs to present lesbians as threats to their peers.

Bogen acknowledges near the beginning of the article that “While most of these girls are seriously delinquent their problems differ all the way from incorrigibility at home to professional prostitution” and remarks at the end of the article that “in view of the extreme mixture of problems because of the inadequacy of the existing Juvenile Hall structures, it is remarkable that we do not have even more outbursts” (14). While much of the article is aimed at describing the different girls who occupy the Hall, Bogen employs these descriptions in effort to call for restructuring of the Hall. The first paragraph states:

The disturbance among girls at Juvenile Hall on the night of Sept. 12, which made it necessary for five girls to be removed to jail because of the impossibility of keeping them separate from the other girls whom they had agitated by disorderly actions, was only one of the many emergencies which have occurred and will continue to occur unless Juvenile Hall is given the proper facilities to care for its extreme problems. (14)

Bogen lists varying reasons why girls have landed in the hall, including running away from a state school, “incorrigible behavior,” being “diagnosed as psychopathic delinquents by the state Mental Hospital,” violating parole, being “held as material witnesses,” and being homosexual (14). For this last point, Bogen writes, “Known homosexuals are included among girls who are forced to associate with each other at Juvenile Hall because the physical facilities make proper segregation impossible” (14). He explicitly calls for segregation of “known homosexuals” from “girls who are forced to associate with each other”—therefore categorizing homosexuals as specifically problematic, so much that they
should be separated not just from the general community outside the Hall, but from the other girls within. While all of the girls may be problematic in society’s view, a hierarchy is implied as to which girls are seen as more or less of a threat to the order of normal society. In terms of rhetorical education, Bogen is slyly teaching readers to view lesbians as other than girls, which harkens to discussions of “the third sex,” a sexological label that Ben mentions in *Vice Versa* and which was referenced in medical and popular texts around that time.⁶

The hierarchization of delinquent girls is again emphasized in Bogen’s concluding paragraph: “Until adequate modern facilities are completed there will be incalculable harm done to both the children detained and to the community” (14). Bogen’s use of the word “children” here is of interest to me for three reasons: first, he connects the community (those reading his report) and the detained “children” as potential victims of harm; second, he labels the harm as “incalculable,” which emphasizes the potential of it being dire and invites readers to imagine what incalculable harm might look like to them; and third, he blames this harm to children on the inadequate state of the Hall facilities. Finally, we need to acknowledge that Bogen calls the girls “children” here in order to gather community support in improving the facilities, while earlier he used the word “problems” to reference the girls who posed the most threat. He is seemingly decriminalizing some girls in the Hall by saying they should be saved from homosexuals. Without explicitly saying it in this way, he is telling his concerned readers that whereas some girls have problems, homosexuals are problems.

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⁶ I will explore the concept of “the third sex” in detail in this dissertation’s conclusion.
The phrase “known homosexuals” is similar to language used to report on the crimes committed by gay and lesbian adults, and thus the young lesbians who live at Juvenile Hall are presented as other than the “girls” whom they interact with. Instead of being a peer in age, gender, and location, the lesbian detainees are presented as a threat, which is directly a result of their homosexuality. Indeed, the word “girls” in this sentence functions similarly to the “children” and “community” who are at risk in the final paragraph. In support of his ultimate request that the Hall be updated, Bogen writes that the impossibility of “proper segregation” within the facilities “force[s]” the lesbians into the physical space of the “girls.” Because Bogen’s article presents young lesbians as an active threat (“known homosexuals” are perceived as adults), their inclusion and association with the other girls is read as unacceptable.

Lisa Ben’s Satirical Response to Lesbians in the News

These scare tactics are nothing if not sensational, which we see from phrases like “child sex murderers” or “outcast personifications of subnormality.” As I mentioned in the introduction to this section, Lisa Ben was disturbed by news reports such as those I have analyzed above, and so she penned a satire for *Vice Versa* that exposed the circulation of sensationalized descriptions of homosexual identity and behavior. Below, I examine her satire, “New Year’s Revolution,” with attention to the ways in which she critiques and queers the public circulation of anti-homosexual rhetoric through scare tactics and categorizations that pull from medical discourse. I focus on this particular story because Ben utilizes a queer retelling to challenge actual news reports. The satire offers Ben’s *Vice
Versa readers a creative way to examine discrimination based on one’s sexuality and teaches them to identify ways that such discrimination occurs.

In the January 1948 issue of Vice Versa, Ben pens an 11-page satire titled “New Year’s Revolution” in response to “sensational newspaper accounts” that had “irked” and “outraged” her (15). In replacing “resolution” with “revolution,” Ben foreshadows a topsyturvy system in which heterosexuals are considered inverted and homosexuals are the normal majority. Reading Ben’s satire alongside the news accounts I’ve analyzed is illuminating. She repurposes pathologizing language in order to both detail the daily threats of discrimination and violence that homosexuals experienced in public spaces and to show how widespread medicalized views of inversion were within daily experiences. Ben’s intentional use of medical and pathologizing language subverts the power of anti-homosexual discourse in the news accounts she critiques and revokes the power from the heterosexual male protagonist in the story, so we may read this satire as an attempt to subvert public classification of homosexuals in a manner that provides Ben’s homosexual readers with some agency.

The main character in “New Year’s Revolution” is Harry Runk, a heterosexual man whom Ben characterizes as drunken, dangerous, and lecherous. In writing this satire, Ben creates a world where Runk experiences the daily experiences of lesbians due to stereotypes based in medical theories of homosexuals being seen as invert, which translated to public views of homosexuals as sexual perverts. For example, when Runk awakens after being knocked out by a lesbian couple whom he attacked when they rebuffed his advances in a lesbian bar, he reflects on his experience: “Oh well, better here than in that degrading bar where he’d been” (Ben, “New Year’s Revolution” 3). He comments on
the bar and its occupants: “‘Idiotic women,’ he thought, viciously. ‘The authorities oughtta close places like that and put the patrons in the booby hatch [psychiatric hospital] where they belong.’ Maybe he’d write a letter to the mayor or somebody tomorrow. That should settle their hatch” (3). Here, Ben highlights that even a common citizen can categorize lesbians as mentally ill. Runk—just like any other member of the public, including Ben’s readers—was privy to medicalized theories of lesbian inversion that were passed from medical tomes to popular media and news journalism. Thus, pathologization becomes a public act, and Runk attempts to seize the power that is attached to stereotypes of inverts as “degrade[ed],” in need of treatment, and worthy of being locked up. Even as a common citizen, Runk is able to repurpose medical discourse around homosexuals through writing a letter and engaging the “authorities” in doing their job to close homosexual establishments and shuffle their clients into a psychiatric hospital. Readers of newspapers at the time may not only have seen letter writing as an option available to them, but as their civil responsibility to hold local lawmakers accountable to protecting citizens.

Readers of “New Year’s Revolution” will soon learn that Runk has awoken in the world of Fruitville, a place populated by gay and lesbian people. Whereas women who performed gender roles outside of heterosexual femininity were considered mentally ill or deviant at this time, the town of Fruitville flips this script. Runk responds to discovering that the conductor of his streetcar is a woman by saying, “The war was over. Why didn’t these women stick to home? Women were only good for one thing, anyhow” (4). Runk’s displeasure with inverted sexuality and changing gender roles contrasts with his heterosexual nature. His sexualization of women as “only good for one thing” implies that women should resume their traditional roles as wives, mothers, or simply sexual objects.
now that their labor was no longer necessary for war efforts. Later, when Runk displays his heterosexuality at gay-owned and gay-staffed establishments by attempting to rent a hotel room, the “desk clerk regarded Harry with a suspicious eye. ‘No, dreadfully sorry, but we do not seem to have any accommodations left’” (6). Here, Ben begins to expose the unequal public management of invert—Runk is denied access and made to feel unworthy. We can imagine that Ben’s actual readers may have experienced similar discrimination or had heard of it occurring to others, so applying the discrimination to a heterosexual man may have hit home.

It’s worth stepping outside of the story for a moment to note once more that the homophobic discrimination Ben satirically recognizes here continues in contemporary times. Indeed, in 2018, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of protecting the free speech of a baker who in 2012 denied a gay male couple service by citing his religious beliefs as reason he would not make them a wedding cake. In August 2019, the Trump Administration filed an amicus brief requesting that the Supreme Court legalize discrimination of homosexuals in the workplace, asking the question of “whether the prohibition in Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964...against employment discrimination ‘because of [...] sex’ prohibits employment discrimination because of sexual orientation” (I).

But back in the 1940s, in addition to being denied services, Runk experiences repeated threats of violence throughout his time in Fruitville. As part of the narrative inversion Ben has composed, Runk’s displays of heterosexual masculinity get him into trouble. For example, when he attempts to pick up a woman walking down the street, “a high falsetto voice shriek[s]: ‘Shame on you! You go right along and mind your own business or I’ll call a police woman!’” (Ben 7). Ben’s choice to give this woman a high
falsetto voice suggests that she may have been a cross-dressing man or a transwoman, which further subverts gender norms. Additionally, by aligning herself with local authority—police women—this woman doubly threatens Runk’s perceived inversion and attraction: first in shaming his heterosexual inclination, and second in criminalizing his affections (similar to Runk’s own comments about writing to the mayor). Soon after this, Runk “barely dodge[s] a heavy stone aimed in the direction of his head. He couldn’t see any sign of who had thrown it” (7). Because Runk cannot see his unknown assailant, Ben implies that he needs to always be wary of threats of violence. While Runk has not caught on to the satire of his situation, we may guess that Vice Versa’s readers would understand that his experiences with violence and being denied service are intentionally written to invoke and subvert lesbians’ experiences in public spaces. Indeed, since Ben’s original impetus was to respond to public news accounts, she may be pulling directly from reports of discrimination and violence against lesbians in public spaces at the time. I emphasize the fact that these accounts are public because the performances of anti-homosexual sentiments and rhetorics circulate openly, not in secret. Public control of homosexual threats was normalized, as in this example with the attempted attack, in Runk’s response to have the authorities close down the gay bar and institutionalize the clients, and in the real-life news report calls to rid Long Beach of homosexuals and to protect children from “child sex murderers.”

When Runk enters a bar called “The Dragnet,” he once again becomes “[e]mboldened by the fiery liquor he had just downed” and asks a woman to dance (8). Her response follows:

She regarded him with mild reproof. “What kind of girl do you think I am? I don’t dance with men!” Then she looked at him a bit more kindly. “I’m not quite so
narrow minded as my friends here, though. I can understand your inclinations, although I don’t approve of them. I think there are a few places on the other side of town [which] still permit— uh—” she wrinkled her delicate nose in obvious distaste, “dancing with the opposite sex. But it just isn’t done here.” (8)

This lesbian’s “reproof” and “distaste” for Runk’s interest in women bookend her response to his dance request. She “kindly” acknowledges his “inclinations” with explicit disproval, suggesting a medical assessment that he cannot help his abnormality. By relegating him to the “other side of town” where he can dance with fellow inverts, this woman categorizes Runk and his kind as less than normal society. However, Ben’s lesbian character offers some sympathy for Runk, perceiving him as an unfortunate being who was born that way. Echoing the pitying discourse attached to congenital views of inversion, the move also presents the lesbian character as compassionate while also categorizing Runk as deviant.

I’d like to briefly step outside of my analysis to provide some context to Ben’s use of the phrase “what kind of a girl do you think I am? I don’t dance with men!” Ben told Gershick in her interview for *Gay Old Girls* that she herself had uttered this phrase to a man who was harassing her for a dance at a bar (Gershick 50). She also shared that her lesbian companions celebrated her witty way of turning him away.

When Runk attempts to start a fight with this woman and calls her a homophobic epithet, another woman “[spins him around] as if he were a top” and exclaims, “I heard what you called my friend. Take that, you unspeakable outrage of nature!” (Ben 8). This woman’s name calling is directed at Runk’s sexuality and attempts to dehumanize him. It conjures conceptions of biological inferiority and counters the sympathetic lesbian’s understanding that Runk couldn’t help his inclinations. The phrase “unspeakable outrage of nature” sounds as if it may have come directly from a news report, such as the *Van Nuys News* article’s “outcast personifications of subnormality.” Once more, Ben is repurposing
content meant to pathologize homosexuals in an effort to rhetorically teach her homosexual readers to acknowledge the intentional application of the language and the resulting effects on the imaginary man (and, thus, on real homosexuals).

The policewomen are called, and Runk is apprehended and placed in a police car without handcuffs, where “he felt very small, frightened, and insignificant in the rear of the car, guarded by six stolid police women. He hadn’t done anything wrong, he kept telling himself; he had just asked a pretty girl for a dance” (9). The policewomen serve such a threat to Runk that he is not even handcuffed. Lesbian readers here may have been reminded of stories or personal experiences where police men raped and assaulted lesbians whom they detained in raids on gay bars. Thus, while the image of six aggressive women escorting one man deemed sexually deviant may at first seem satirically humorous, the potential for violence towards the one labeled deviant—imagine six armed heterosexual men transporting one unarmed lesbian deemed criminal—is quite horrifying. Beyond the physical imposition of police presence, Ben attempts to challenge the inherent wrongness and shame that lesbian readers may feel in their desires. By emphasizing that Runk “kept telling himself” that all he had done was “[ask] a pretty girl for a dance,” we see the private thoughts of the sexual deviant who knows his desires are not inherently wrong (9).

After establishing the hierarchy of Runk versus six authorities, Ben speculates what he would overhear from the back of the car. This overheard conversation is perhaps the most powerful rhetorical critique within Ben’s whole story, as she shows the ways that dominant discourses circulate and transfer from medical texts to the mouths and hands of law enforcement. Each police woman states a different perspective on heterosexuality that pulls from dominant opinions about homosexuality in Ben’s readers’ real lives at the time:
“Thought we’d cleaned out our part of the city pretty well of these undesirables”; “Well, they can’t help it if they’re born like that, they just never grew up emotionally. Intensive treatments from the Psychiatric Department have worked wonders on some of them”; and “…when I see a creature of this type, I can’t help but feel rather sick in the pit of my stomach” (9). While these three different critiques may seem dramatic layered together in one conversation, they mirror the rhetoric Ben and *Vice Versa*’s readers absorbed in the daily news. The policewomen share their disdain for inverts by labeling them “undesirables” and “creature[s] of this type,” which is not far from the phrases in the news reports I examined before. The other police woman’s disappointment for not fully vanquishing Runk’s type from “our part of the city” mirrors the language we read above in the Petronius Jr. article: “a drive is under way to run homosexuals out of Long Beach” and “Police report more perverts are drifting here since recent heat was put on them along Sunset Strip and in Santa Monica.” Finally, whereas earlier Runk had suggested the lesbians belonged in a mental hospital, the fact that a police woman—an authority of the law—blends together congenital (“born like that”) and psychoanalytic (“never grew up emotionally”) ideas shows how sexological discourse trickles down from medical diagnosis to be wielded as a method of criminalization.

In this chapter, I have identified the ways journalists rhetorically educated their readers to fear homosexuals as potential threats and called on readers to band together as a common group interested in preservation of their families and communities. While the presumed heterosexual audiences and actual homosexual audiences received the same message in the news, Ben’s satire acknowledges the rhetorical impact of circulating top-down discourse about homosexuals, and her creative reimagination teaches her
homosexual readers how to identify rhetorical moves used to maltreat them in real life. If a lesbian from the 1940s could identify the abnormal treatment of heterosexuals in a satire, she may have then been able to challenge the normalized treatment of homosexuals in similar ways. My next chapter focuses on Ben’s songwriting and shows how Ben used parodies to challenge very real threats to homosexuals via repurposing popular songs that were intended for heterosexual audiences. Ben’s use of parody allows her to rhetorically reeducate listeners—both heterosexual and homosexual—via this creative satirical genre.
CHAPTER 3
SURVEILLANCE AND AGENCY IN POPULAR MUSIC
AND PARODY

Introduction

In addition to her labors at Vice Versa, Lisa Ben utilized music as a method of queer rhetorical reeducation. By parodying popular songs, Ben queered not just the characters, but also exposed the circulation of heteronormative stories that excluded or harmed homosexuals. This chapter will explore multiple ways that Ben utilized parodies to perform queer rhetorical reeducation, but first, I’d like to explore Ben’s motivation for writing parodies in the first place.

In her 1988 interview with the lesbian organization Daughters of Bilitis, “lesbian pioneer” Lisa Ben explained why she began writing and performing gay parodies of popular songs in the late 1940s, a practice she would continue throughout her life (Brandt 8). According to Ben, bars like the If Café and the Flamingo in Los Angeles would host drag shows in the evenings. She recounts a time when she stayed after hours to view the show, where she observed drag performers “degrad[ing] themselves so much by talking down about their lives and all, and the general public just ate it up” (Soares, “Tape 1” 00:38:53 – 00:39:00). The “general public” Ben mentions here is an audience of heterosexuals, who would “show up at the clubs in the evening to see how the other half lived” (Marcus). Ben critiqued the gay male drag performers, viewing the performers’ self-degradation for heterosexual consumption as “one reason why we are thought less of, and these guys are promoting it, and shame on them” (Soares, “Tape 1” 00:39:00 – 00:39:10). She details one disturbing example in particular in her interview with Gershick, noting the following occurrence at a bar called the Flamingo:
One thing, at the Flamingo when night came and the non-gay people would come in—the afternoons were for us—these gay professional entertainers would get up there on that little stage, and they would say the most deprecating things about themselves. Run themselves down. I remember one time, one gay man was dressed up as a woman and said something terrible about the lady singer, who was a very good singer...He said, “Oh, she’s so butch that when she has her monthly, she wears a band aid.” I thought, “Oh, God!” And the straights were sitting around, “Ha ha ha ha,” you know; and the more these people would talk down about themselves, the more laughter would come from these other people. I thought, My God! Why do these gay people do that? I think that is terrible to make a buck at the expense of their own dignity. Where are their brains? (64; emphasis original)

Ben regarded such degradations of fellow homosexuals as “filth,” an accusation that is reinforced by the drag queen’s exchange of cruel jokes for “just for a lousy buck” (Soares, “Tape 1” 00:39:10 – 00:39:13).

Readers may interpret Ben’s critique of the men’s performances as “filthy” due to the nature of discussing sexual content, which can be read as prudish and shaming of overt discussions of sex and sexuality. While the example I noted about the drag performer mocking the butch singer’s body would have remained misogynistic were the audience purely homosexual, I wonder how Ben’s critique of the drag performer’s “filth” may have altered were the audiences not composed of heterosexuals? I suggest reading Ben’s critique of “film” more of the circulation of “self-degrading” performances to heterosexual audiences, who may have interpreted the nuance of camp or queer gender performance as something that affirmed negative discourse about homosexuals.

Ben told Gershick that she

was so revolted...that [she] decided [she] would write a few gay parodies. But they weren’t going to down-speak us. They were going to be upbeat songs. They were going to be gay songs; they were not going to be full of four-letter words, but they were going to be gay. (64)
Thus, Ben’s role as a parodist was born out of her desire to entertain, and simultaneously, rhetorically empower her homosexual listeners, which enabled her to effectively perform queer rhetorical reeducation via her lyrics.

Historian Eric Marcus describes Ben’s decision to write parodies as follows: “She wrote her own lyrics as a protest against the demeaning jokes gay entertainers told for the benefit of straights.” Similar to Marcus, I read Ben’s critique as being motivated by her interest in denying straight audiences not simply the view of gay men in drag or butch lesbians singing (which Ben knew she could not prevent), but more specifically self-deprecating humor that reinforced popular stereotypes of gay men and lesbians that may have been rooted in sexological discourse. Instead, Ben endeavored to pen parodies of popular songs that would entertain, and as I will argue, rhetorically alter the lyrics for gay audience enjoyment via the use of humor.

Reading or hearing Ben’s parodies often provokes in me the response “If we don’t laugh, we will cry,” due in part to the ways she layers critiques of oppression of homosexuals over upbeat songs that originally were meant to celebrate heterosexual romance. Ben’s parodies are complex, often drawing on her personal experiences, being performed for gay and straight audiences, and marketed to lesbians and gay men on an audio record. Ben’s parodies perform queer rhetorical reeducation via actions such as replacing, flipping, or misusing objects or ideas that are commonly accepted to work in a particular “correct” manner. A principal result of this queer rhetorical move is humor, which Ben utilizes to draw our attention to the constructed nature of rules or functionality. This move is particularly impactful when performed in an effort to prioritize queer audiences over heterosexual ones.
In the rest of this chapter, I’ll investigate two rhetorical moves Ben employs in her parodies that help her to perform queer rhetorical reeducation. First, she recognizes the act of surveillance by police and heterosexual citizens of homosexuality and homosexuals, which allows her to acknowledge and challenge real life threats via humor. Second, she reframes stereotypes of homosexuals as something attractive and admirable, versus something monstrous or abnormal. As a result of these two rhetorical moves, Ben offers her homosexual audiences tangible takeaways in the form of advice and support.

Ben’s parodies function as queer rhetorical reeducation in part because they shift the intended audience from heterosexual (as in the example above where the drag queen mocked a butch lesbian) to purely homosexual. Ben engages gay audiences via experiences they understand, such as cruising, and she claims heterosexual storylines for herself and her homosexual brothers and sisters. As I’ll show in my reading of her song “The Girl that I Marry,” she especially provides lesbians with agency by giving them space to vocally express desire for other lesbians. Ultimately, Ben’s parodies repurpose popular songs to entertain and educate gay audiences, and in doing so, the personal experience of discrimination is harnessed with critique and transposed into warnings. As a result, homosexual audiences gain some agency for telling their own stories via Ben’s rhetorically savvy take on self-love and respect.

**A Note on Private and Public Rhetorical Performances**

In order to fully comprehend the rhetorical impact of Ben’s parodies, it’s important to acknowledge their public performance and circulation among homosexual audiences. In response to the field of Rhetoric’s long history of canonizing only public or published
performances of rhetoric (and thus almost exclusively men’s rhetorics), in the 1990s feminist rhetorical scholars pushed the field to reconsider two things:

…feminist rhetorical recovery of previously ignored or unknown women rhetors…[and] theorizing of women's rhetorics, or what some have called 'gendered analysis,' which involve developing a rhetorical concept or approach that accounts for rhetors who are excluded from traditional rhetoric. (Rawson 40)

While most feminist scholars of rhetoric agreed that adding women to the canon was essential, attempts to supplement anthologies of rhetoric with women’s voices did not solve the issue of privileging public, professional discourse within the rhetorical canon. In “Opportunities for Feminist Research in the History of Rhetoric,” Patricia Bizzell intentionally leaves the definition of “feminist” open, suggesting that “almost any kind of material on women and rhetoric” could serve to “correct” that traditional canon (51). Bizzell recognizes that this supplemental call for any material on women may encounter criticism for “tak[ing] its terms too slavishly from male-oriented standards of scholarship,” while she simultaneously calls for scholars to reframe our notion of what we count as rhetoric by locating women’s rhetoric in “places not previously studied” (53, 61). This call for collecting more women’s rhetorics is admirable, but to do so by any means possible (or through traditional methods) does not analyze or dismantle the rhetorical tradition of privileging public and recorded rhetoric, nor does it erase the need for critical analysis of canonization and representation. It calls to mind Cheryl Glenn’s question in the afterword of Reclaiming Rhetorica: “…if rhetoric is defined strictly in terms of activities accessible only to public men-in-power, then how can we responsibly investigate women’s role in the rhetorical tradition?” (329).

It is important here to acknowledge the complexity of “public” in relation to my study of Ben’s parodies. Ben’s music is public in that we now have free access to her papers
in a university archive and to recordings of interviews and performances online, whereas at the time of its publication it circulated in counterpublics (in fact, we might still read the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives as a counterpublic).\textsuperscript{7} In the mid-twentieth century, her music was public in that she performed it at gay bars, in private homes, and via purchasable records, yet also counterpublic in that these venues were intentionally homosexual spaces and objects, used to circulate lesbian and gay content. Thus, my reading of Ben’s public (and/or counterpublic) performance here is more interested in the historiographical account of interpreting her creative performances \textit{as} rhetorical. In other words, my interest lies in generating a historiographical and contextual rendering of Ben’s parodies alongside my contemporary queer analysis of her lyrics and performances.

Like previous feminist rhetorical historiographers, I am interested in studying and recording rhetorics that may not at first glance appear to be “rhetorical,” while to the writer and audience they were indeed of importance and served a purpose. I analyze Ben’s practice of parodying popular songs, arguing that her recreations with homosexual themes and language performed queer rhetorical reeducation by introducing a homosexual voice to the circulation of discourse about homosexuals. This chapter is split into two parts. In Part One, I focus on the effects of state and citizen surveillance of homosexuals, and in Part Two, I consider the agency homosexuals gain via attraction and desirability. I open Part One with a queer rhetorical analysis of one of her more well-known parodies, “Frankie and Johnny” (sometimes written as “Frankie and Johnnie”), identifying moments that may

\textsuperscript{7} Michael Warner’s \textit{Publics and Counterpublics} offers an extensive reading of counterpublics, but here I’d like to reference his quote: “A counterpublic, against the background of the public sphere, enables a horizon of opinion and exchange; its exchanges remain distinct from authority and can have a critical relation to power; its extent is in principle indefinite, because it is not based on a precise demography but mediated by print, theater, diffuse networks of talk, commerce, and the like” (56-7).
unsettle the ways her audiences engaged with discourses about sexuality or gender. I begin my analysis with “Frankie and Johnny” because it employs multiple rhetorical moves of surveillance and admiring stereotypical homosexual behaviors, and I continue to analyze similar rhetorical moves in Ben’s parodies, “That Old Gang of Mine” and “Fairy from Tulare.” In Part Two, I explore Ben’s rhetorical construction of lesbian desire and attraction in the songs “The Girl that I Marry,” “Always True to You Darling, in My Fashion,” and “The Lady is a Butch.”

**Part One: Surveillance and Stereotype**

**Why “Frankie and Johnny”?**

Ben penned many parodies to popular songs. Her methods of parodying varied, including reimagining homosexual content over well-known melodies, such as changing “Okie from Muskogee” to “Fairy from Tulare” and writing “In the Village, Greenwich Village” to the tune of “Oh My Darling Clementine.” A number of her parodied songs originated in popular musical plays, such as her version of “The Girl that I Marry” (*Annie Get Your Gun*, 1946) or “I’m in Love with a Wonderful Girl” (*South Pacific*, 1949). She also swapped the gender of main characters, such as changing Jim Reeves’s original boy character in “Bimbo” to a butch lesbian, or changing the female character of Frankie to a gay man in “Frankie and Johnny.” This chapter narrows its scope to focus explicitly on a handful of songs that employ rhetorical moves that I read as queer, and “Frankie and Johnny” employs each of them.

To fully grasp Ben’s rhetorical moves in “Frankie and Johnny,” it’s important to contextualize the original song. “Frankie and Johnny” has crossed genre lines, being
covered by country singer Johnny Cash to pop singer Elvis Presley to jazz musician Louis Armstrong, as well as gender lines, being covered by Pearl Bailey, Ethel Waters, and even by actress Lindsay Lohan. While the song often refers to Frankie and Johnny in the third person, male singers have sung it as if they were Johnny and had cheated or intended to cheat on Frankie. This song originated from a true story of murder, although over time the exact date and location have been confused: "An archetypal tale of love, jealousy, and murder, the story originates on one account in a North Carolina murder of 1839, while another traces it to St. Louis in 1899. It may have been written in the first decade of the twentieth century, or even substantially earlier" (Sartwell 186). At its essence, the song tells the story of a man (Johnny) who is unfaithful to his female partner (Frankie), who usually discovers that Johnny has been cheating on her when she asks a bartender whether Johnny had been at the bar. Upon learning of his indiscretion with a woman named Nelly Bly, Frankie seeks revenge on Johnny with a gun. Having killed him, she is punished for murder.

When she was asked by an interviewer if she had written her songs for “special occasions,” Ben shared her inspiration for writing “Frankie and Johnny” after a disagreement with a girlfriend: “As a matter of fact I wrote that one coming home from um, a trip, uh, to Las Vegas with a friend of mine, and I was terribly, terribly angry because she turned out to be a compulsive gambler and I didn’t know it, and she almost left us without funds…” (Soares, “Tape 2” 00:35:01 – 00:35:21). Ben refused to give the women her remaining money, instead asking her what she thought they would have done if they had lost all of the money and not been able to return to Los Angeles. She continues:

So that’s all I said and I rode in the back seat all the way back, I was so burned up, I didn’t say a word because I thought I, I won’t say anything ‘cause if I do say
anything I’ll probably say something that I’ll be sorry for and when I’m mad I should button my lip. So I did, and I had a cocktail napkin back there with me from one of the [indistinguishable] um casinos, and I wrote this song, just to keep my, keep my mind off troubles [see Figure 3.1 and 3.2 below, both from Box 1, Folder 15 of Ben’s papers]. And, uh, on the way back she said “are you going to tell my mother about this?” and I said “no, no. I won’t say a word.” I said, I said “that’s not my way of doing,” I said “you, you do what you please about it. I’m not going to say one word.” But that’s how the song came to be written, because I wanted to occupy my mind and cool down. [laughter]. (Soares, “Tape 2” 00:36:06 – 00:37:00)

Ben’s answer to the interview question provides us with context for how the song functioned for her on a personal level. She knew the song “Frankie and Johnny” very well, in that she could silently remember the original tune and lyrics in the back of the car over the hours-long drive, and she used writing her parody as a productive coping mechanism for dealing with a very stressful experience. However, while Ben’s anger was tied to disappointment in her girlfriend’s gambling and its effect on their relationship, she chose to transform the discord to a story of infidelity within a gay male couple. This decision connected Ben’s version of the song to the number of covers and parodies that existed at the time, sticking to the main theme of the song (infidelity). Although Ben wrote the song as a personal coping exercise, it would soon be recorded and circulated by the Daughters...
of Bilitis as a 45 rpm record (the reverse side featured her original song, “Cruisin’ Down the Boulevard”), which means it had a wider audience than only the listeners in the bars and homes where she performed, extending the reach of her queer rhetorical reeducation to more listeners. The record was advertised as “The Gayest Songs on Wax” in the September 1960 issue of ONE Magazine, a magazine with gay and lesbian readers (see Figures 3.3 and 3.4 below, from Kate Litterer’s personal collection). While the advertisement lists the spelling as “Frankie and Johnnie,” I use the spelling of “Johnny” from Ben’s handwritten and typed lyrics.

The Rhetoric of Censorship and Surveillance

In order to acknowledge the rhetorical import of Ben’s parody of “Frankie and Johnny” in 1960, it is important to contextualize the song in terms of censorship and
restrictions around homosexuality. In Ben’s parody of “Frankie and Johnny,” the gay bar is described as a community space (her audience may have actually been listening to her performance live in a gay bar). However, it is also a target for raids by police. As I will cover in more detail later when I read Ben’s song “That Old Gang of Mine,” homosexuals caught in raids were often harassed, physically assaulted, jailed, fined, and even had their names printed in newspapers, which could lead to being fired from their jobs and ostracized by their families. Therefore, it makes sense that, in Ben’s version, Frankie’s first question before he enquires a gay bartender about Johnny’s infidelity is whether Johnny was caught in a police raid on the gay bar: “He asked “Has my Johnny been in here, / Was he caught in last night’s raid?” (Ben, “Frankie and Johnny”). At the time Ben was performing this song in gay bars, we may assume that homosexual audience members were aware of and may have been or knew someone who had been “caught” in a raid. While queer rhetoric functions via humor in other parts of Ben’s “Frankie and Johnny,” this short comment helps us understand the very real impact of police surveillance of homosexual spaces.

In addition to acknowledging physical restriction on gay bodies in the space of a gay bar, we need to consider the censorship of circulating homosexual content for homosexuals. It is important to note that only two years before they advertised Ben’s record, the publishers of ONE Magazine had fought and won a Supreme Court trial over whether or not the magazine was obscene, which speaks to the status of Comstock Act ideology around this time (Savage). In “Frankie and Johnny,” Ben rhetorically engages with the censorship of homosexual material. We already know that Ben knew “Frankie and Johnny” well enough to recall it from memory and generate parody lyrics on the spot. She knew that her version would be one more version added to the collection of “Frankie and
Johnny” recordings with repetitive heterosexual themes, and she chose to open her version up with this note, which is typed on top of the lyrics (see Appendix A for a photocopy of Ben’s lyrics):

Now, you may all think you know the story of Frankie and Johnny, but chances are you’ve just heard the censored version.
Let me tell you what really happened! (Ben; emphasis original)

This introduction sets the stage for the parody as an authentic truth to dispel the fiction generated by censorship. This is a form of queer rhetorical reeducation, because by emphasizing that she will share what “really” happened, Ben unsettles the validity of all previous versions. She calls the other, heterosexual versions of Frankie and Johnny “censored,” implying that her version about gay men is uncensored and thus perhaps more authentic. In doing these moves, Ben revokes the power of the originals by marginalizing them via issuing her own form of censorship.

Ben must have been aware of the rhetorical impact of this decision. She worked as a secretary at movie studios during the enforcement of the Motion Picture Production Code, which prohibited explicit mention of homosexuality, and she was restricted by Comstock Laws to distribute Vice Versa by hand in the 1940s so as not to get caught posting “obscene” content. When we apply a queer rhetorical analysis to Ben’s action of “uncensoring” the story, we see that she undermines the assumption that the heterosexual version was true just because it had been widely circulated and presented as such. I defined queer rhetorical analysis in my introduction, but as a brief reminder, I am using queer rhetorical analysis to expose the normalization of circulating dominant discourse (such as

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8 Having reviewed Ben’s archived lyrics and papers thoroughly, I can report that her action of including a preface to lyrics is unique to this song, and thus I argue we should read its function as intertwined with the lyrics, both in print and in performance.
sexological discourse) and to examine ways that such discourse can be repurposed by queer rhetors, writers, and readers for alternative purposes. By suggesting that the truth will finally be freely discussed in her version, Ben directly challenges censorship laws, undermining their attempts to repress homosexual realities by constructing a public image of “normal” sexuality that functioned by keeping homosexual content out of circulation or by circulating negative representations of gay men and lesbians across genres, such as film, literature, journalism, etc. As a result of these moves, “Frankie and Johnny” is a prime example of queer rhetorical reeducation.

### Recovering Stereotypes

Another one of Ben’s rhetorical actions in her parodies is repurposing stereotypes about homosexuals. She wittily applies this move for multiple purposes in her parody of “Frankie and Johnny.” Before I analyze Ben’s version of the song, I would like to first break down the functionality of this quite popular song in its original, heterosexual versions. According to Bruce Buckley, author of the 1963 dissertation *Frankie and Her Men: A Study of the Interrelationships of Popular and Folk Traditions*, an in depth examination of the song’s many versions up until his dissertation’s publication, the first verse of the song “serves three functions in the narrative: (1) the introduction of the two main characters, (2) a short description of these characters, and (3) the prior relationships which have been established between the two main characters” (42). We see this in the first verse of the 1929 version by Jimmie Rodgers:

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9 Rodgers’s version has been utilized by other scholars in their analyses, so I will use it here as well. You can listen to a version of the song at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kNq532Cyhu0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kNq532Cyhu0) and read the full lyrics in Appendix B to this dissertation.
Frankie and Johnny were sweethearts,
Oh, Lord, how they could love,
Swore to be true to each other,
True as the stars above,
He was her man
he wouldn't do her wrong. (Rodgers)

In his analysis of the song, Buckley notes the various ways both Frankie and her relationship are described that imply she may be a dedicated wife or a jealous girlfriend or a sex worker (45-6). Ben’s first verse follows the same three functions (introduction, description, prior relationship) as outlined by Buckley, but she switches a key word in the first two lines:

Frankie and Johnny were lovers
Lordy, but how they could camp.
Swore to stick to one another
Just like two wet postage stamps;
He was his man, but he done him wrong. (Ben; emphasis added)

This first verse introduces us to one of Ben’s key rhetorical moves as a parodist: description of gay performance via stereotype or generalization. Even before the listener learns that “he was his man,” they learn that Frankie and Johnny could “camp.” At first listen, a not-in-the-know audience member may think “camp as in sleeping in tents near a campfire,” but members of the homosexual community would likely be aware that “camp” referred to a particular performance of gender that was practiced by homosexual men. Susan Sontag explores camp’s complex, multiple functions as an aesthetic, action, and object in “Notes on ‘Camp’.” She argues that in its verb form, “To camp is a mode of seduction—one which employs flamboyant mannerisms susceptible of a double interpretation; gestures full of duplicity, with a witty meaning for cognoscenti and another, more impersonal, for outsiders” (5). I am particularly interested in the duplicity of actions Sontag mentions here, as Ben creates a distinction with the word “but”: they were lovers, but how they could
camp. Being that Ben was a scrupulous writer, we should read this differentiation of camping from loving as intentional. While I cannot be certain of Ben’s audience’s responses to this line, I interpret Ben’s use of “camp” and “lovers” to refer to the men’s gender performances and sexual and romantic activities. The relation of “camp” among lovers is worth a deeper analysis. If at least some of Ben’s audience were gay men (and we know the song was marketed to them via a gay publication), then Ben is connecting camp performance, which is often read as flamboyant or visibly out as homosexual, to love and attraction. By positioning camp performance as something to which gay men would be attracted, Ben teaches her readers how to identify a loving homosexual couple.

In the second verse of the Rogers version, Frankie begins to search for her missing Johnny:

Frankie went down to the corner,
Just for a bucket of beer,
She said, "Oh, Mister Bartender,
Has my loving Johnny been here,
He is my man,
He wouldn't do me wrong."

Here, we read normative presentations of heterosexual monogamy (“my loving Johnny”) and yet we note that female Frankie is seeking “a bucket of beer” in addition to gossip about Johnny’s whereabouts. Ben maintains this general structure of the second verse, sending male Frankie to the bar in search of a drink and for information about Johnny. However, she begins to layer on the parody of gay Frankie’s movements by highlighting homosexual stereotypes within his actions. Ben writes:

Frankie swished down to the gay bar
To sip him some pink lemonade.
He asked “Has my Johnny been in here,
Was he caught in last night’s raid?
Oooh, he’s my man, is he a-doing me wrong?”
Ben chooses to characterize Frankie through what we may read as effeminate stereotypes. First, she highlights the way that he moves his body by “swishing,” which harkens to early twentieth century stereotypes of the “fairy,” a homosexual man who “was defined as much by his ‘womanlike’ character or ‘effeminacy’ as his solicitation of male sexual partners” (Chauncey 13). Frankie does not run or even “go” down to the bar—he swishes. Once there, he doesn’t drink beer or liquor—he sips pink lemonade. These rhetorical choices contrast gay male Frankie’s action of sipping a feminized (pink), nonalcoholic drink with heterosexual versions that described Frankie as going “down to the corner/Just for a bucket of beer.” This corroborates the presentation of Frankie as a woman without morals, one who seeks out a whole bucket of beer, a move we could read as masculine, or at least less wholesomely feminine (prohibition was still a law in 1929 when the original song came out). Ben’s version, instead, highlights gay male Frankie’s stereotypical homosexuality by having him intentionally swish and sip his pink drink as he lovingly seeks out his partner.

**The Queer Mispurposing of Objects and Labels**

Ben’s third rhetorical move is using objects and language for new, queer purposes. In the first verse mentioned above, we learn that homosexual Frankie and Johnny “[stuck] to one another/Just like two wet postage stamps.” I read this as a queer move because sticking two stamps to one another instead of to an envelope undermines their original purpose and thus labels them “nonfunctional.” However, there is a queerness in Ben’s misuse of the stamps that renders them useful in a different manner. Ben notes that the two men loved each other very much, so the act of affixing two stamps together can be read as
an intentional connection. Listeners may have viewed this as witty or humorous, as Ben is discussing the men’s choice to happily use an item for an alternative purpose—love—instead of a productive one.

Ben extends her rhetorical misuse of objects to consider the misuse of homosexual vernacular in the third verse of the song, which introduces us to the third person involved in the love triangle. In the original Rogers version of the song, the bartender responds as follows when Frankie seeks knowledge about Johnny:

I don't want to cause you no trouble,
Ain't gonna tell you no lies,
I saw your lover an hour ago,
With a girl named Nellie Bly,
He was your man,
But he's doing you wrong.

Ben’s version follows the same general outline, although she complicates the story through the use of queer vernacular:

The bartender said, “Listen, Frankie,
I ain’t gonna tell you no lie.
Your John’s got it made with a piece of trade
Who is known as Nelly Bly.
If he’s your man, he’s a-doin’ you wrong.”

The third and fourth lines are of my interest here because of the ways that they relate the label “trade” with a name and performance: “known as Nelly Bly.” The term “nelly” is an adjective used to describe effeminate men, often employed pejoratively, like the term “sissy.” Additionally, “nelly” has been tied to Black vernacular in texts such as the special issue of *Callaloo*, “Plum Nelly: New Essays in Black Queer Studies.” Thus, it is important to consider the ways that Ben’s use of the phrase “Nelly Bly” to refer to a gay man may

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10 Ben uses a similar rhetorical move in her song, “It’s Gay to be Gay,” where she writes “Now, science claim that likes repel/And opposite attract/But since I’ve been in Hollywood/I sure don’t hold that that’s a fact!”
appropriate the racial specificity of the gay vernacular she and her audiences had access to. I do not know the race of Ben’s primary audiences (live and listeners to her record), but it is worth considering the implications of her use of Nelly for a white audience and for Black audiences and audiences of color. Researcher Esther Newton writes in *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* that the term “nellie” is a stand in for “effeminate” and that “nellie” functions as the opposite of butch or masculine (8, 32). The connection of performance of masculinity (i.e., trade) and effeminacy (i.e., nelly/ie) is rooted in Black gay male culture.11

Because heterosexual audiences were accustomed to the stereotype of gay men as effeminate, the name “Nelly Bly” would likely have summoned up sissy stereotypes such as those used to describe Frankie in verse two. However, Ben’s homosexual audiences were likely aware that the descriptor “trade” referred to a masculine man, perhaps even a heterosexual one, who had casual sex with gay men, sometimes in exchange for money.12 Because the song centers on infidelity, it is important to also note the interchangeability of a lover who “swishes” with one who is “trade” and simultaneously “Nelly.” When the bartender calls Nelly Bly a “piece of trade,” he generalizes and objectifies him as one of many and as exchangeable with another lover, like the colloquial phrase “piece of ass.”13 Furthermore, this hypermasculine sex object is “known as” a feminine name, a rhetorical

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11 For more in queer Black scholarship on gender performance, see the special issue of *Callalou*, “Plum Nelly: New Essays in Black Queer Studies,” the anthology *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, and Patrick E. Johnson’s scholarship on his autobiographical performance, “Strange Fruit.” Johnson’s work explores both feminine and masculine performances via readings of Black queer scholarship and his personal performances.

12 See George Chauncey’s *Gay New York* for a description of trade as hypermasculine, often straight-acting men who would have sex with gay men, sometimes for pay (16).

13 The word “fruit,” which Ben uses in the last verse of the song to describe “plenty of fruit in the orchard,” also suggests the exchangeable nature of the gay male lover in this song.
move that highlights the act of feminizing gay men (even those also deemed hypermasculine) by assigning them effeminate labels. The parodic humor occurs because gay audiences would likely have known that trade symbolized masculinity, so when Ben puts the gay vernacular in conflict with the stereotype of femininity, she turns the function of the stereotype on its head. Thus, Ben is performing a parody within a parody by labeling a trade man “Nellie Bly,” and as a result is performing rhetorical reeducation specifically for her queer audience’s enjoyment.

Queer Word Play and Puns

Another key component of Ben’s parodies is her use of puns and word play to highlight double meanings. She uses this method well to tie up the narrative at the end of “Frankie and Johnny,” going off track from the original versions. Crispin Sartwell’s chapter “Frankie, Johnny, Oprah, and Me” analyzes the narrative successes of “Frankie and Johnny” and argues that one of its key strengths is its relatability for listeners. He writes,

In the narrative manner it draws you in and accumulates: you have to pay attention and you want to pay attention, and in the end you learn something: that life has no moral or end, except that there ain’t no good in men: one of the fundamental insights of our shared culture. (188)

This shared insight (a lack of morality) is a key theme for the final verse of Rogers’s original song:

This story has no moral,
This story has no end,
This story just goes to show
That there ain't no good in men,
He was her man, and he done her wrong.
Here, the singer is speaking to the audience, telling them that Frankie and Johnny’s story is generalizable, which assumes the listeners are also heterosexual. Ben replicates the move of speaking directly to the audience in her final verse:

Now this story has quite a moral
As you can plainly see:
There’s plenty more fruit in the orchard
So go out and shake that tree
Don’t shoot your man, for a-doin’ you wrong.
Never, never shoot your man for a-doin’ you wrong.

While Ben speaks directly to her audience, she undermines the original version’s lack of morality. Her story has a moral: there’s no need to shoot your man if he does you wrong, because you can always find another one. Her use of the metaphor “there’s plenty more fruit in the orchard” functions similarly to the aphorism “there’s plenty more fish in the sea.” In the example of the orchard, Ben’s use of the metaphor bends the function of the aphorism, suggesting to listeners that they would not only find another partner, but that they can find another fruit, or homosexual partner. As I mentioned in my discussion of the word “trade” above, the word “fruit” functions as a stand in for an exchangeable gay man, although Ben uses the term in another verse to describe Johnny when Frankie was attempting to shoot him—“Root-a-toot-toot at his fickle fruit/He shot right through that door”—which shows the way “fruit” can be both personal and impersonal. In the case of the last verse, I interpret Ben’s use of “fruit” as intentionally queering the function of the “plenty more fish in the ocean” aphorism to make the action apply specifically for a gay audience. By adjusting this common aphorism to highlight homosexual relationships and sex, Ben excludes heterosexual audiences from participation in the new, queer courting description, which functionally reeducates her queer audience.
Verse six extends the use of wordplay to examine the result of Frankie shooting through the door. In the Rogers version, Frankie talks directly to the listener, admitting her murder and awaiting punishment:

    Bring out your rubber-tired hearses,  
    Bring out your rubber-tired hacks,  
    I'm taking my man to the graveyard  
    But I ain't gonna bring him back,  
    Lord, he was my man, And he done me wrong.

Ben’s lyrics locate the listener closer to the scene, remain in the second person point of view, and use word play that at first appears humorous, but which I read as a queer rhetorical move to examine something darker. Observe:

    Frank was not much of a marksman  
    And that hotel door was shut.  
    Those bullets were meant for their cruel, cruel hearts  
    And they landed in their—BUT  
    He shot his man, for a-doin’ him wrong. (Ben)

In the original versions, female Frankie often murders Johnny and is sentenced to death as a punishment. In Ben’s version, however, male Frankie does not murder Johnny or Nelly Bly. It is important to note that heterosexual female Frankie had in fact hit her target with a gun she carried on her person, whereas homosexual Frankie had sorely missed. It is also worth analyzing Ben’s naming of Frankie as “Frank” during the shooting scene, because she removes the feminizing “ie” from his name when he is attempting to be a marksman. The performative masculinity of calling him Frank contrasts with Frankie’s gun, which was feminine in itself: earlier in Ben’s version of the song, Frankie had “[flown] down to the gun shop/ bought a pearl-handled ’44” (Ben). Whereas female Frankie was a “marksman,” homosexual Frankie, even as “Frank,” was not. He was aiming for their hearts, and we know that he missed, because the bullets “landed in their—BUT.”
Ben simultaneously employs a conjunction that rolls into the last line of the verse while implying that Frankie shot the two men in their “BUT[TS].” The gay men are not murdered (as far as we know at this point in the song), yet the play on words suggests that the violence they did receive was initially directed towards the parts of their body that symbolized love and also would cause death if hit (their hearts), yet the bullets hit their buttocks, a locus of gay male sexuality. Although Ben had utilized humor or word play in other parts of the song, there is something particularly chilling about the men being shot in their buttocks with bullets, even though a shot hitting its mark in their hearts would have murdered them. Instead of consensual and pleasurable penetration, the men receive painful punishment in the form of stray bullets, which we may read as punishment for their cheating, but as a form of rhetorical reeducation might also be read as a commentary on violence towards gay men in response to their sexuality. In Ben’s other writing, she regularly critiques the trope of homosexuals (mostly lesbians, however) being murdered, harmed, or committing suicide. Thus, I speculate that Ben may have modelled Johnny and Nelly Bly’s injuries on other media where gay men and lesbians were punished through violence, as a result calling her audience’s attention to real acts of violence through the rhetorical use of parody.

**Rhetorical Surveillance**

As we saw above in “Frankie and Johnny,” raid on gay bars or bars that allowed homosexuals to populate there were often to be expected, and Ben was keenly aware of the surveillance of gays and lesbians at the time she wrote her parodies. She told Gershick that she experienced a police raid at a bar in Santa Monica where the police collected names
and humiliated a long-haired gay man by forcing him to take down his pants and expose his genitals (59-60). In addition to the threat of arrest and police violence, homosexuals witnessed surveillance in bars via being surrounded by heterosexuals who visited the bars and observed shows. At the time, bartenders sometimes allowed gay and lesbian customers to occupy a part of the bar. According to Ben, “at the Flamingo when night came…the nongay people would come in—the afternoons were for us” (64; emphasis original).

Ben responds to the reality of police raids in homosexual spaces in her song “That Old Gang of Mine.” This song is a parody of the song “Wedding Bells,” a barbershop song written by Sammy Fain, Irving Kahal and Willie Raskin, was performed by Gene Austin in 1929 and later covered by other male singers, including Steve Gibson (1948), The Four Aces (1954), and Gene Vincent (1956). In the original, the heterosexual male singer bemoans the loss of his male friends to marriage, sharing how lonesome he feels and singing that “wedding bells are breaking up that old gang of mine” (Fain et al.). In Ben’s version, the threat is converted from the wedding bells chiming to the Los Angeles Police Department’s Vice Squad arresting gay people and punishing them with prison time and fines. It is also rhetorically poignant that Ben repurposes the cadence and tune of a song about marriage to describe threats to homosexuals. Homosexual marriage was not legal at the time and wouldn’t be for more than half a century more, and being arrested for loving a partner is the polar opposite to celebrating and legally joining two lovers in the eyes of the state. Additionally, Ben’s song rhetorically brings gay men and lesbian listeners into camaraderie over their shared experience with police surveillance.

While the original version expresses the singer’s loneliness, it doesn’t offer any alternatives or solutions to his problem. In contrast, Ben’s version functions as a real
warning: be careful about undercover cops and raids by the Vice Squad. Ben uses “Vice Squad” to refer to the Vice Division of the Los Angeles Police Department. According to the Los Angeles Police Department, the Vice Division today “is responsible for collecting, recording, maintaining, and disseminating intelligence data on major organized criminal enterprises within and affecting the City of Los Angeles,” and the official website for the Vice Division highlights the focus on “gaming, bookmaking, pornography, [and] prostitution” (“About the Vice Division”). However, one of the Vice Squad’s roles in the mid-twentieth century was to surveil homosexuals, including going undercover to entrap homosexuals in places known to be gay meeting spaces, such as bars or parks. In *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965*, Nan Alamilla Boyd describes the conflation of homosexuality with sex perversion, which allowed it to be controlled by the Vice Division. Although Boyd refers to the San Francisco Police Department (SFPD) here, this description provides us with context for interpreting the Los Angeles Vice Squad’s roles:

Between 1951 and 1957, SFPD annual reports distinguish between rape, prostitution, and sex offenses. “Sex offenses” was a new category and a catchall phrase for nonviolent sex-related crimes. It included contributing to the delinquency of a minor, indecent exposure, obscene literature, lewd and indecent acts, and sex perversion. …Because of national trends and a rhetoric connecting homosexuality to violent crimes, sex offenses related to homosexuality became a predominant concern for city officials. (Boyd 78-79)

Whereas the original male singer bemoans the distance he feels from his happily wedded pals, Ben’s song serves as a practical guide to dealing with the Vice Squad’s surveillance practices. We see this rhetorical instruction in the first and second verses, which both open with the warning to “watch out.” Observe verse one of Ben’s version of “That Old Gang of Mine” (read the full lyrics in Appendix C):
Watch your cruising in the gay bars
Or on Hollywood and Vine
The Vice Squad keeps on breaking up
That old gang of mine.

Now compare this verse to the original one by Fain, Kahal, and Raskin, performed by Gene Austin (full lyrics available in Appendix D), which states:

Not a soul down on the corner
That’s a pretty certain sign
Those wedding bells are breaking up
That old gang of mine. (Fain et al.)

Ben’s verse opens with a warning for homosexuals cruising in gay spaces (bars and streets), which are no longer safe from the Vice Squad. The male singer in the original also acknowledges the lack of people on the street corner, except in his case the disappearance is voluntary, whereas in Ben’s the vacancy is a result of police surveillance.

Both songs’ second verses consider romantic perusal. Ben’s is:

Watch your actions in the rest-room
With the fellow next in line,
He might be with the Vice-Squad
Breaking up that gang of mine.

The original heterosexual version’s verse is:

All the boys are singing love songs
They forgot Sweet Adeline
Those wedding bells are breaking up
That old gang of mine. (Fain et al.)

Both verses mention perusal of a lover. In the original, flirting and pining for women has been replaced with declaring love for specific women, but in Ben’s there is a legitimate fear that undercover police may be posing as homosexuals, so one should be wary of cruising. As in Ben’s first verse, the key takeaway is a warning to gays to hide their love,
while in Austin’s original version heterosexual love is thriving in a conventional, heteronormative trajectory.

The next verse is in my opinion the most interesting in its repurposing of the heterosexual actions of courting to expose the threats homosexuals faced as a result of surveillance and entrapment. Here’s the original verse:

Well, there goes Jack, there goes Jim  
Down to lover’s lane  
Now and then we meet again  
But they don’t seem the same. (Fain et al.)

Here’s Ben’s version of that same verse:

There goes Jack, there goes Jim,  
Off to Lincoln Heights  
Guess we’d better play it cool  
At home, alone, these nights.

Whereas heterosexual Jack and Jim disappeared down a metaphorical route of love and matrimony, Ben’s homosexual Jack and Jim are removed off to Lincoln Heights, a prison in Los Angeles. According to the Los Angeles Conservancy, a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving historic Los Angeles buildings, at one point “the Lincoln Heights Jail became so frequently populated with individuals being held for sex-related crimes that the prison opened a separate wing for inmates suspected of being gay. The wing was given the derogatory nickname of ‘The Fruit Tank’” (“Lincoln Heights Jail”). Ben suggests that it’s a safer bet to “play it cool” alone and at home, avoiding public displays of homosexuality that could likely result in prison time. This verse may be inspired by Ben’s
experience of witnessing a raid on a gay bar in the 1940s, after which police waited outside the bar to apprehend people who left alone (Gershick 60).  

The last verse covers one more threat of surveillance faced by homosexuals: being fined. Ben’s verse is as follows:

You can get a frantic feeling  
Raising dough to pay that fine  
So watch out for the Vice-Squad  
Breaking up that gang of mine!

The original version’s last verse comes off as blasé in comparison to Ben’s warning:

Gee, I get a lonesome feeling  
When I hear the church bells chime  
Those wedding bells are breaking up  
That old gang of mine. (Fain et al.)

Here, the singer feels lonely when he hears the bells and is reminded of the loss of his pals, who are presumably safe and happy at home with their wives. There’s a vast difference between feeling lonesome and frantically attempting to raise enough funds to pay off fines for being found to be homosexual, or even just for being accused of being homosexual.  

So, now that we’ve reviewed the parodic alterations Ben made in her version, what’s the big rhetorical deal with offering a warning via a song? While “That Old Gang of Mine” lacks the comedic puns of “Frankie and Johnny,” its value in rhetorically educating audiences is strategic. Out of all of Ben’s songs, this one most of all brings tears to my eyes. Ben acknowledges the loss of gay spaces for cruising, the loss of gay friends to jail, and the lonely and desperate feelings that homosexuals felt as a result of Vice Squad surveillance and entrapment. In this way, she rhetorically validates homosexuals’ fears of

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14 Ben told Gershick that her friends had told her not to leave after a raid, “Because [the police] lurk outside, and if anyone leaves early, then they harass them again” (60).
violence and entrapment while offering support via camaraderie. Imagine her gay audience listening to her version, while in the back (or front) of their minds they recalled the original version’s crooning about the “inconvenience” of marriage, partnership, and safety in homes. Whereas the original heterosexual version subtly resists the phenomenological progression of love and family-building, Ben’s version cycles like an eerie music box, telling a dark yet credible truth: we may get entrapped, jailed, and fined for loving while homosexual.

**Citizen Surveillance in “Fairy from Tulare”**

One of Ben’s later parodies explores the use of surveillance by citizens in a small town. The original song she parodied is “Okie From Muskogee,” recorded in 1969 by country musician Merle Haggard. Ben’s version retains the same title structure of slang term from small town: “Fairy from Tulare.” Tulare is a small California town 200 miles south of San Francisco and 180 miles north of Los Angeles.

One of the motivating themes in “Okie from Muskogee” is a critique of Vietnam War protesters, a view that Haggard ties to the community of Muskogee in his song. Reading Haggard’s version alongside Ben’s shows the rhetorical impact of having pride in being small town-minded, particularly in terms of traditional gender roles and patriotism. One way both singers emphasize the citizens’ actions being rooted in their small-town identities is by contrasting Muskogee and Tulare with San Francisco. In Haggard’s case, San Francisco is a place for heathen hippies; in Ben’s case, the city offers a safe haven for homosexuals in the face of small-town intolerance. While Haggard doesn’t explicitly mention homosexuality in his version, he does interrogate nonnormative gender
presentation as something un-Muskogeean. In contrast, Ben celebrates gay men and lesbians dressing as they like, something they can only do in San Francisco. Ben critiques Tulare as a response to Haggard’s version of the song, and as a result we can interpret what it’s like to be gay in a small town like Tulare (or, we may assume, like Muskogee).

Let’s examine the rhetorical moves in action. Haggard’s song employs the trope of stating proudly what Muskogeeans do and do not do, actions that he ties to their patriotism and to their rule-abiding nature. Through contrasting a proud small town Muskogeean with homosexuals and hippies, he rhetorically educates his listeners to see those groups as simultaneously un-American. He opens his version as follows (see the full lyrics in Appendix E):

We don’t smoke marijuana in Muskogee
We don’t take trips on LSD
We don’t burn our draft cards down on Main Street
We like livin’ right, and bein’ free. (Haggard)

Aligning drug use with burning draft cards in public immediately elicits thoughts of war protesters. Haggard contrasts these implied hippies’ behaviors with the actions Muskogeeans do: live right and, as a result, enjoy freedom. The act of living “right” is vague on its own (as we’ll see, Ben’s “right” way to live is quite different), but by connecting it to certain behaviors and not others, he begins to define the town and its inhabitants as people who are proud to be straight-laced Americans.

Ben’s first verse also opens with describing a small town, but her focus is on its homophobic citizenry who make it an unsafe space for homosexuals. Full lyrics to this song are in Appendix F, and the first verse reads as follows:

We don’t dare act gay around Tulare,
The people there would run us out of town.
Sometimes we board the Greyhound bound for ‘Frisco
And there we really let our hair hang down. (Ben)

Ben flips Haggard’s structure; whereas Muskogeeans don’t act different and are proud of it, Ben’s gay “we” can’t act authentic in the small town. This is emphasized by the pattern she begins here of praising San Francisco’s welcoming nature in comparison to Tulare’s closemindedness. By dichotomizing Tulare and San Francisco, Ben sets up a rhetorical comparison to reeducate her queer listeners and celebrate a gay-friendly space.

The second verse of both songs elaborates on the small town “good” and “bad” behaviors. Haggard writes:

- We don’t make a party out of lovin’
- We like holdin’ hands and pitchin’ woo
- We don’t let our hair grow long and shaggy
- Like the hippies out in San Francisco do.

Haggard praises the old-fashioned courting and shuns “mak[ing] a party out of lovin’,” which implies wild gatherings and non-monogamous orgies. The next item on his “don’t do” list is breaking gender roles: long hair on hippie men. Although he doesn’t explicitly refer to homosexuals in these two “don’ts,” the mention of gender nonconforming men with long hair next to the discussion of exhibitionist sex could potentially be read as a dig at the stereotype of homosexuals as promiscuous. Rhetorically, Haggard links multiple behaviors in the “don’t” pile—drugs, orgies, unconventional gender—which on its own isn’t surprising, as it presents hippies as unsavory. However, by linking hippies’ nonconventional behaviors with burning draft cards and, as we may assume based on the binary of behaviors listed, living wrong and disrespecting freedom, he guides his audience to identify with, or at least sympathize with, the small-town folks.

Let’s see how Ben builds on her descriptions of Tulare in her second verse:

- We’re cautious with our lovin’ in Tulare.
Just hold hands when we’re at the picture-show.
But in the city, we walk right down Main Street,
Arm-in-arm so all the world can know.

As in verse one, the gay citizens have to be extremely discreet in Tulare, so much so that they can only perform Haggard’s approved method of public affection in secret and under the guise of darkness. This is the first example of Ben repurposing a phrase from Haggard’s version, which she quickly adds to when she describes what can happen on Main Street in a small town versus a city. San Francisco is so welcoming that homosexuals can gladly display their affection in public. Ben coopts two of Haggard’s explicit actions to rhetorically expose the ways that Tulare’s (and, by default, Muskogee’s or any other small town’s) citizen surveillance affects homosexuals. Haggard’s straight citizens are proud of their chaste displays of affection. They’re proud that their Main Street is free of protest. In contrast, Ben’s Tulare penalizes gay affection so much that even in a public place, it must be pitch black before homosexuals can perform the “right” kind of loving. Similarly, the town of Muskogee is seen as “good” by Haggard for its foil to San Francisco, whereas Ben praises the city’s Main Street welcome to proud public displays of affection between homosexuals. In fact, San Francisco is presented here as the opposite of surveillance and prosecution, in that it openly celebrates homosexual loving, and as a result, Ben’s celebration of the city serves to critique the surveillance of homosexuals.

The next verse of both songs is the chorus, including the title as lyrics. Haggard’s reads:

I’m proud to be an Okie from Muskogee,
A place where even squares can have a ball
We still wave Old Glory down at the courthouse,
And white lightin’s still the biggest thrill of all.
This verse shifts from describing the townsfolk to talk about the town, although the title phrase names them in an explicit manner: Okie. According to the Oklahoma Historical Society’s online *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, “Okie’ was not widely used until it became a disparaging term to deride the ways of migratory agriculture workers, who through the usage of the term automatically became associated with Oklahoma” (Logsdon). Haggard’s reclaiming of the slur to symbolize a proud small-town Oklahoman is emphasized with his pride in being a “square” who can have a ball waving the American flag and drinking homemade, illicit whiskey. Haggard is leaning into the stereotypes of “Okies” here, often seen as backwards or rednecks. Haggard’s narrator has great pride in this identity, and he roots it in patriotism and nationalism.

Ben’s chorus parodies the structure of the first and last line. She sings:

It’s tough to be a Fairy in Tulare.
I think I’ll move to ‘Frisco come next fall,
Where you can’t hardly tell the men from the women
And cruisin’s still the biggest thrill of all.

Like before, Ben places Tulare and San Francisco on the opposite sides of a spectrum. She rewrites Haggard’s first line to shift from feeling proud of being a small-town citizen to acknowledging the challenge of living in a small town as homosexual. She replicates the use of a slur, and while her fairy narrator may feel openly proud of their homosexuality in the big city, it’s tough to be gay in Tulare. In the last line, she replaces the thrill of moonshine in the small town with the act of cruising in San Francisco, so once again we see her excitement about the openness of the city through its contrast to the activities available in the small town.
Ben’s parody has six total verses, whereas the original has only five, and her fourth verse serves to develop the critique she offers in her chorus, since her fifth verse aligns with Haggard’s fourth in its function. Here’s what Ben writes in her fourth verse:

There are folks with small-town minds from here to Boston
Who drink and play around and raise a fuss,
Yet some of them still go to church each Sunday
And point and whisper “Shame!” when they see us.

Instead of simply describing how she feels about Tulare, Ben generalizes the hypocritical behavior of “small-town minds” across the United States: they drink (perhaps white lightning?); play around, which may imply adultery or gambling; and they raise a fuss, which may imply disorderly public conduct, complaining, or causing a scene. Despite their bad behaviors, these small-town citizens use going to church as a leverage to shame homosexuals, an action Ben exposes as hypocritical.

The next verse in both Ben’s and Haggard’s versions explores gender presentation and social approval (or disapproval). Haggard writes:

Leather boots are still in style for manly footwear
Beads and Roman sandals won’t be seen
Football’s still the roughest thing on campus
And the kids here still respect the college dean.

His song up until here had focused on political leanings and straight-laced behaviors, and while he had previously critiqued male hippie hairstyles, this is the first time he directly discusses gender: manly men wear this, not that. In addition, college students are on their best behaviors, which implies they are not protesting the Vietnam War on their college campuses. As in the first verse, Haggard rhetorically links disparate behaviors to imply correlation—there it was burning draft cards and doing drugs, here it is disrespected authority via protesting and not dressing like a “man.” This move is rhetorical education in
action: by listing all the things a good Muskogeean does and doesn’t do, Haggard is able to present homosexual men’s clothing as un-American without directly saying it.

Ben’s version of this verse directly responds to the gendered clothing mentioned in Haggard’s verse. She writes:

In ‘Frisco boys wear beads and Roman sandals,
   While girls go roamin’ ‘round in leather boots.
   Squares think our apparel’s such a scandal
   But, frankly, we all think it’s kind of cute.

Homosexuals freely wear whatever they want to wear in San Francisco. While the squares don’t approve, the fairies love their style and their gender presentation via their clothing.\(^{15}\)

Without even mentioning Tulare here, Ben’s referral to “squares” harkens directly to Haggard’s use of the word to describe the citizens of Muskogee.

The last verse of both songs is a repetition of the respective choruses with the addition of the repetition of the last line and the line “In Muskoge, Oklahoma, USA” in Haggard’s version and the following in Ben’s: “(Where gays can all relax and have a ball.).” As before in her use of the phrases “Main Street” or “holding hands,” Ben repurposes Haggard’s line “have a ball” to reemphasize that San Francisco—not the small town of Tulare (and perhaps she is also implying Muskogee)—is where all homosexuals can finally relax and enjoy themselves. In this line and in the verses above, Ben repurposes the exact phrases Haggard uses, such as the boots and sandals, squares, and San Francisco. Just as Ben exposes that which Haggard praises as traditional and American in Muskogee to truly be homophobic and hypocritical in Tulare, she champions the styles and practices

\(^{15}\) Ben refers to similar clothes in the September 1947 issue of *Vice Versa*. In her piece “Here to Stay,” she notes that it is common for men to wear necklaces and dog tags post-WWII (4).
that Haggard casts out of Muskogee. In doing so, she uses queer rhetorical reeducation to celebrate and offer new stories and language around queer identity.

Haggard’s narrator loves his small town for its patriotism and traditions, which he celebrates in small town practices (even the illegal ones) and in gender and courting rules. Ben loves San Francisco for its foil to the small town of Tulare, which is populated with citizens like the Okies from Muskogee whom she reads to be homophobic, closeminded, and hypocritical. The citizens’ surveillance of their fellow citizens’ gender presentations, partners, and affection is linked to their surveillance of other citizens’ commitments to patriotism. Haggard’s impetus to surveil and exclude homosexuals from Muskogee is a small-town example of the large-scale efforts of the United States government to remove homosexuals from government positions and the military during the Lavender Scare of the 1950s and 1960s. Thus, in critiquing Haggard’s love for his small town, Ben exposes the implied homophobia, and even more interestingly, the connection of this homophobia to patriotism and nationalism.

**Part Two: Attraction and Desirability**

In addition to providing a critique of the surveillance of homosexuals in Los Angeles, Ben uses queer rhetorical reeducation in her parodies in an effort to discuss lesbian agency in building community, particularly by praising butch gender presentation and highlighting the joys of the butch-femme lesbian dynamic. In this part of my chapter, I will examine Ben’s parodic use of gender presentation and relationship dynamic in three of her songs—“The Lady is a Butch,” “Always True to You Darling, in My Fashion,” and “The Girl that I Marry”—and I will analyze Ben’s efforts to provide lesbian listeners with
agency. I use the term “agency” here to describe the lesbians’ active decisions to choose how to present their gender and to choose who to date or befriend. As my analyses will show, Ben attempts to rhetorically empower the women in her songs with various methods: subverting heterosexual male ownership with femme agency to choose a highly desired butch partner (“The Girl that I Marry”), praising the performance and attractiveness of intentional butch gender presentation (“The Lady is a Butch”), and creating femme narrators who can choose to attract and set boundaries with a variety of paramours (“Always True to You Darling”).

**Intentional Butch Gender in “The Lady is a Butch”**

I begin this section with Ben’s song “The Lady is a Butch,” which is a parody of “The Lady is a Tramp.” The original’s music and lyrics were by Rodgers and Hart, and it was first performed in the 1937 musical *Babe in Arms*. The song rose in popularity that spans decades, including a cover by Lena Horne in 1948 that appeared in the film *Words and Music*, a cover by Frank Sinatra in the film *Pal Joey* in 1957, and covers in the 1950s and 1960s by heavy hitters like Ella Fitzgerald, Bing Crosby, and Shirley Bassey.

Regardless of the singer, the original version of the song carries similar themes: a woman shirks the high society of New York in favor of less pretentious preferences. While the song itself focuses on the woman’s behaviors and desires, it serves as a social commentary on class-based performances of decorum and commodities. The original *Babe in Arms* version functions via the narrator’s statement of what she will and won’t do, with verses such as the following (see full lyrics in Appendix G):

I get too hungry for dinner at eight
I like the theater, but never come late
I never bother with people I hate
That’s why the lady is a tramp.

I don’t like crap games with barons and earls
Won’t go to Harlem in ermine and pearls
Don’t dish the dirt like the rest of the girls
That’s why the lady is a tramp. (Rodgers and Hart)

The singer repeats this general trope of listing her preferences throughout the song, reinforcing a dichotomy between high society things she doesn’t like or need, like “Lizzie Arden” (cosmetics company), California, and the Ritz, and things she enjoys, like going to Coney beach, “follow[ing] Winchell and read[ing] every line” (a gossip column), and the “free, fresh wind in [her] hair” (Rodgers and Hart). Both Lena Horne’s and Frank Sinatra’s versions repurpose most of the same lines from the original Rogers and Hart, but shift the song to the third person point of view, singing “she” instead of “I.”

Now that we understand the theme and structure of the original version of the song, I would like to examine Ben’s parody. Ben’s version of the song would have been recognizable as a parody due to three things: she retains from the original the cadence and rhyme scheme, the structure of “yes to this, no to that,” and the use of “the lady is a ____,” replacing “tramp” with “butch.” However, instead of offering an exemplary critique of high society, Ben’s parody exposes and undermines a society that pushes heterosexuality and feminine gender performance on women. By showing what her butch main character does and doesn’t prefer and perform, Ben creates a character to whom her lesbian audiences could relate, desire, and aspire. This move is a form of queer rhetorical reeducation, where the emphasis is on championing and celebrating that which society deemed unusual.

Let’s examine the ways Ben rhetorically educates her audience via her song, beginning in the very first verse (see full lyrics in Appendix H):
She dislikes boyfriends, they give her a pain.  
They want to smooch her in some shady lane  
When she’d much rather cruise some engaging young jane,  
That’s why the lady is a butch.

Similar to the original, the butch has dislikes—boyfriends and kissing them—and instead prefers an alternative: the gay act of cruising a fellow homosexual woman. Like the original, which say “that’s why the lady is a tramp,” Ben says that these preferences and actions influence the woman being a butch. The next stanza builds on the initial differentiation of desires, discussing hobbies:

Parlor games bore her until she could scream,  
One round of bridge and she’s way off the beam.  
She’d much rather pitch on a girls’ softball team.  
That’s why the lady is a butch. (Ben)

The mention of lesbians playing on a softball team is both a stereotype and was actually true in Ben’s experience. Ben is developing the butch’s character: a butch woman who prefers women also prefers the playful company of lesbian women to the boring repetition of parlor games.

Before she returns to the cadence of what the butch will and won’t do, Ben includes a quick aside that reinforces the message in the first verse:

If fellows whistle, she passes them by.  
That gleam in her eye  
Is for ladies, only! (Ben)

In this short intermission from the sing-song cadence of “won’t do, will do” actions, the butch actively refuses to engage with heterosexual courting. Ben will mimic this structure

16 Ben tells Gershick that the first group of lesbian friends she made in Los Angeles invited her to go to softball games (47).
later in the song, but first she returns to the “not this, yes that” format and describes why
the lady is a butch based on her clothing:

She won’t wear dresses from Magnin’s or Sak’s,
High heels and nylons won’t let her relax.
She’s much more carefree in bow-ties and slacks.
That’s why the lady is a butch. (Ben)

Out of all the verses in the songs, this one tips its hat most to the original, in that it mentions
specific store names. Ben doesn’t simply say that the butch dislikes dresses, heels, and
nylons—she differentiates them from bow-ties and slacks based on their ability to let the
butch relax and feel carefree. It’s worth mentioning here surveillance of lesbians and gay
men during this time period in regards to wearing clothing assigned to their assigned sex
Community*, Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis cite a butch who
described police harassment she experienced in New York state during the 1950s:

At that time when they pick you up, if you didn’t have two garments that belong to
a woman you could go to jail…and the same thing with a man…They call it male
impersonation or female impersonation and they’d take you downtown. It would
really just be an inconvenience….it would give them the opportunity to whack the
shit out of you. (180)

Thus, while Ben’s parodic dichotomy between dresses and slacks on women may appear
humorous at first, there were real consequences at stake for her listeners.

The final half of the song shifts to give the butch more agency and desirability,
particularly via the use of the phrase “because the lady is a butch” (emphasis mine). The
first example is as follows:

When Gable and Turner romance on the screen
She wants a change in this time-worn routine
With Liz Scott and Hepburn as stars in this scene,
Because the lady is a butch. (Ben)
As you know, Ben worked in Hollywood as a secretary at the RKO movie studios, so she was privy not just to films, but to their sets and to the gossip that occurred on them. It’s important that Ben chose Liz Scott and Hepburn as the potential lesbian relationship in the butch’s preferred film, as she had seen Scott cozied up with another woman at her job at the RKO studios (Gershick 62). By calling the movie romance between Clark Gable and Lana Turner a “time-worn routine,” Ben labels the performance of heterosexuality as both outdated and monotonous. The butch calls for a change to the tedious heterosexual tale because she is a butch—not the other way around, where the woman would become a butch lesbian as a result of dreaming of representations of lesbians on the big screen. While this differentiation between “that’s why” and “because” may seem inconsequential, I argue that Ben is rhetorically flipping the script to give the butch agency to stake claim to her own preferences and desires, versus having them prescribed to her as a categorized identity.

Ben’s next stanza develops this agency by explicitly noting the act of categorizing lesbians:

Week-ends with jam [heterosexual] friends she tries to avoid
They may discuss Kinsey and Adler and Freud
But their views on some subjects just make her annoyed,
Because the lady is a butch.

Alfred Kinsey, Alfred Adler, and Sigmund Freud were famous sexologists who published texts that categorized homosexuals through medical and psychological lenses. Although the texts were written by medical professionals and researchers, they were incredibly popular with the American reading populous. For that reason, Ben’s verse is quite smart in its investigation of dominant rhetorical circulation: she acknowledges that heterosexual laypersons are discussing sexology, which shows that dominant medical discourse has circulated from sexological texts and lectures to weekend gettogethers. However, the butch
chooses not to participate in the discussions about her ilk, because the heterosexuals’ “views” annoy her. These views may include the circulation of dominant discourse under the guise of what we may call “armchair psychology” While Ben is unable to squelch that circulation in real life, she does offer her butch character the opportunity in the parody. Why does she choose not to partake in discussions that potentially categorize her as ill or inverted? Because she is a butch who chooses not to do so.

The penultimate and final verses turn their attention to affirm the butch’s desirability within gay spaces. They are:

And in the gay spots, she’ll dance cheek-to-cheek
Girls love her technique!
She won’t be lonely.

Her ‘phone’s always ringing, and she’s got a list
Of eager young girlfriends, who madly insist
That she has a charm that they just can’t resist—
Because the lady is a butch! (Ben)

These verses highlight the butch’s appeal to the array of women who are entranced by the charm she offers because she is a butch. Coming after the verse about the jam friends pontificating on sexology, it reads as if the butch bypasses their salons and enters into the gleeful space where butches are celebrated—the “gay spots” and the butch’s busy phone. Both the original song and Ben’s version describe a woman who differs from “normal” women—in the case of the tramp, the woman prefers to wander freely than to participate in activities expected of high society women, like gambling, gossip, and rubbing shoulders with wealthy men. In the case of Ben’s butch, she prefers masculine clothing to feminine and playing softball on a team of women to being bored to death by parlor games. Ben’s version tweaks the refrain “that’s why the lady is a ___” to say that certain actions occur because the lady is a butch: she wants lesbian representation in film, she avoids weekend
salons with heterosexuals who pontificate on sexology, and, of course, the fact that a number of women are very attracted to her. Instead of positioning the main butch character as a lonely, wandering tramp, Ben gives her a loving community and many potential dates who desire her precisely because she is a butch. By swapping the words “that’s why” with “because,” Ben provides her butch character with agency, self-esteem, and partners. This rhetorical switch becomes reeducation when we acknowledge that lesbian listeners are learning similar actions that they may choose to perform beyond the generalized ball playing and tie-wearing: call out the triteness of heterosexuality in entertainment, say no to being pathologized (by doctors or by heterosexual friends or acquaintances), and seek out a community who not only welcomes you, but who actively desires you for that which makes you so butch.

**Lesbian Agency in Dating in “Always True to You Darling, In My Fashion”**

Another song that prioritizes lesbian choice and pleasure is Ben’s parody of “Always True to You Darling, In My Fashion.” The original version of the song was written by Cole Porter and first debuted in the 1948 musical *Kiss Me Kate*. It would later be covered by singers such as Ella Fitzgerald, Eartha Kitt, and Peggy Lee, as well as being repurposed for a film adaptation of *Kiss Me Kate* in 1953. The original song is playfully sung by a female narrator who lists and describes numerous wealthy men who have offered her gifts and money in exchange for sex (although sometimes the act of sex is implied rather than explicitly stated). The film version of the song includes additional verses and a male part to the song, sung by the woman’s cuckolded partner. The verses follow a pattern,
describing the man, the exchange, and the refrain that she remains true to her partner (in her fashion). Here are two verses from the 1948 version (see Appendix I for full lyrics):

If a custom-tailored vet
Asks me out for something wet
When the vet begins to pet, I cry “hooray!”
But I’m always true to you darlin’, in my fashion
Yes, I’m always true to you, darlin’, in my way. (Porter)

and

I’ve been asked to have a meal
By a big tycoon in steel
If the meal includes a deal, accept I may
But I’m always true to you darlin’, in my fashion
Yes, I’m always true to you, darlin’, in my way. (Porter)

Although these two verses don’t directly admit that the singer is having sex with the men, she later sings that

There’s an oil man known as ‘Tex’
Who is keen to give me checks
And his checks, I fear, mean that sex is here to stay! (Porter)

Besides this, however, the exchanges are humorously stated and function via rhyme and wordplay, such as

There’s a madman known as Mack
Who is planning to attack
If his mad attack means a Cadillac, okay! (Porter)

Ben’s parody version of this song retains the cadence, rhyme scheme, and variations of the last two lines of the verses. The act in question—a woman being with others and proclaiming that she is true to her lover “in her fashion”—translates exactly, but Ben’s version appropriates the original song for queer purposes. In the original version of the song, the singer is attracted to the men due to their wealth, but in this version, Ben’s singer uses the first and second lines of the verses to describe the female paramours’
physical attributes and the dates they invite her on. Here is Ben’s first verse, for example (full lyrics are available in Appendix J):

If a tall, athletic dyke
Asks me out to take a hike,
I’ll desert my rusty bike without delay….
But I’m always true to you, darling, in my fashion,
Yes, I’m always true to you, darling, in my way.

As we can see, the date in question is not directly sexual, although it does imply that the two lesbians get to be alone, and it implies that both lesbians are attracted to one another. The rest of the verses adapt the structure as follows for the first 3-4 lines, with the same refrain of being true to her darling in her fashion in the last two lines:

If a cute, curvaceous queer
Wants to share her glass of beer,
Who am I to say, ‘My dear, I’m not that way!
……………………
If a girl with hair cut short
Asks me to her tennis court,
If that’s her racket,
I’ll be glad to play!
……………………
If a smartly-tailed miss
Should request a little kiss,
Why should I deny her this, to her dismay?
……………………
If a butch with lots of jack
Drives me in her Cadillac
For a cozy midnight snack in some café [/I’ll be always true to you, darling…]
……………………
If a country lass invites me
To a hayride late these nights
If a hayride means a gay ride
That’s okay (Hey-hey!)
…………………… (Ben)

I’d like to note two rhetorical effects of Ben’s parody. First, and most obvious, Ben’s lesbian narrator repurposes the trope of exchanging dates (sex) for gifts and money from the original—queering it by replacing the men with different lesbians. When she
replaces the wealthy male paramours with everyday women, Ben highlights the fact that
the women are lesbians in place of the original’s focus on the men’s jobs. In Ben’s version,
the women include a dyke, queer, girl, miss, butch, and lass. This act challenges the societal
belief that “the lesbian” is a stereotypical group who all look the same, and further—the
singer is attracted to the many variations of lesbians. Whereas the original version
described the men in relation to their status or wealth, Ben’s version details the women’s
physicality and style (tall, athletic; cute, curvaceous; short hair; smartly-tailored; jacked;
and country), which implies that attraction and desire is what prompts the dates—not a
desire for gifts.

Second, compared to the original version of the song, many of the lesbian narrator’s
dates seem quite tame and cute. The date proposals in Ben’s version include a hike, sharing
a beer, playing tennis, sharing a little kiss, enjoying a midnight café snack, and going on a
hayride. This may be because Ben assumed her audience knew that the original was about
sex, and thus she purposefully amped up the tongue-in-cheek description of seemingly
innocuous acts like tennis and hayrides—but I posit that instead Ben was highlighting the
pleasure of simply going on a date with a fellow lesbian. If the narrator is dating seven
different women (including the one to whom she is true in her fashion), then Ben creates a
remarkable opportunity for her lesbian listeners to also imagine themselves openly dating
women.

**Giving Both Women Agency in “The Girl that I Marry”**

The final song I’d like to analyze in this chapter is “The Girl that I Marry.” The original
version of the song was written by Irving Berlin and appeared in the 1946 musical *Annie*
Get Your Gun, and like other songs I’ve analyzed in this chapter, “The Girl that I Marry” was later performed by famous singers like Frank Sinatra and Eddy Howard, as well as being performed in the 1950 film adaptation and soundtrack record to Annie Get Your Gun. It is always performed by a male, heterosexual singer who describes his future wife, a very submissive and feminine woman. As we can see in the following lyrics, his requirements are listed as demands—she must be, she has to be—which shows his refusal to compromise in command. The full song is:

The girl that I marry will have to be
As soft and as pink as a nursery
The girl I call my own
Will wear satins and laces and smell of cologne

Her nails will be polished and in her hair
She’ll wear a gardenia and I’ll be there
‘stead of flittin’, I’ll be sittin’
Next to her and she’ll purr like a kitten

A doll I can carry, the girl that I marry must be. (Berlin)

The male singer demands a diminutive wife whose girlishness starkly contrasts the woman Ben imagines as the potential future wife in her version of the song. Before I compare and analyze these two versions, I’d like to share Ben’s lyrics for her full song:

The girl that I marry will probably be
As butch as a hunk of machinery
The girl I idolize
Will wear slacks with fly fronts,
Tailored shirts and bow ties.

She’ll walk with a swagger and wear short hair
And keep me entranced with her tom-boy air
‘stead of cruisin’ I’ll be usin’
Her shoulder to lean on while…snoozin’.

A faint-hearted fairy
The girl that I marry won’t be. (Ben)
Ben’s first rhetorical move is starkly ironic, because marriage was not legal between lesbians when she wrote this song. While the narrator could not hope to be legally wed to her future dream wife, her descriptions of the woman’s actions and attributes praise the butch in her daydreams—and as a result, the singer circulates the message that strong, masculine women are attractive. Ben’s descriptions of the butch function as if opposites to the timid potential wife in the original version, although I read this action as more than just a simple flip of the script for humor’s sake. Instead, I read Ben’s parody as a version of queer rhetorical reeducation and an effort to present women with agency, in that the butch is seductive and the female singer chooses her partner.

First, Ben says that her future dream partner will “probably be” masculine, whereas the male singer said his future wife would “have to be” feminine. Ben contrasts the metaphor of “butch as a piece of machinery” with the equally dramatic, yet infantilizing “soft and as pink as a nursery” in the original. The butch has active power to move or create things (like a bulldozer or a crane), whereas the femme is a literal, inactive room (that is, unless it serves its purpose of housing a baby). Next, the narrator shares that she will “idolize” a butch who wears men’s clothing, whereas the man says that the girl he “call[s his] own” will wear lace, satin, and perfume. The spectrum of gender presentation is vast here, but it’s important to note that Ben’s butch’s hypermasculinity is an active decision. The butch is queering the function of men’s dress clothes, appropriating them as her own and as a result becoming incredibly attractive to (idolized by) the singer. The original singer perceives his ideal woman as something he can own like property, but only if she dresses stereotypically feminine and wears perfume for him.
Ben’s next stanza switches up the role of seducer and seduced, opening with additional details about the potential wife’s gender presentation. Ben’s butch “keep[s her] entranced with her tom-boy air,” which is attributed to the butch’s swagger and haircut—two things that would have potentially made her stand out in a crowd as a lesbian. In the original version, the man increases his list of requirements for his potential wife: well-polished nails, a particular flower in her hair—listing what she must do to be with him, versus showing his admiration for these attributes. The next two lines of the middle verse are the epitome of a parody. The original states that when the man chooses to go steady with the woman that she will “purr like a kitten,” presenting her as so incredibly submissive that she is in fact a weak, albeit adorable, baby animal. In Ben’s version, the singer also imagines what she would do if she went steady (stopped cruising): she would use the butch’s shoulder to snooze on! The meaning of this action is not clearly translatable: Ben may have meant that they would share a bed, move in together, share tender moments, or perhaps she meant to highlight the butch’s protective nature over the narrator. Regardless of the explicit meaning, the use of the pause before “snoozin’,” which Ben emphasizes when she sings the song on recordings, provides a snippet of time for the listener to imagine that the word after the pause might be sexual in nature. Instead, per Ben’s witty use of puns and humor, the punchline is romantic and emphasizes the butch’s physical strength and the femme’s agency to choose her kind partner.

The last two lines of the song are a hammer on the nail of the women’s roles. The original ends by saying that the woman “must” be similar to a small, inanimate version of a woman—a doll. In Ben’s version, the potential butch wife is provided with unlimited options outside of being a “faint-hearted fairy.” There are two queer rhetorical moves here:
first, the use of “faint-hearted” mimics the description of what kind of wife the original male singer sought after, and this stands out because it’s the only place in the song where Ben sets a parameter for what the butch woman cannot be. Second, the use of the word “fairy” is double-edged: the image of a mythological fairy mirrors the small demeanor of the wife-as-doll, but the term “fairy” was well known as a descriptor for effeminate gay men. By highlighting the image of the “faint-hearted fairy,” Ben really twists the description of homosexuality, since a butch lesbian would likely not have been called a fairy within the gay community. If we zoom out a little, we can interpret this as Ben saying that an attractive butch partner would be one who embraces the stereotype of a butch, rather than embracing the stereotypes of a feminine homosexual man, or even a femme lesbian.

Ben’s listeners may have been butch, or femme, or somewhere in between, but they all would have received a similar message from her parody: Ben’s potential butch wife is attractive precisely because she chooses to present her “tom-boy air,” and as a result, she becomes attractive. By amplifying the masculine stereotypes of her butch to mirror the heightened femininity of the male singer’s potential wife, Ben simultaneously critiques the diminutization of women and celebrates lesbian relationships. As a result of Ben’s parodic moves, “The Girl that I Marry” offers lesbians a vision of an attractive butch woman via the humorous exaggeration of her masculinity. This humor functions via the rhetorical comparison to the original version’s similarly dramatic revocation of female agency at the whim of a demanding male narrator.
Conclusion

In this chapter, I laid groundwork of reading Ben’s critiques and parodic responses to the circulation of dominant discourse about homosexual agency (or lack thereof) and the respectability and attraction of and by lesbians—particularly the masculine presenting folks, who were often the object of sexological and medical categorization. The songs I’ve reviewed vary in terms of their characters and storylines, but they all perform queer rhetorical reeducation by repurposing and queering the original lyrics. While Ben often relies on humor, she acknowledges real threats that homosexuals faced in terms of surveillance and violence, and she challenges stereotypes of lesbians as undesirable and miserable by focusing on lesbian agency and desire. My next chapter will develop this critique by reading Ben’s critical responses and reviews of plays and films that overtly circulated anti-homosexual discourse via the voice of real and fictional doctors. By examining the rhetorical education that took place in theatres, I’m able to show the impact of Ben’s queer rhetorical reeducation.
CHAPTER 4
THE PROPAGANDA OF MEDICAL ETHOS IN FILMS AND PLAYS

Introduction

This chapter shifts its focus from music to films and plays, yet my interest endures in examining the function of rhetorical education to circulate dominant discourse and of Ben’s circulation of critical and alternative discourse via queer rhetorical reeducation. There was a trickledown effect of messages about homosexuality in post-war United States. This includes medical discourse, such as advertisements to the general public for medical texts that pathologized homosexuals, as well as legal discourse, including obscenity laws that restricted the publication and circulation of positive representations of homosexuality. By examining the ways in which sexological conceptions of lesbians as ill or deviant were dispersed from scholarly or state-sanctioned discourse through films and plays, this chapter focuses on representations of lesbians in films and plays in the early to mid-twentieth century and uses Lisa Ben’s critical and creative writing as a lens for asking the question “What happens when sexological discourse is repurposed and circulated as entertainment as a method of rhetorical education?” I argue that Ben exposed and undermined the rhetorically savvy circulation of medical discourse in these genres. Ben’s criticism teaches readers that citizens did not need to read scientific jargon or dry law texts in their original sources, because films and plays did the work of recirculating their discourse via the guise of entertainment.

Additionally, the trope of the violent or doomed lesbian in films and plays from the early and mid-twentieth century was common. Below, I consider the rhetorical implications of such vilification in two films and one play. Specifically, I observe
how Lisa Ben summarizes and critiques the films and play in issues of *Vice Versa*. All lesbians in the films and plays Ben reviews meet a form of punishment—death, suicide, or banishment—and while they’re active characters in the films, they’re often called monsters or unnatural. I will argue that Ben’s analyses functioned as queer rhetorical reeducation for her readership, both in terms of providing access to storylines with homosexual content in the first place, but more importantly due to her intentional critique of the circulation of anti-homosexual, sexological discourse via entertainment.

The films and plays Ben reviews repurpose medical and sexological discourses and recirculate it under the premise of entertainment. I read this act as dangerous, in that it shifts the genre while retaining the ethos of medical classifications of normal and abnormal, or safe and dangerous. I’m inspired by Lisa Duggan’s description of this method of circulation in her book *Sapphic Slashers: Sex, Violence, and American Modernity*: “…the cultural narrative of lesbian identity—a pathologizing, mainstreamed version—is shown developing at the heart of national institutions of the state, publicity, medicine, and popular as well as literary culture” (3). My research in this dissertation is motivated by a desire to read Ben’s rhetorical move to poke holes in dominant discourses as an opportunity to shift how people think about that discourse. In this chapter, my motivation narrows to the question: how does sexological discourse function in films and plays, which are presented to viewers as entertainment, and how does Ben challenge and undermine this discourse.

My analyses below show the following processes in action in the films and plays Ben reviews: first, lesbians are presented as active or passive threats to “normal” heterosexual women and girls; next, lesbians are judged for their behaviors, either by doctors or citizens who utilize medical classifications as judgements; then, the lesbians
receive punishment; and finally, a moral or threat is presented to the audience. I examine these tropes in depth through the guidance of Ben’s “Cinematic Ramblings” or Drama, Film, or “On Stage” reviews in *Vice Versa*. As my analyses will show, Ben’s critiques extend beyond the films themselves, and she invites her readers to acknowledge the discreet and dangerous circulation of sexological rhetoric within the guise of entertainment.

**Contextualizing Censorship in Film**

When studying a film from this time period, it’s essential that I first acknowledge the Hays Code, or Motion Picture Production Code. In 1922, Will Hays assumed leadership of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association and was “given the job of turning down any regulatory heat” that had been placed on the motion picture industry (Mashon). In his article for the Library of Congress, titled “When ‘Pre-’ Met ‘Code’”—Eighty Years Ago Today,” Mike Mashon writes that

> Hays proved quite the adept politician, shepherding the industry through a series of self-censoring rules and guidelines, first with the ‘Formula’ (1924), then the ‘Don’ts and Be Carefuls’ (1927), and then A Code to Govern the Making of Talking, Synchronized, and Silent Motion Pictures in 1930, or what came to be known as the Hays Code. (Mashon)

The Hays Code existed until 1968, after which it was replaced with a film ratings system (i.e., G, PG, R, etc.). According to a 1947 report by Geoffrey Shurlock, an assistant to the director of the Production Code Administration (PCA), the code was a form of “self-regulation” (140). The PCA was responsible for upholding the Production Code, and it emerged in 1934 in response to protests against “objectionable scenes and dialogue” and threats of boycott by The National Legion of Decency (a Catholic organization) (141). I was drawn to read Shurlock’s take on the Code for two reasons: he was a member of the

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PCA and thus I presumed his published description of the Code would support company opinion, and he published this piece in 1947, the same year Ben published *Vice Versa*, which provides me with context for reading her analyses of films from that time.

The PCA members’ role involved reading scripts, reviewing lyrics and costume choices, suggesting edits to producers, and Shurlock noted that “In addition to other duties, PCA members must keep abreast of public reactions to pictures showing currently, and to be cognizant of present trends of the various pressure groups” (such as the National Legion of Decency) (143). Once a film had been reviewed and deemed “satisfactory,” it was granted a Certificate and a Seal of Approval, which “will be found on one of the early credit titles at the beginning of the picture” (143). It is important to note that films did not need an official Seal of Approval to be distributed, but that the seal may have helped films to reach wider audiences and to avoid protest and boycott.

Having described the PCA’s role, I’d like to examine the Code in a bit more detail. To answer the question “What Is the Code?,” Shurlock responds, “The code is a moral document. It is embodied in a nineteen-page booklet which not only sets forth basic rules governing the portrayal of various subjects, but also gives the underlying reasons for such provisions” (142). The PCA’s role was to uphold three general principles:

1. No picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin.
2. Correct standards of life, subject only to the requirements of drama and entertainment, shall be presented.
3. Law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation. (142)

One of the Code’s particular rules was a provision on Sex, which had also previously been included in the “Don’ts and Be Carefuls” list. According to the Motion Picture Producers
and Distributors of America, Inc., “The sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld. Pictures shall not infer that low forms of sex relationship are the accepted or common thing” (7). The actual bans under the category of Sex varied, including “Excessive and lustful kissing, lustful embraces, suggestive postures and gestures, are not to be shown,” “Miscegenation (sex relationships between the white and black races) is forbidden,” “Children’s sex organs are never to be exposed,” and of particular interest to my study—“Sex perversion or any inference to it is forbidden” (Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, Inc. 7).

While the Code did not explicitly list homosexuality as a banned topic, film makers were aware that “sex perversion” implied homosexuality. According to Fiona Cox in “Closet Cases: Costuming, Lesbian Identities and Desire, Hollywood Cinema and the Motion Picture Production Code,”

The Code ostensibly shut down the possibility of representing lesbian characters in mainstream film until 1961. At that point, an alteration allowed for the depiction of homosexuality—if treated in a tasteful manner and not shown to be a positive or valid live choice. (43)

From 1961 to the Code’s dismissal in 1968, homosexuality could only be suggested in films, whereas from 1934 through 1961, “even inference to homosexuality was prohibited in Hollywood cinema” (44).

**Discreet Rhetorical Education in Films and Plays**

Despite the restriction on homosexual inference and suggestion by the Hays Code, directors and actors found ways to include references to homosexuality within their films by portraying homosexuality as sinful or pathological. Unfortunately, many of these representations employed gross stereotypes of homosexuals as deviant villains whose
gender presentation was abnormal (i.e., gay men were sissies and weak, lesbians were masculine and tormented).

**The Role of Propaganda in Children of Loneliness**

The first film I'll analyze is *Children of Loneliness*. However, in order to grasp the importance of Ben’s critique of this film, it’s first necessary to consider her opinion on the novel that loosely inspired it, *The Well of Loneliness*. Ben’s reviews of both Radclyffe Hall’s novel and its film adaptation reject constructions of lesbian identity and experience as inherently dark or deviant. She notes in the “Bookworm’s Burrow” review in the July 1947 issue of *Vice Versa* that Hall’s novel “is a revelation of the life and thought processes of a lesbian” (3). She praises *The Well of Loneliness* for being “beautifully and comprehensively written” and suggests that Hall “neither praises nor condemns the contradictory nature of her main character, Stephen Gordon, but gives the reader an insight… into the problems that Stephen and her kind must face in this unsympathetic, heterosexual world” (3). Stephen Gordon, the protagonist of *The Well of Loneliness*, subscribes to a congenital argument about sexual inversion. Ben’s review quotes particular sections from the novel, and she engages her lesbian readers with analyses of topics in each section. For example, in reference to a section about Stephen’s childhood crush on her family’s maid, Ben suggests that Stephen’s feelings “will probably recall to the minds of the more sympathetic readers their own similar youthful crushes” (4). Here, Ben uses “sympathetic” to mean alliance with fellow lesbians, compared to medical uses of it to categorize lesbians as ill. Later, when discussing Stephen’s mother’s adverse reaction to Stephen’s inversion, Ben writes that “Anna Gordon, incapable of the fine understanding of her deceased husband, and reacting in the usual stupid manner, is shocked and mortified”
(5). Stephen’s father, informed about inversion by medical books, had accepted her as she is, while Ben’s reference to Anna’s “usual stupid manner” speaks to disdainful public judgment and rejection of lesbians. Ben’s analyses invite readers to sympathize with Stephen and to judge her mother. This emotional appeal is also a form of rhetorical reeducation for Ben’s readers. If we apply her sentiments to readers’ real lives, Ben may be offering comfort and support for lesbians who have experienced trauma in relation to their family’s homophobia, as well as offering another interpretive lens for readers to look through than what they see in Anna’s judgment of Stephen.

While Ben’s review focuses on summarizing *The Well of Loneliness* for those who haven’t read the novel, her conclusion extends the novel into real life. She writes that *The Well of Loneliness* “carries a powerful message—a plea against senseless persecution and intolerance, and despite its tragic nature, the novel imparts words of hope and inspiration for members of the third sex” (10). The “tragic nature” Ben refers to is Stephen’s loss of her family and her lover due to the nature of her being “the third sex.” Ben’s reading of “persecution and intolerance” offers a critical counterpoint to public views of lesbians as dangerous, emphasizing instead that the oppression faced by lesbians may result in insanity, suicide or, in Stephen’s case, a depressive loneliness. Ben is performing two reeducational moves in this review. The first is teaching her readers how to interpret and relate to the treatment of lesbians, both in the text and in their real lives. The second may appear less rhetorical on the surface, yet it enables readers to learn more about cultural beliefs about lesbians: she is summarizing this popular text for readers who could not access it. Readers of *Vice Versa* may not have had access to novels, films, or plays with
lesbian content, or they may not have wanted to risk being seen consuming media about homosexuals, but Ben allows them to vicariously partake in the content.

While Ben finds hope for social change in the end of Hall’s novel, she bitterly critiques the film adaptation, *Children of Loneliness*, for its treatment of those deemed biologically “third sex” or “invert.” Released by Jewel Productions Inc. in 1937 and directed by Richard A. Kahn, the film features actors Luana Walters and Jean Carmen. Another actor in this film is worth particular mention: one “Dr. S. Dana Hubbard,” who plays himself in the introduction and conclusion to the film and whom Richard Barrios writes in *Screened Out: Playing Gay in Hollywood from Edison to Stonewall*, *Children of Loneliness* was “allegedly of the New Youth Health Department” (158). Barrios calls *Children of Loneliness* an “exploitation melodrama” that “ran in dingy dives specializing in adult-only films that would neither apply for nor be granted Production Code certificates” (158). Ben opens her Film Review of *Children of Loneliness* in the first issue of *Vice Versa* by noting how she found out about the film: “It was with great anticipation that I went to see “Children of Loneliness,” based, according to newspaper advertisements, upon “Well of Loneliness,” that most admirable novel penned by Radclyffe Hall” (9).

While we cannot know for sure what specific advertisement Ben is mentioning in her review of *Children of Loneliness*, I would like to examine two different advertisements for the film that provide context for contemporary readers who are reading Ben’s critique about the film in 1947. The first advertisement (Figure 4.1) is from 1935, and was preserved in a Library of Congress article by Cary O’Dell. The second (Figure 4.2) is from a May 1950 issue of the *Long Beach Independent*. 
One of the first things we notice in the 1935 advertisement (Figure 4.1) is a drawing of two women, one dressed in a blouse or dress and one dressed in a suit and tie. The suited woman has her arm wrapped around the one in a dress, which implies that she is a lesbian without showing the women embracing or showing affection. The ad also features a repetition of capitalized warnings that this film is for “ADULTS ONLY!” alongside sensationalized statements about the homosexual characters. Although this film was not approved by the Hays Code, I’d like to draw attention to the advertisement’s promise that while the film is
“definitely adult entertainment,” it features “nothing to offend the most refined of tastes.”
To further reinforce the appropriateness of the film for cultured theater-goers, the ad is
directly marketed to “normal” people: “every normal person should see this, an amazing
picture” (emphasis in original). These normal people are presented in comparison to the
homosexual characters, who are “born to tragedy!,” for whom “life’s a grim jest!,” and for
whom “love’s a hideous travesty!”—a rhetorical action that preemptively praises potential
eheterosexual viewers for their difference from those whose sensational stories they are
consuming.

The 1950 advertisement (Figure 4.2), printed after Ben’s review and thus for a
different showing of the same film, displays a similarly sensationalized view of
homosexuals as abnormal. Whereas the advertisement from 1935 showed two women
touching, this one shows a drawing of a bleak, dark void covered by a question mark and
wedged between two sides of a male and female face, symbolizing the homosexual
character’s confounding, inhuman nature. Under this image, we see the phrase “THE
THIRD SEX.” The third sex, unlike a normal man or woman, is presented as one of
“nature’s tragic mistakes,” and the advertisement also uses the word “unusual” to describe
the characters’ “unnatural and forbidden” love. While the film and its advertisements
needn’t have met Hays Code criteria to be circulated, both advertisements attempt to
differentiate between the normal, cultured, theater-loving public (who are implied to all be
heterosexual) and the abnormal, monstrous third sex/homosexual, whose stories are
sensationalized for entertainment.

Advertisements such as these served to fascinate (or titillate) heterosexual
audiences and draw them to purchase movie tickets, but they also attracted homosexual
audiences to see representations of their kind on the big screen. Ben writes in a drama review in the August 1947 issue of *Vice Versa* that a newspaper review mentioning homosexuality in the play “No Exit” had similarly drawn her to watch it so she could review it for her readers. In her review of “No Exit,” Ben describes fellow viewers who also may have been drawn to the theater due to mentions of lesbianism:

The audience who attended the performance was a motley lot. Previous newspaper reviews informed readers about the lesbian character in the play, and it was clear to see that quite a few in the audience were probably drawn there by this factor. Aside from the usual smattering of minor motion picture players and cultural people who make it a point to attend legitimate theatre performances, there were quite a few nattily dressed lads who seemed to come together by pairs, or in groups. Here and there could be seen a neatly tailored woman, alone, or with a woman companion. Some of them who came together were not the tailored type. (14)

It’s important to acknowledge the differences between *Children of Loneliness* and “No Exit”: the first was unable to pass the Motion Picture Production Code, whereas the second was an existentialist French play written by Jean-Paul Sartre. However, while these performances varied in their intended cultural audiences, we know that homosexuals attended the showings—even though they were not originally written for homosexual audiences. While Ben describes the scene at the showing of “No Exit,” Barrios notes that a *Motion Picture Herald* critic who attended a showing of *Children of Loneliness* “ended his report by noting, for one of the first times in history, the reaction of gay audience members to a gay-themed movie” (160).

**Lisa Ben’s Rhetorical Review of *Children of Loneliness***

In the first issue of *Vice Versa* in June 1947, Ben offers a “Film Review” on *Children of Loneliness*, which she suggests “in no way resembles” *The Well of Loneliness* besides a shared last name of Gordon (9). As she does in most reviews of literature, plays,
and films, Ben provides a summary of the plot interspersed with analyses and personal opinion. A warning that accompanied the film particularly disturbs Ben, and her critique extends beyond the film itself to engage with the film’s support of pathologizing theories and stereotypes about homosexuals. In other words, Ben acknowledges this as a rhetorical move by the film’s director. She writes:

Prior to the story, a “scientific” preface to the film is delivered on the screen, newsreel fashion, by a doctor or social worker, in an attempt to lend dignity and prestige to the film. If this is the type of social worker to which our society is exposed, then Heaven help our civilization! The references to homosexuality as a “weakness” and an “evil” are an insult and an abomination to any clear-thinking and right-minded person, whether normal or a member of what is so aptly referred to as the “third sex.” (Ben 10)

Here, we see Ben noting the film’s incredulous application of medical discourse via the figure of a doctor. She continues this critique by directly quoting the doctor and then responding to his use of disparaging rhetoric. Observe as she opens with his quote and then offers her response:

“Let this picture be shown to every adult, so that he (or she) will know how to combat such abnormal love and will not be dragged into the depths of degradation” is the moral that the doctor preaches. Ah, self-styled judges, who smugly carve the standards for society! If only you would not condemn them as freaks, as weaklings, tragedies of nature, or worse, despise, scorn, or laugh at them. If only the third sex could be recognized and accepted as equally as “honorable” as their smug and uncomprehending fellows who dare to pass judgment upon them! (Ben 10)

Ben recognizes the conflict that the preface attempts to create between inverts or the third sex and “normal” members of society. In these two paragraphs, Ben employs multiple methods of queer rhetorical reeducation in effort to challenge the supposed doctor’s use of medical discourse to spread propaganda to film-goers. She suggests that all “clear-thinking and right-minded” people should feel offended by the preface’s connection of inversion to weakness and evil, and she later critiques the smugness of the doctor and “judges” like
him. I’d like to point out that Ben’s use of the phrase “clear-thinking and right-minded” feels like a direct response to the 1935 newspaper advertisement’s appeal to “every normal person.” Next, by calling the doctor’s judgment “self-styled,” Ben undermines his authority as an expert on homosexual experience, and by labeling the preface “scientific” in quotation marks, she challenges the ethos of the speaker. By wishing that judges like doctors and other “smug and uncomprehending fellows” would discontinue their numerous cruel names and abuses towards homosexuals, Ben sarcastically criticizes the judge’s “honor.” Finally, in describing the preface as cruel and unfounded, she challenges the doctor’s description of homosexuality as “degradation” and thus welcomes her readers to agree with her rejection of the preface by positioning it as slander.

While the film was either never submitted to the PCA for consideration or was submitted and was not awarded a Seal of Approval (assumedly due to its “sex perversion” content), Jewel Productions, Inc. did apply for copyright. Barrios notes in Screened Out that “[t]he cautionary tone taken by Dr. Hubbard was echoed in a statement Jewel included in the copyright submission, no doubt to ensure protection against arrests” (158). That copyright submission describes the film as “an educational and scientific presentation of an absorbing subject that deals with the manifestations, evil associations, and mental complexes that affect and misdirect normal adults into channels resulting in homosexuality [sic]” (O’Dell 1). The copyright submission delves into medical discourse, stating that homosexuality “is an acquired anomaly requiring only the influence of some exciting cause to become manifest” and extends from medical categorization to the use of scare tactics: “[in] their effort to satisfy their desires these unfortunate people often stoop to the most loathsome practices” (O’Dell 1).
Both the doctor’s warning and this copyright statement serve to preemptively satisfy any morality protests by professing that the film is a warning that is meant to safeguard the (assumed to be heterosexual) public. In fact, another part of the copyright statement directly employs a rhetorical appeal via pathos and ethos, stating that "[t]he story of these inverts is a tragic one and reveals the known fact that these people are mentally sick and their only hope lies in treatment by competent physicians…” (1-2; emphasis added). The copyright statement ends by reiterating the film’s educational value: “...but because these particular individuals are shunned by society, they do not know there is a cure for them, and as a result, medical science has little chance of winning out against a conspiracy of prudery and ignorance” (O’Dell). As a result of these warnings, and as I will argue later, via the vilification and killing off of homosexual characters, the film found success even without an MPA Seal of Approval.

Ben’s review of *Children of Loneliness* summarizes the film and notes two key deaths. First to die is Bobby, a lesbian whose unrequited love for her coworker, Eleanor, led to dismissal from her job, and who attempts to attack Eleanor and her sweetheart, Dave. Auspiciously,

Dave intervenes just in time, accidentally spilling the acid onto Bobby, who runs screaming into the street and is killed by a speeding automobile. Dave is also slightly sprinkled with acid. Eleanor’s tender ministrations to Dave rekindle their romance. Vanquished Bobby’s death shriek provides a background for their first kiss, as “true love” triumphs. (Ben 11)

Like her writing of “scientific” in reference to the doctor in the preface, Ben’s placement of “true love” within quotation marks is a tongue-in-cheek critique of the film’s “lesson” about homosexual morbidity: lesbians are violent and obsessive, likely to die as a result of their inherent danger. The use of acid feels poignant, in that Bobby’s homosexual desire
had permanently disfigured Dave, even if “true [heterosexual] love” ultimately protected the “normal” couple form the shrapnel of a lesbian’s tragic fate in film: death. It is important to note that Bobby died only after being “vanquished,” again highlighting a notion that lesbians would be best removed from society. Bobby’s death is a precursor to the television and film trope currently known as “bury your gays,” which I will explore in depth in my conclusion to this dissertation. Bury your gays refers to the statistically high number of homosexual characters (specifically lesbians, bisexual, and queer women) who die in television shows and films. I suggest that Bobby’s death employs a version of this trope, motivated by the rhetorical purpose of featuring a dangerous and doomed lesbian character in a film from that time: circulating a sensationalized stance about the dangers lesbians posed to heterosexual women.17 This message may have functioned to scare heterosexual viewers, but I imagine that homosexual viewers received a similar message: the life of a lesbian is a dangerous one, best kept hidden entirely.

As if Bobby’s death were not enough to fulfill the “educational and scientific presentation” promised in the copyright statement, another homosexual character meets his death—this time at his own hand. The second to die in the film is Paul, a homosexual artist who is driven to suicide after the “country’s greatest art critic” reviewed his art “as being the work of a woman assuming a masculine name” (Ben 12). After having drunkenly left a drag show he called “disgusting,” the last words Paul speaks are to his valet: “You can have a girl. You can be married. You can—have—children…” (12; emphasis original). He

17 Many scholars have studied the trope of lesbian death and doom in pulp novels from this time, such as Katherine Forrest’s book Lesbian Pulp Fiction: The Sexually Intrepid World of Lesbian Paperback Novels, 1950-1965 and Yvonne Keller’s chapter “Pulp Politics: Strategies of Vision in Pro-Lesbian Pulp Novels, 1955-1965” from the book The Queer Sixties.
is later found dead, and “A close-up of Paul’s dead hand clutching futilely at the flimsy feminine costume is flashed on the screen” (13). This desolate scene ends the movie and suggests a similar queer fate to Bobby’s encounter: there is no hope for the invert—in work, in love, in mental stability.

After Paul’s death, the doctor from the preface appears in a closing statement and warns, “If, by showing this picture, one person has received benefit thereby, if one person has been reclaimed…,” suggesting that the film should terrify viewers away from homosexuality (13; emphasis original). Of this, Barrios writes:

Dr. Hubband, whoever he was, filled in whatever psychological or dramatic holes as remained after the plots wrapped up and the homos died, just as early hard-core movies employed bogus sex therapists to put everything in a barely redeemable context, just in case. (159)

With a similarly critical response, Ben closes her review by labeling the film a “vicious piece of propaganda,” noting not the doctor’s final remarks, but rather the film’s depiction of homosexuals “in a most unfavourable light” (13). To emphasize the film’s effects on her fellow audience members, she notes that

The few close-up scenes of effeminate men in the cafes were met by wisecracks and snickers by quite a few in the audience. And so it is that most of us who are accustomed to see a man and a woman look longingly at each other, are wont to laugh because any other combination seems new, and therefore grotesque and odd. (13)

Ben’s use of the word “propaganda” is aimed squarely at the film’s depiction of homosexuals as abnormal and immoral, which shows her awareness of the film’s potential to educate audience members to categorize homosexuality as not just a sin, but a threat to oneself and to others.

Whereas The Well of Loneliness (and Ben’s review of it) had offered sympathy for lesbian readers who may have felt categorized as dangerous and sick alongside Stephen
Gordon, *Children of Loneliness* takes something that was dear to homosexuals (a vague connection to the beloved novel) and repurposes it to reinforce the belief that heterosexuality is normal and right due to its stark difference to the hazards of homosexuality. Coopting *The Well of Loneliness* in *Children of Loneliness* is dangerous, because it erases and replaces the cultural import of *Well of Loneliness*, which had been praised by lesbians like Ben for representing homosexual experience via the voice of an actual lesbian. Ben’s review is particularly important for lesbians who had seen the film but not read *Well of Loneliness*, because it shows that the film slanders a book that Ben argues ethically represents lesbian life by showing how homophobia affects one’s lived experience. We can read Ben’s review of this film as both a critique of scientific and medical classifications of inverts and of the morbid characterization of homosexuals as violent and doomed. Through her attempts to reeducate her readers alongside the film, Ben’s analyses encourage *Vice Versa’s* readers to imagine their lives outside of the restrictions placed on them by such categorizations and popular stereotypes perpetuated in *Children of Loneliness*.

**The Predatory Lesbian as a Symbol in College for Scandal**

In addition to reviewing popular films, Ben reviewed live drama productions. The first example of this is a “Drama Review” in the June 1947 issue of *Vice Versa* for the play *College for Scandal*, which was created in 1943 in Melbourne, Australia by the author Wallace Parnell. On the surface, the play is a murder mystery: a pregnant female student is killed, and we later discover the man who impregnated her also murdered her in an attempt to protect his identity. Although the main plot revolves around this murder, Ben wrote that
the “rather unusual play” felt worthy of review in *Vice Versa* due to “its constant undertone of possible lesbian relationships amongst some of the characters portrayed” (3). In my analysis of Ben’s review, I focus on the play’s implication that lesbians are predatory villains via the use of one symbolic character.

The play’s setting is a school for young women, presided over by a headmistress named Janet Grange, who we learn has intimate relationships with her students behind the closed doors of her private rooms. The sexual nature of these relationship is implied versus shown explicitly—Ben describes one occurrence to her readers as follows: “…one can see, as the curtain closes on the first scene, that Janet Grange intends to make her little protege feel—right at home” (5). *Vice Versa*’s readers learn about Grange’s character through Ben’s visual observation of her as “a tall, plain austere woman, attired in a severely tailored suit…masculine”—all implications of lesbian attire (Ben often uses “tailored” as a descriptor for lesbians based on their outfits) (4).

Per Ben’s summary, as the plot progresses, we learn that one of Grange’s previous favorite girls has fallen pregnant, which is uncanny, as the campus is supposedly devoid of men (besides the aged groundkeeper, who is not considered as a suspect). After threatening to expose the man who impregnated her unless he agrees publicly to marry her, the young woman is found murdered, having been pushed out of a window. A policeman arrives on campus to search for the murderer. Eventually, Grange is exposed when her assistant, Mary Wright, overhears Grange professing her love to another young woman. Wright vocally disapproves of Grange’s behavior, and Ben describes the scene as follows: “Mary Wright, listening to their conversation, is incensed and outraged. With the attitude of scorn all too prevalent of her ilk, she comes out into the open denouncing Janet Grange as ‘an unnatural
monster’ and ‘an abomination of god’” (8). In response, Grange attempts to strangle Wright, but is prevented from murdering her by the authorities. Immediately after, Grange shrieks as she propels herself to her death out a window, the same way she had murdered the young woman. It is only in the last two paragraphs of Ben’s review that we learn the secret of the play: “Some of us will be happy to learn that the solution to the mystery reveals that Janet Grange was a man…” on the run having escaped from prison (8).

There are two key elements to the ending of the play that I’d like to investigate further. First, in relaying the scene where Wright challenges Grange, Ben peppers the summary with her own critique of the “prevalent” use of “scorn” rooted in language that presents lesbians as not just abnormal or strange, but truly as threatening monsters or abominations among the human species. This use of medicalized language to categorize lesbians as subhuman is pertinent to my argument in this chapter: this play, meant to entertain viewers with the genre of a mystery, is in fact teaching them how to recognize and label lesbians in their midst. Whereas Ben sees Grange as “tailored” and “masculine,” Mary Wright uses disapproving language to categorize Grange’s behavior as deviant and to categorize Grange herself as a predatory monster.

My second interest is in the fact that Grange was a predatory heterosexual man disguised as a lesbian for most of the play. While Ben writes that “this conclusion entirely dispels the obvious inference of romance between two women,” most of the play had been propelled by the actions of a predatory lesbian character (8). Grange was a villain because he coerced his students into sex and then murdered a young woman so that he could keep up his predatory behaviors—which he could only continue under the mask of being a lesbian.
The damaging representation of lesbians via Grange’s gender swap is rhetorically complex. When we don’t know that Grange is a convict on the run and disguising himself as a woman, we assume she is a closeted, predatory lesbian. Therefore, Grange’s ultimate demise by his own hand—which occurs before his secret is exposed—reinforces the trope of homosexual deaths as resolutions in entertainment. I posit that even when he is exposed to have been pretending to be a woman, the damage has already been done: the audience has already been shown a vetted representation of lesbian behavior. After all, this play had been valued enough as an entertaining story to be circulated across oceans, memorized by a cast, and performed for a paying audience. Although Ben does not mention this in her review, I would like to add that storylines such as Grange’s reinforce damaging stereotypes of transgender and gender nonconforming people as predators, which is why it’s important to critique stories like this one. Discourse around “men pretending to be women” or “women pretending to be men” to access private spaces like restrooms or schools and vulnerable populations like students and children continues decades later in efforts today to prevent transsexual people from accessing rights.

Double Standards for Punishment in Club de Femmes

*Club de Femmes* is a French film that was produced in 1936 and later circulated in the United States. In her analysis of Ben’s review of *Club de Femmes* in her article “Proto-Queer Media Criticism: ‘Cinema Ramblings’ from an RKO Secretary,” Candance Moore acknowledges Ben’s use of subtext, or that which is implied, via a homosexual lens. For example, Ben describes an early scene of the film where we see “energetic ‘tom-girls’ romping with boxing gloves, or at play on the trapeze. A few vie with their more fragile
sisters splashing about in the pool. Action shots indicate much gaiety everywhere, much flashing of strong limbs and scantily-clad femininity” (Ben, “Cinema Ramblings” 13).

Moore writes that

Through drawing out missing or subtextual elements in the films she analyzes, Ben boldly explicates and reauthors media with any suggestion of homoeroticism or lesbian difference. She brings a magnifying glass to her projects, relying upon powers of meticulous description to suggest how to identify with and eroticize cinematic characters from a lesbian perspective. (19)

I concur with Moore about the value in Ben’s method of educating her audience in how to engage with films with lesbian characters and content, and I’d like to extend my study of Ben’s review beyond description of homosexual characters’ behavior to examine the ways Ben weighs this behavior alongside similar behaviors by and treatment of heterosexual characters for the purpose of rhetorical education.

Ben reviews the film Club de Femmes in the July 1947 issue of Vice Versa. Although the film involves multiple storylines, Ben places most of her attention on describing the experience of a lesbian character named Alice. In what I will argue is an effort to undermine the medicalized classification of lesbians as deviant, Ben acknowledges Alice’s relatability and respectability, particularly by equating her actions to that of a hypothetical heterosexual man. Below, I read Ben’s efforts to expose the role of double standards in punishing lesbian and heterosexual characters in an effort to answer my key question for this chapter: what are the rhetorical effects when medical discourse circulates via entertainment?

In order to comprehend the double standards that Alice encounters in punishment for a crime she commits, it’s important to understand the context and setting for the film. The first portion of Ben’s summary describes the setting of the Club, which the Club’s
leader “likens…to a city of women” (Ben 12). One of the rules for living in the Club de Femmes is that no men are allowed. Ben describes the comedic actions taken by Mademoiselle Rivier, a talented dancer who repeatedly attempts to sneak her boyfriend into the club, including dressing him like a woman, until they are discovered, the boy is kicked out, and Rivier is “brought before the board of directors and severely reprimanded” (13). Although viewers may have expected that Rivier would be banned from the club due to breaking the rules, “Dr. Aubry, house physician…pleads in favor of the dancer and it is decided that she may remain in the Club des [sic] Femmes, providing that she behaves herself from then on” (13). Even when it is discovered that she is pregnant, Mademoiselle Rivier is allowed to remain in the Club, where “the conclusion of this little episode is a happy one” (13).

Ben’s review then shifts to the second plot in the film, when we meet Alice, a lesbian who “is aware that she is ‘different,’ but does not know why” (13). Alice develops a crush on a pretty blonde woman who also lives at the Club de Femmes and endeavors to tutor her in spelling and writing. The film depicts scenes where Alice is secretly pining for the heterosexual woman during tutoring sessions, which Ben reports in detail for her readers:

One of the most expressive scenes shows Alice, bending lovingly over her friend, dictating a passage from a poem, presumably as a spelling exercise. How beautiful and melancholy her eyes, how wistful her voice as she dictates, three or four words at a time, the simple verse which says, ‘Come away with me, we two shall live together…’ (14)

Ben’s description of Alice’s longing employs the subtexting method praised by Moore, and I imagine that Vice Versa’s lesbian readers may have related to Alice’s emotional experience. While Ben interprets Alice’s attraction to the blonde woman via description,
she writes that “Alice, however, not understanding her own nature, holds herself reserved and aloof at all times. Alice’s self control and fine conduct is much to her credit…” (14). Here, Ben begins to acknowledge Alice’s respectability in her love for her friend, which foreshadows her defense of Alice after she seeks revenge against Helene, a female switchboard operator for the club “who also secretly acts as a procuress for her male companion on the outside” (14). Helene orchestrates the sexual assault of Alice’s crush, after which “Alice finds her in the shower frantically laving herself as if to cleanse away her sins. The girl sobs her story to Alice, who listens in grim, stony silence. The blonde leaves the Club des [sic] Femmes, a broken and dejected girl, telling no one of her departure” (14). Incensed when she learns of Helene’s role in the rape of her crush and “deranged with grief, [Alice] obtains poison from the Club doctor’s laboratory. Determined that Helene should pay for deliberately ruining the life of her dear friend, Alice poisons the hussy and confesses her crime to Dr. Aubry” (14). What happens next is poignant in its foil to Dr. Aubry’s previous treatment of Mademoiselle Rivier:

The doctor agrees to conceal the crime from the authorities, since Helene’s death appears to be suicide, but she does not prove as kind and companionable as she was to the unfortunate dancer, Mademoiselle Rivier. Dr. Aubry denounces Alice as an unnatural monster, and when the girl declares no further interest in life, the despicable creature takes advantage of Alice’s dejected mood to banish her to a leper colony far across the sea. Thus, to her narrow way of thinking, Dr. Aubry absolves herself in the eyes of her God for concealing the crimes from the authorities and saving the Club des [sic] Femmes from notoriety. (14-15)

General theater-goers received a message via Dr. Aubry’s response to Alice’s crime: lesbians are sick, violent abominations, and as a result should be extracted from normal society.

Having explored the film’s conclusion, I inquire whether this fictional doctor’s disdain for Alice differs that much from the supposed “real” Dr. Hubbard’s “warning” to
the audiences of *Children of Loneliness*. As Barrios noted in *Screened Out*, there isn’t a way to prove that Dr. Hubbard was truly an accredited doctor, and I argue that regardless of his actual training, the effect on audiences is similar across both films: doctors believe that lesbians are unnatural, violent, and doomed to death or banishment—regardless if their behaviors are similar to their heterosexual peers—and this belief is circulated via the ethos of doctors’ professional opinions.

Ben’s film and play reviews are incredibly important, because they offer *Vice Versa*’s readers an opportunity to participate in a critique that is not offered as an option within the films or plays themselves. For example, in response to Dr. Aubry’s sentencing of Alice, Ben uses the pages of *Vice Versa* to acknowledge the doctor’s hypocrisy, labeling her a “despicable creature” with a “narrow” mind who banished a woman whom Ben found respectable. She further undermines Dr. Aubry’s banishment of Alice, writing:

> The role of Alice was portrayed with admirable good taste. One could not help but admire the character of the quiet, self-contained lesbian who bore such great affection for her girl friend, yet forbore, even when entreated repeatedly to do so, to enter her girl friend’s room to keep her company in the evenings. Possessed of beauty, both spiritual and physical, Alice was reserved, dignified, intelligent and honorable at all times, even when perpetrating her crime, which was, to her, a justifiable revenge. (Would not a wronged husband or lover be inclined to similar actions?) (15)

While Ben’s respect for Alice’s chastity may at first be read as prudish or in support of censorship of lesbian sexuality, instead I believe Ben is rationally challenging the stereotype of lesbians as predatory to straight women. Had Alice accepted her crush’s invites to join her in her bedroom, she would have accessed her friend in an intimate manner to which she had not consented. Because Ben’s *Vice Versa* audience was explicitly lesbian or allies to lesbians, she had no reason to defend Alice’s character against an accuser in its pages. Instead, I believe she is offering her community of readers an alternative reason
for why they should individually dismiss the film’s “moral” ending. Ben reinforces this logic by comparing Alice’s revenge to that of a heterosexual man, whose violent revenge would likely have been considered justified, if not celebrated. Ben is exposing the explicit homophobia that Dr. Aubry employs in the film, which the audience thus connects to lesbian revenge, or to a violent lesbian stalker trope. Although Ben cannot actively change the result in the film, she offers her readers a rhetorical method for interpreting and undermining medicalized categorizations of lesbians as violent or unnatural.

In the final paragraph of her review, Ben writes that the film “should be highly recommended for all who enjoy reading VICE VERSA, if only because the presence of a lesbian in the film is handled in a sane, intelligent manner rather than furnishing the usual subject for harmful propaganda or mere sensationalism” (15). Again, Ben is writing to Vice Versa’s audience, whom she assumes agrees with her that Alice is admirable and was unfairly punished. As Moore writes, “Ben’s reviews do not just express a willy-nilly personal experience of lesbian spectatorship (though that itself is a coup). They are prismatic—they enable positions of agency for subsequent readers/viewers” (20). In her review, Ben educates her readers in how to interpret films such as Club de Femmes, and as a result, Ben praises Alice’s sane, intelligent actions of defending a violated woman whom she respectfully admired. Although the result of Alice’s actions is customary of real treatments of homosexuals as ill or criminal in the 1930s and 1940s, Ben is grateful that Alice’s behavior had not been untoward itself.

**Conclusion**

Ben’s film and play reviews had multiple potential effects for her audiences. She offered lesbian readers of Vice Versa the opportunity to hear narratives about homosexual
storylines that they themselves may not have had access to, and she offered the readers a guide for interpreting the treatment of lesbians in the films and plays. By challenging the ethos of doctors and laypeople employing medical discourse within the films and plays, Ben simultaneously challenges the medicalized and sexological rhetoric they utilize to classify lesbians as violent, unnatural, and sick, as well as the circulation of this rhetoric via fictionalized stories meant to entertain assumedly heterosexual audiences, which we know for a fact also included homosexual viewers. Ben makes readers aware that films and plays can serve as propaganda against homosexuals, and I argue that this act gives her readers permission to employ this rhetorical critique to homophobia writ large. As I will show in the conclusion to my dissertation, Ben’s critiques remain salient almost a century after she first issued them. My next chapter concludes my dissertation by relating Ben’s critiques of journalism, music, films, and plays to contemporary discourse circulations in similarly varied media, including commercials, edited anthologies, and online news sources. I then springboard off this analysis to imagine how contemporary and future scholars, creatives, and archivists can continue to utilize and adapt queer rhetorical reeducation in their labors.
CHAPTER 5

WHAT IS REMEMBERED, LIVES: BRIDGING BEN’S TIME WITH OURS, AND BEYOND

Introduction

Throughout this dissertation, I have endeavored to uncover the ways dominant sexological and medical discourse circulated in unlikely places (journalism, music, film, and drama), and I have argued that readers and audiences received rhetorical education about homosexuality and gender performance through those circulation practices. I’ve also examined multiple creative ways that Lisa Ben attempted to expose the rhetorical uses of ethos, hyperbole, and double standards in both dominant sexological texts and in entertainment and journalism for the purposes of pathologizing homosexuals. Exposing that function of discourse for her audience, Ben utilized a queer analytical frame and offered a queer rhetorical reeducation for her readers and listeners so that they may broaden their understandings and see and hear models of options for disagreeing with widespread pathologization of their gender and sexuality.

This conclusion bridges the mid-century discourse and circulation practices I examined in Chapters One through Four to contemporary rhetorical education about sexuality and gender. As my analysis of select contemporary examples will show, there are disturbing overlaps between Ben’s time and ours in terms of how homosexuality and gender nonconformance are rhetorically positioned as undesirable and dangerous in circulated media and publications. I conclude by arguing that it matters how we talk about sexuality—where “we” includes not just wealthy media producers or politicians, but also the queer creators who will continue Ben’s rhetorical reeducation work decades
later, and further, historians who will record and circulate processes of queer creation and critique. I end by examining the ways Lisa Ben’s history has been recorded and circulated across genres and for varied audiences, and I posit that recovering her story for the purpose of circulating her biography—my personal post-Ph.D. goal—can be a form of queer rhetorical education in itself.

**Discourse Then, Discourse Now**

In reviewing contemporary discourse circulation about homosexuality and gender nonconformance (i.e., trans*, nonbinary, androgynous, etc.), I could jump right in to examining television, film, or other popular entertainment. However, I want to begin my bridging practice from the 1940s and 1950s to 2020 by establishing the context of dominant, governmental discourse about homosexuality and queerness in the United States. Currently, Donald Trump is president. The same day that Trump was inaugurated, “The Trump Administration removed all mentions of LGBTQ people and issues from the White House website, and removed the Department of Labor’s (DOL) report on Advancing LGBTQ Workplace Rights from the DOL website as well” (Flaherty). Soon after this, in February of 2017, Trump’s administration “rescinded the transgender student guidance” that President Barack Obama had instituted in the spring of 2016, which had required schools to “protect transgender students from harassment, accommodate their preferred names and pronouns, and give them access to the locker rooms and bathrooms of their choice” (Simmons-Duffin). As a result of Trump’s withdrawal of protection in schools, weeks later the Supreme Court “took transgender plaintiff Gavin Grimm’s [a transgender teenager from Virginia who was fighting to secure the right to access the boy’s bathroom
at his school] case off its calendar” (Simmons-Duffin). Here is a longer list of changes that Trump’s Administration has enacted or proposed, credited to Connie Hanzhang Jin, Selena Simmons-Duffin, and Emily Vaughn, and featured in Simmons-Duffin’s National Public Radio report, “‘Whiplash’ Of LGBTQ Protections And Rights, From Obama To Trump”:

- **Employment:** In October 2017, the U.S. Attorney General ruled that Title VII does not prohibit discrimination of individuals “based on gender identity…including transgender status” (Sessions, qtd. in Simmons-Duffin). Also, while it is not yet finalized or in effect, as of in August 2019, the Department of Labor proposed revoking protections and called for “allowing certain for-profit federal contractors to hire and fire their employees based on the employer’s religious beliefs” (Simmons-Duffin et al.).

- **Education:** In February 2017, “Newly-appointed Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos rescind[ed] the Obama-era guidance in a new ‘Dear Colleague’ letter and also inform[ed] the Supreme Court of its new position regarding transgender students’ access to bathrooms” (Simmons-Duffin et al.).

- **Military:** In 2017, Trump tweeted that the U.S. Government would block transgender people from serving in the military. Almost two years later, in March 2019, what is known as the “trans military ban” takes effect (Simmons-Duffin et al.).

- **Housing:** In May 2019, the Department of Housing and Urban Development “propose[d] a rule that would allow homeless shelter operators to determine which services transgender people have access to. Operators could base their decisions on their own religious beliefs, among other factors” (Simmons-Duffin et al.). The rule has not yet taken effect.

- **Health care:** In June 2019, the Department of Health and Human Services proposed a rule wherein people would only be protected based on “biological sex,” versus sexual orientation or gender identity (Simmons-Duffin et al.). The Director of the Office for Civil Rights said that the office determined that “discrimination on the basis of sex does not cover gender identity” (Severino qtd. in Simmons-Duffin et al.).

- **Criminal justice:** In May 2018, the Bureau of Prisons updated the Transgender Offender Manual to rule that inmates should receive placement based on their “biological sex” verses gender identity (Simmons-Duffin et al.).

- **Child welfare:** In November 2019, the Administration proposed a rule to remove protections and stop enforcing an Obama era rule that disallowed child welfare organizations to discriminate against people based on gender identity or sexual orientation. As a result of the 2019 rule, child welfare organizations can receive funding while refusing to work with gay people who wish to adopt children.
What I’d like to highlight from the above list is that these proposals and rules came from multiple departments of the Administration, including Departments of Education, Housing and Urban Development, the Office for Civil rights, and more. Also, I would like to emphasize here that rulings about homosexuality and transgender rights and access to resources and protection disproportionately affect certain populations, such as people of color, poor and working-class people, immigrants, and women.

It would be easy for me to trace a top-down circulation of messages about homosexuals and transgender people from the Trump Administration to, say, conservative media, such as FOX news, or far-Right media, such as InfoWars, which tend to support the Trump Administration’s rulings. However, reports of these messages circulate in other media, as we see above in the case of National Public Radio, but also on more liberal news journalism sources, such as MSNBC or “The Daily Show.” While news journalists are all reporting the same news—what the Trump Administration has proposed or passed—they may be filtering the news through a political—and rhetorical—filter. For example, FOX is known to be conservative, MSNBC is liberal, and NPR often tows a line of being in the middle (for example, Simmons-Duffin quoted Ryan Anderson, a senior research fellow at conservative think tank The Heritage Foundation). When news journalists imbue their written, video, or audio reports with particular tones and language of approval or dismissal, they rhetorically educate their audiences about how to think and feel about the news they receive. Therefore, while all U.S. citizens currently live under the anti-trans and anti-homosexual bills, some of us are primed to see such rulings as a mechanism of patriotism.

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18 For a developed study of the reception of news journalism among Conservative and Liberal viewers, see “Political Polarization & Media Habits: From Fox News to Facebook, How Liberals and Conservatives Keep Up with Politics” by Amy Mitchell, Jeffrey Gottfried, Jocelyn Kiley, and Katerina Eva Matsa and published by the Pew Research Center.
or upholding the values of our nation’s forefathers, whereas others of us are primed to recognize discrimination and protest unjust oppression.

The United States is quite bipartisan, which means it would be foolhardy to imagine that all news consumers will suddenly shift their opinions or their preferred news source consumption. However, acknowledging the rhetorical impact of news reporting on people’s lived experiences is one possible avenue for rhetorical reeducation. One example of this is the Human Rights Campaign’s “Brief Guide to Getting Transgender Coverage Right,” which is “intended to serve as a primer, a starting point for reporters committed to telling the stories of transgender people accurately and humanely, from appropriate word usage to context that reflects the reality of their lived experience” (Human Rights Campaign). In support of their suggestion that reporters “Be aware of the reality of many transgender people in the United States and how that can inform the context of your story,” the HRC acknowledges that

In the recent past, it was common for media reports on transgender murder victims to emphasize a victim's arrest record (if they had one) in order to suggest—nearly always inaccurately—that they were killed because of their own criminal activity or because they deceived their killer about their transgender status. The report continues to say that “Thankfully, today many reporters are now respectfully covering transgender people and their identities and avoiding stereotypes and misconceptions that can unintentionally inflame prejudice, discrimination and violence.”

While it may be true that reporters are increasingly either choosing to or being required to respectfully report news about transgender people, I believe that the HRC’s rhetorical use of “Thankfully” here serves as a preemptive, and intentional, pat on the back for reporters who decide to avoid “unintentionally” doing harm via their journalism. This move is strategic, in that it encourages the guide’s intended audience of reporters, who may be naïve
about transgender identity and experiences of violence—to try to write substantive and respectful news reports.

**Bury Your Gays**

“Bury your gays” is a phrase utilized by fans to describe the trope of killing off homosexuals in television and film. It is often specifically applied to the deaths of lesbian, bisexual, and queer women, often referred to as “women loving women” (WLW). The organization LGBT Fans Deserve Better writes on their website that bury your gays “is especially harmful when it happens shortly after or alongside a positive development with regards to their orientation, further linking the character’s orientation to the death of the character” (“Trope: Bury Your Gays”). The LGBT Fans Deserve Better website features a timer that resets when the bury your gays trope has been employed (see Figure 5.1 below), although it appears that the website has discontinued its updates (“She’s Dead”).

![Figure 5.1: Screenshot of LGBT Fans Deserve Better Countdown](image)

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Erin B. Waggoner writes in “Bury Your Gays and Social Media Fan Response: Television, LGBTQ Representation, and Communitarian Ethics” that

…current television reveals that despite an increase in WLW visibility, harmful tropes such as [bury your gays] are still used more frequently than they should be. The message this sends to those individuals struggling with their identities is that WLW may find happiness, but it is short-lived and perhaps requires a bulletproof vest. (1879)

Waggoner’s article focuses on community building and social media responses to the bury your gays trope, specifically examining audience response to the murder of the lesbian character Lexa on the show The 100 in 2016. I was particularly struck by Waggoner’s finding that “In the 24 hours after the episode aired [where Lexa died], various posts and tweets revealed an alarming increase of identity struggles and triggering responses of self-harm and/or suicidal thoughts” (1888). Waggoner notes that after the alarming posts were shared, “Several posts responded in a sense of duty and virtue to engage the entire fandom and present resources available for those having these thoughts and feelings” (1888). Additionally, LGBT Fans Deserve Better launched a fundraiser to raise money for The Trevor Project, an organization that focuses on suicide prevention for LGBTQ youth and offers a free counseling hotline (Waggoner 1888). LGBT Fans Deserve Better write on their fundraiser page that

…There is not much we can do in the way of changing what’s already been written [referring to the unnecessary killing of Lexa on The 100 for shock value]. What we can do however, is unite to help those who are hurting and despondent
through this. We now have the means to reach a large audience, individuals who NEED to be heard, who NEED to be understood, and who ASK for our help.

It’s disheartening to think many of us were here, with The Trevor Project all those years ago. We continue to attempt now what we did then. To forge the creation of a safe haven opposing the baffling misrepresentation we had so hoped to eradicate for the younger generations. We will take this yet again to serve as a lesson, but, let it be us this time who teach it. (“Fundraiser”)

As of April 21, 2020, the LGBT Fans Deserve Better fundraiser has raised $171,565 via 4,430 donations (“Fundraiser”). While the organization does not use the phrase “rhetorical education,” I read their fundraiser, and the resulting 4,430 donators acting in response, as evidence that many people are interested in reeducating LGBTQIA viewers to focus on community support as a method of saying “no” to bury your gays.

While I’ve only reviewed one example of the bury your gays trope, the death of Lexa, others have noted the vast and increasing number of lesbians, bisexual, and queer women who have been killed off in television shows. In 2016, the lesbian website Autostraddle published the article “All 211 Dead Lesbian and Bisexual Characters On TV, And How They Died,” and TVTropes.org has used the phrase “Dead Lesbian Syndrome” to refer to the repeated death of queer women in television (“Bury Your Gays”). While the bury your gays trope is not likely to die out anytime soon, I am pleased to see a continuation of protests via social media and news journalism, including Emma Powys Maurice’s praise for the decision to save a gay man at the end of an episode of “Doctor Who.” In her article “Doctor Who abandoned the ‘bury your gays’ trope in a big way and we love to see it,”
Maurice shares tweets by viewers who responded to the episode: “hold up lads do we have a whole two gay survivors #doctorwho,” “Also just wanna say thank you for saying fuck you to bury your gays this week well done #doctorwho,” and “#DoctorWho gave us a gay relationship with two characters who were relevant to the plot, defined by more than just their sexuality, actually were allowed to show affection on screen, and didn’t die. It takes so, so little to make us happy but I will take it. And be happy” (@ollie_allen, @charlieq_02, and @exorcisingemily, qtd. in Maurice). By using the hashtag “#DoctorWho,” these authors circulate their own responses about the bury your gays trope online, which is a different adaptation of the LGBT Fans Deserve Better’s call to do action that “serve[s] as a lesson, but, let it be us this time who teach it.”

**Rhetorical Homosexuality in Advertising**

In the last decade, there has been an influx of commercials and advertisements incorporating homosexual characters and same sex parents, including Kohl’s, Campbell’s, Tylenol, Hallmark, Nabisco, Amazon, Orangina, and Snickers (Petrow). The intentional inclusion of homosexuals in commercials is complex, in that while it may be heart-warming and suggest that a company values diversity, the commercials may be “intended for comic effect” (“Advertising Week 2011…”). A repeat culprit in this is Snickers, who has released multiple homophobic commercials, but I would like to focus here on the first one I remember watching, which debuted during the 2007 Super Bowl. The commercial called “Kiss” shows two mechanics enjoying a Snickers bar in the style of Lady and the
Tramp, which results in them kissing. Repulsed, they immediately attempt to perform “manly” actions, such as ripping off their chest hair. While this commercial was problematic in itself, in that the men were horrified at the act of appearing gay, Snickers then encouraged viewers to visit their website to view alternative endings of the commercial. Bill Browning describes the function of the website in his report for LGBTQ Nation below:

The website had four versions of the commercial. All four started the same, but one ended with ever more horrific endings. One showed an effeminate guy walking up and asking the other two, "Is there room for three on this love boat?" So gay equals promiscuous. Ending number two ended with the two men drinking motor oil and antifreeze in an attempt to "do something manly." Yeah, better to die than be gay. The third though, took the cake. Entitled "Wrench," this ending had one of the men bashing the other with a huge wrench and being smashed into the hood of the car himself. Cause gay bashing is the "manly" thing to do, right? Are you laughing yet?

This commercial, and its alternate endings, rhetorically educated audiences that even subtle or accidental homosexuality should be punished. While LGBTQ groups did organize to later have the commercial taken down, approximately 93.15 million viewers saw the commercial live on television when it debuted at Super Bowl XLI (La Monica). Those football fans who visited the Snickers website to view alternate endings also saw “clips from various Colts and Bears players' reactions to the commercials. While the Colts players obviously registered discomfort at the commercial’s premise, the Bears players were offensive with their expressions of disgust and their comments” (Browning). The commercial’s violence was hyperbolic, yet the football players’ “discomfort” and “disgust” was presented as authentic, layering an ethos of homophobia on top of the tasteless humor

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of the original commercial. In other words, the rhetorical instruction to chide (at best) or violently silence (at worst) homosexuality was introduced by Snickers and reinforced by the NFL team players.

While it’s easy to critique the homophobia in this Snickers commercial as rhetorically problematic, it’s equally easy to praise the positive representation of homosexuals in other commercials. However, even seemingly progressive advertising can rhetorically educate viewers to have particular viewpoints about homosexuality that may be outdated or inappropriate, as I’ll show in my analysis of a commercial that capitalizes on one of Lisa Ben’s most famous articles from *Vice Versa*, “The Third Sex is Here to Stay.”

**The Third Sex in 1947 and 2011**

Before I review the commercial, I first want to contextualize the terminology that links it to Ben’s writing: third sex. The phrase “third sex” is a creation of sexological classification, and it was used interchangeably with “invert” to refer to lesbians and gay men. When Lisa Ben was writing *Vice Versa*, “third sex” was “rooted in sexology and referred to a person whose non-normative gender presentation or homosexuality placed them outside of societal and medical classifications of ‘normal’” (Litterer 10). The medical use of “third sex” was complex, in that it “challenged the binary basis upon which norms of gender and sexuality were based and thus could either inspire hope for inverts who sought acceptance in society or could be used to further pathologize them” (Litterer 10-11).

Ben utilizes the phrase “third sex” in the September 1947 issue of *Vice Versa*. At this time, Los Angeles lesbian bars faced threats of police raids, previously mentioned
Comstock laws restricted mailing “obscene” literature, and both professional medical texts and popular films and songs taught audiences how to identify homosexuals. Ben writes in “Here to Stay” that

Whether the unsympathetic majority approves or not, it looks as though the Third Sex is here to stay. With the advancement of psychiatry and related subjects, the world is becoming more and more aware that there are those in our midst who feel no attraction for the opposite sex. (3)

In the next example from the February 1948 issue of *Vice Versa*, Ben analyzes the circulation of information about “inverts.” She focuses on a *Magazine Digest* article (I explored this in detail in my introduction), which she calls “a welcome change from the sensational and misinformed accounts which find their way into the newspapers and prejudice the average reading public” (7). She continues to praise the article:

this timely article seeks to correct the erroneous idea which seems to be firmly implanted in the public’s mind that all inverts are criminals or persons of low intelligence. Whether such write-ups will succeed in this purpose is debatable, but certainly they will do more to eliminate the rocks from the invert’s path through this heterosexual world than will garbled newspaper accounts, often written by uninformed, sensation-seeking journalists. (7)

It is important to note that while Ben utilizes the terms “third sex” and “invert,” she simultaneously critiques mass circulations of “erroneous ideas” that lesbians are deviant, dangerous, or unintelligent.

Now that we have a comprehension of the way “third sex” functioned in the early to mid-twentieth century, I’d like to examine the rhetorical implications of its application in 2011 by the Californian company Union Bank. Union Bank produced “Community Matters” commercials from 2011 to 2014, and their 2014 series won two marketing and communications industry awards. The bank writes that the commercial series are meant to “underscore Union Bank’s commitment to inclusion, diversity and service.” The
commercials aired on channels in Los Angeles, San Diego, and San Francisco as “part of the bank’s partnerships with the television stations” (Peebles-Hill and Yedinak). Union bank focused their 2011 PSAs on what they called “LGBT equality issues,” highlighting individuals “from Air Force veterans to people of color and youth, the PSAs focus on the community while highlighting the rich history of LGBT Americans” in an effort to show their commitment to diversity within the California community and their company (Houlihan).

All of the 2011 Community Matters commercials have the same script structure: the same man introduces the particular subject, multiple speakers discuss the contribution the subject made by taking turns saying parts of sentences, saying particular words together, and emphasizing particular words by saying them twice. Here is a transcript of the Ben commercial, which is also available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gn6sD04w8aw:

Male speaker: There’s a place in California that’s the cornerstone of our community. It’s here you’ll find the origins of LGBT publishing.
Multiple female and/or queer speakers with varied skin colors and gender expressions, speaking alone, in unison, and alternating words in sentences: With an untapped talent for journalism and a clear point of view, secretary Edythe Eyde created the earliest known periodical for lesbians, Vice Versa. Writing under the pseudonym “Lisa Ben,” [typewriter font of “‘Lisa-ben’ = Lesbian” moves across screen] on the pages of her self-proclaimed “gayest magazine in America,” Edythe dared to take on the views of the 1940s and proclaimed in print that “the third sex is here to stay” [emphasizing by pointing down at “here” and “stay”]. Today—today—the news of our community is published out and proud thanks to the ground-breaking commentary of pioneer publisher, Edythe Eyde—Edythe Eyde [emphasis in original].
Male speaker: A landmark for self-expression at the heart of our community. At Union Bank, community matters.
In the video, one actress points down to emphasize that Ben proclaimed that the third sex is here to stay (see Figure 5.2), which can be read to imply that the “here” also applies to the current time and place.

![Screenshot from Union Bank commercial](19th floor and proclaimed in print that the third sex is here)

**Figure 5.2: Screenshot from Union Bank commercial**

As a rhetorical historiographer, I am interested in the ambiguity of place and time that this pointing presents. “Third sex” had a very specific meaning during 1947, and I read Ben’s use of the term within *Vice Versa* as a form of queer rhetoric: she analyzes how dominant publications use the phrase, and she reclaims and repurposes it to undermine their messages. When an actress emphasizes “the third sex is here to stay,” Union Bank blurs the context of the term, potentially teaching viewers that “third sex” is synonymous with “lesbian” or “queer” or “diversity” in 2011. What are the implications of anachronistically suggesting that Ben’s use of “third sex” in 1947 is still “here to stay” in 2011, soon after the upheaval of Proposition 8, which had banned same sex marriage in California, and
alongside a national “It Gets Better” project, which reinforced the message to LGBTQIA youth that they could find acceptance and thrive? I call on scholars to interrogate rhetorical uses of queer history by corporations. We can begin that critical process by viewing Union Bank’s use of an outdated sexological term in a commercial for a neoliberal purpose that amalgamates an individual with a community with a company.

**Remembering Lisa Ben**

Lisa Ben passed away on December 22, 2015, yet no obituary was published at the time. Ben was a skilled writer and editor of multiple genres, and her story could fill various gaps in queer rhetorical historiography. She could fit into multiple Composition and Rhetoric subfields, including extracurricular writing or literacy, while I chose to focus on circulation and rhetorical education. In fact, Ben’s history itself is on a rhetorical path. She has been historicized under multiple names across national newspaper articles, queer history podcasts, science fiction anthologies, gay documentaries, queer music archives, and, interestingly, as we just observed, a bank advertisement. I argue that by rhetorically analyzing the ways Ben and her writing are historicized, we learn to read the discursive functions of circulating queer histories, including the ones we ourselves produce.

Both before and after her death, queer historians have endeavored to share Ben’s story through circulating biographical write ups, interviews, oral histories, and podcasts. Some of what is circulated are primary texts, such as the Daughters of Bilitis Oral History Tapes, which live at the Lesbian Herstory Archives but have been digitized for online viewing, J.D. Doyle’s scanned photographs of the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives’s copies of *Vice Versa* on his website “Queer Music Heritage,” and Eric Marcus’s
audio interview with Ben, which he featured on his podcast *Making Gay History*. In addition to these, a number of online lesbian and queer publications and websites have honored Ben and *Vice Versa* for breaking ground in gay publishing. In an article for *Autostraddle* titled “Our Legacy: Six Lesbian Magazines From The Then Before Now,” the author lists Ben’s text first, writing “It all started with *Vice Versa*” (Riese). This trope continues in other online writeups about lesbian publishing in LGBTQIA publications. Website such as *Autostraddle, The Advocate*, and *AfterEllen* generate a bridge between *Vice Versa* and contemporary lesbian magazines, writing that as the first lesbian magazine in the U.S., *Vice Versa* set the stage for later lesbian magazines by serving as a model for formatting, for laboring out of love, and for building community.\(^{20}\) However, while the authors note the similarities between *Vice Versa* and contemporary lesbian magazines, they also recognize the differences between Ben’s context and their own digitally, widely circulated texts. This distinction is important. Beyond restrictive laws preventing Ben from mailing *Vice Versa*, the terminology we have access to is radically different from that of the late 1940s. One key example of this is the use of the phrase “the third sex,” which I analyzed above.

Ben has also been remembered in spaces that are not directly marketed to LGBTQIA audiences, such as Dan Lamothe’s *Washington Post* article “The lost World War II letters of Edythe Eyde, who started America’s first lesbian publication.” Additionally, while Ben is most remembered for *Vice Versa* and her music, she was also an avid science fiction and poetry writer under the penname Tigrina. Her science fiction

\(^{20}\) For specific examples of these tropes in online writing about Ben and *Vice Versa*, see “Our Legacy: Six Lesbian Magazines From The Then Before Now” (Riese) on *Autostraddle*, “The growing need for local lesbian media” (Bendix) on *AfterEllen*, and “Women Who Paved the Way: Writer Edythe Eyde” (Ring) on *The Advocate*. 
and poetry writing have been republished in Lisa Yaszek and Patrick B. Sharp’s *Sisters of Tomorrow: The First Women of Science Fiction*.

I’ve now established that people are writing about and reading about Lisa Ben, which you would think would satisfy my queer historian heart. Yet, I’d like to propose that more attention is devoted to recovering and circulating her history with critical intention—as a form of queer rhetorical reeducation in its own right. I would first like to note that there are small mistakes across publications about Ben. The *Washington Post* article gives the wrong date for when Ben started *Vice Versa* (1948 instead of 1947), and incorrectly states, like many other texts, that Ben used the name “Lisa Ben” when writing *Vice Versa*. In *Sisters of Tomorrow*, the authors list the publication date for *Vice Versa* to be 1946 and share that Ben “embarked on what would become a decades-long career in gay journalism” (xx). While the authors may be referring to Ben’s later writing for *The Ladder*, a reader focused only on Ben’s science fiction and poetry may have read this sentence and visualized Ben working in a news office. While it irks me personally as a scholar of Lisa Ben, I’m not quite sure of the impact of small mistakes in publications, but I would like to ask us all to consider that potential damages could be done by these small errors.

After I submit my dissertation and complete my degree, I plan to focus on penning a biography on Ben. As first steps in that process, I’ve reviewed Ben’s personal papers extensively, and recently I purchased the domain lisabenography.com, generated the email lisabenography@gmail.com, and created the Instagram account @lisabenography. My intention is to share all of my resources about Ben, such as scans and recordings of the materials in my personal Ben archive, such as fanzines, magazines, and a record, and too generate and circulate an annotated bibliography of all of the sources I’ve located thus far.
about Ben. I intend to share this information publicly online on the website and via social media, and I will request that readers and viewers submit their own Lisa Ben resources, citations, and reflections to me. Additionally, I have been in contact with the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives about hosting an event to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Lisa Ben’s birth in November 2021. I intend to contact other Lisa Ben researchers and people who have interviewed her to ask them to contribute a speech, recording, or writing about their experiences with Ben, and I am considering asking local or distant LGBTQIA people to contribute their reflections and writing, too. While the event will be held in person in Los Angeles, I want to document it and circulate photos, write ups, and ask reporters to document the source as well—all the while archiving these objects, as well.

My hope is that I will write Lisa Ben’s biography in ways that are accessible in terms of media and financial access (i.e., not behind a university paywall), because I want as many people as possible to learn about Lisa Ben and queer rhetorical reeducation. To do this, I intend to remediate my findings from this dissertation and my studies of Ben’s papers in ways that appeal to audiences outside of academia, such as podcasts, digital and print zines, social media posts, lisabenography.com, and, my dream, a book-length biography. I will need to make intentional choices about which discursive practices I employ across the genres I create and co-create, always with an awareness that my history of Lisa Ben itself is a rhetorical document that, if I am lucky, will continue to circulate and educate beyond my lifetime, as well.
APPENDIX A

LYRICS TO “FRANKIE AND JOHNNY” BY LISA BEN

Photograph taken by Kate Litterer of lyrics from folder 31, “Songs A-Y Circa 1950-2000,” from Box 1 of Coll2015-019 Lisa Ben Papers at ONE Archives at the USC Libraries, University of Southern CA, Los Angeles, CA.

FRANKIE & JOHNNY

Now, you may all think you know the story of Frankie and Johnny, but chances are you've just heard the censored version. Let me tell you what really happened.

Frankie and Johnny were lovers
Lardy, but how they could camp.
Swore to stick to one another
Just like two wet postage stamps;
He was his man, but he done him wrong.

Frankie swished down to the gay bar
To sip him some pink lemonade.
He asked: 'Has my Johnny been in here,
Was he caught in last night's raid?
Oooh, he's my man, is he a-doing me wrong?'

The bartender said, 'Listen, Frankie,
I ain't gonna tell you no lie.
Your John's got it made with a piece of trade
Who is known as Nellie Bly.
If he's your man, he's a-doin' you wrong.'

Frankie went to the hotel room,
Knelt down by the keyhole to spy.
And, sure enough, there was his John-Boy.
Foolin' 'round this Nellie Bly, other spy.
He caught his man, he was a-doing him wrong.

Frankie flew down to the gun shop,
Bought a pearl-handled '44.
Neat-toot-toot at his fickle fruit
He shot right through that door,
He shot his man, for a-doin' him wrong.

Frankie was not much of a marksman
And that hotel door was shut.
Those bullets were meant for their cruel, cruel hearts
And they landed in there--OH
He shot his man, for a-doin' him wrong.

Now this story has quite a moral
As you can plainly see:
There's more fruit in the orchard
So go out and shake that tree.
Don't shoot your man, for a-doin' you wrong.
Never, never shoot your man for a-doin' you wrong!
APPENDIX B

LYRICS TO “FRANKIE AND JOHNNY” BY JIMMIE RODGERS.


Frankie and Johnny were sweethearts,
Oh, Lord, how they could love,
Swore to be true to each other,
True as the stars above,
He was her man
he wouldn't do her wrong.

Frankie went down to the corner,
Just for a bucket of beer,
She said, "Oh, Mister Bartender,
Has my loving Johnny been here,
He is my man,
He wouldn't do me wrong."

I don't want to cause you no trouble,
Ain't gonna tell you no lies,
I saw your lover an hour ago,
With a girl namd Nellie Bly,
He was your man,
But he's doing you wrong.

Frankie looked over the transom,
She saw to her suprise,
There on a cot sat Johnny
Making love to Nellie Bly,
He is my man, and he's doing me wrong.

Frankie drew back her kimona,
She took out a little forty-four,
Root-tooot three time she shoot
Right through that hardwood door,
She shot her man,
He was doing her wrong.

Bring out your rubber-tired hearses,
Bring out your rubber-tired hacks,
I'm taking my man to the graveyard
But I ain't gonna bring him back,
Lord, he was my man, And he done me wrong.

Bring out a thousand policemen,
Bring 'em around today,
To lock me down in the dungeon cell
And throw that key away,
I shot my man, He was doing me wrong.

Frankie said to the warden,
"What are they going to do?"
The warden, he said to Frankie,
"It's electric chair for you,
'Cause you shot your man, he was doing you wrong."

This story has no moral,
This story has no end,
This story just goes to show
That there ain't no good in men,
He was her man, And he done her wrong.
APPENDIX C

LYRICS TO LISA BEN’S “THAT OLD GANG OF MINE”

Photograph taken by Kate Litterer of lyrics from folder 31, “Songs A-Y Circa 1950-2000,” from Box 1 of Coll2015-019 Lisa Ben Papers at ONE Archives at the USC Libraries, University of Southern CA, Los Angeles, CA.

THAT OLD GANG OF MINE

Watch your cruising in the gay bars
Or on Hollywood and Vine
The Vice Squad keeps on breaking up
That old gang of mine.

Watch your actions in the rest-room
With the fellow next in line,
He might be with the Vice-Squad
Breaking up that gang of mine.

There goes Jack, there goes Jim,
Off to Lincoln Heights
Guess we'd better play it cool
At home, alone, these nights.

You can get a frantic feeling
Raising dough to pay that fine,
So watch out for the Vice-Squad
Breaking up that gang of mine!
APPENDIX D

LYRICS TO COLE PORTER’S “WEDDING BELLS (ARE BREAKING UP THAT OLD GANG OF MINE)

Not a soul down on the corner, that's a pretty certain sign
That wedding bells are breaking up that old gang of mine
All the boys are singing love songs
They forgot "Sweet Adeline"
Those wedding bells are breaking up that old gang of mine

There goes Jack, there goes Jim, down to Lover's Lane
Now and then, we meet again, but they don't seem the same
Gee, I get a lonesome feeling when I hear the church bells chime
Those wedding bells are breaking up that old gang of mine

Not a soul down on the corner, that's a pretty certain sign
That wedding bells are breaking up that old gang of mine
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There goes Jack, there goes Jim, down to Lover's Lane
Now and then, we meet again, but they don't seem the same
Gee, I get a lonesome feeling when I hear the church bells chime
Those wedding bells are breaking up that old gang of mine
APPENDIX E

LYRICS TO MERLE HAGGARD’S “OKIE FROM MUSKOGEE”

We don't smoke marijuana in Muskogee
We don't take no trips on LSD;
We don't burn no draft cards down on Main Street
But, We love living right, and being free
We don't make a party out of loving
But we like holding hands and pitching woo;
We don't let our hair grow long and shaggy
Like the hippies out in San Francisco do

And I'm proud to be an Okie from Muskogee
A place where even squares can have a ball;
We still wave Old Glory down at the courthouse
White lightning's still the biggest thrill of all

Leather boots are still in style for manly footwear
Beads and Roman sandals won't be seen;
A football's still the roughest thing on campus
And the kids here still respect the college dean

And I'm proud to be an Okie from Muskogee
A place where even squares can have a ball;
We still wave Old Glory down at the courthouse
White lightning's still the biggest thrill of all
And white lightning's still the biggest thrill of all
(In Muskogee Oklahoma USA)
APPENDIX F

LYRICS TO LISA BEN’S “FAIRY FROM TULARE”

Photograph taken by Kate Litterer of lyrics from folder 31, “Songs A-Y Circa 1950-2000,” from Box 1 of Coll2015-019 Lisa Ben Papers at ONE Archives at the USC Libraries, University of Southern CA, Los Angeles, CA.

"FAIRY FROM TULARE"
(Parody on "Okie from Muskogee")

We don't dare act gay around Tulare,
The people there would run us out of town.
Sometimes we board the Greyhound bound for 'Frisco
And there we really let our hair hang down.

We're cautious with our lovin' in Tulare.
Just hold hands when we're at the picture-show.
But in the city, we walk right down Main Street,
Arm-in-arm so all the world can know.

It's tough to be a Fairy in Tulare.
I think I'll move to 'Frisco come next fall,
Where you can't hardly tell the men from women
And cruisin's still the biggest thrill of all.

There are folks with small-town minds from here to Boston
Who drink and play around and raise a fuss,
Yet some of them still go to church each Sunday
And point and whisper "Shame!" when they see us.

In 'Frisco boys wear beads and Roman sandals,
While girls go roamin' 'round in leather boots.
Squares think our apparel's such a scandal
But, frankly, we all think it's kind of cute.

It's tough to be a Fairy in Tulare.
I think I'll move to 'Frisco come next fall,
Where you can't hardly tell the men from women
And cruisin's still the biggest thrill of all.
(Where gays can all relax and have a ball.)
APPENDIX G

LYRICS TO LORENZ HART AND RICHARD RODGERS’S “THE LADY IS A TRAMP.”

I've wined and dined on mulligan stew
And never wished for turkey
As I hitched and hiked and drifted, too
From Maine to Albuquerque
Alas, I missed the Beaux Arts Ball
And what is twice as sad
I was never at a party where they honored Noel Ca’ad
But social circles spin too fast for me
My hobohemia is the place to be

I get too hungry for dinner at eight
I like the theater, but never come late
I never bother with people I hate
That's why the lady is a tramp

I don't like crap games with barons and earls
Won't go to Harlem in ermine and pearls
Don't dish the dirt with the rest of the girls
That's why the lady is a tramp

I like the free, fresh wind in my hair
Life without care
I'm broke
It's oke
Hate California, it's cold and it's damp
That's why the lady is a tramp

I go to Cony, the beach is divine
I go to ballgames, the bleachers are fine
I follow Winchell and read every line
That's why the lady is a tramp

I like a prizefight that isn't a fake
I like the rowing on Central Park Lake
I go to opera and stay wide awake
That's why the lady is a tramp

I like the green grass under my shoes
What can I lose?
I'm flat
That's that
I'm all alone when I lower my lamp
That's why the lady is a tramp

Don't know the reason for cocktails at five
I don't like flying. I'm glad I'm alive
I crave affection, but not when I drive
That's why the lady is a tramp

Folks go to London and leave me behind
I'll miss the crowning, Queen Mary won't mind
I don't play Scarlett in Gone With the Wind
That's why the lady is a tramp

I like to hang my hat where I please
Sail with the breeze
No dough?
Hi-ho!
I love LaGuardia and think he's a champ
That's why the lady is a tramp

Girls get massages, they cry and they moan
Tell Lizzie Arden to leave me alone
I'm not so hot, but my shape is my own
That's why the lady is a tramp

The food at Sardi's is perfect, no doubt
I wouldn't know what the Ritz is about
I drop a nickel and coffee comes out

That's why the lady is a tramp

I like the sweet, fresh rain in my face
Diamonds and lace
No got
So what?
For Robert Taylor I whistle and stamp
That's why the lady is a tramp
APPENDIX H

LYRICS TO LISA BEN’S “THE LADY IS A BUTCH”

Photograph taken by Kate Litterer of lyrics from folder 16, “Poems 1950-2000,” from Box 1 of Coll2015-019 Lisa Ben Papers at ONE Archives at the USC Libraries, University of Southern CA, Los Angeles, CA.

She dislikes boyfriends, they give her a pain,
They want to smooch her in some shady lane
When she'd much rather cruise some engaging young jane,
That's why the lady is a butch.

Parlor games bore her until she could scream,
One round of bridge and she's way off the beam,
She'd much rather pitch on a girls' softball team,
That's why the lady is a butch.

If fellows whistle, she passes them by,
That gleam in her eye
Is for ladies, only!

She won't wear dresses from Magnin's or Sak's,
High heels and nylon won't let her relax,
She's much more carefree in bow-ties and slacks,
That's why the lady is a butch.

When Gable and Turner romance on the screen
She wants a change in this time-worn routine
With Liz Scott and Hepburn as stars in this scene,
Because the lady is a butch.

Week-ends with jam friends she tries to avoid
They may discuss Kinsey and Adler and Freud
But their views on some subjects just make her annoyed,
Because the lady is a butch.

And in the gay spots, she'll dance cheek-to-cheek
Girls love her technique!
She won't be lonely.

Her 'phone's always ringing, and she's got a list
Of eager young girlfriends, who madly insist
That she has a charm that they just can't resist--
Because the lady is a butch!
APPENDIX I

LYRICS TO COLE PORTER’S “ALWAYS TRUE TO YOU DARLING, IN MY FASHION”

If a custom-tailored vet
Asks me out for something wet
When the vet begins to pet
I cry "Hooray!"
But I'm always true to you, darlin', in my fashion
Yes, I'm always true to you, darlin', in my way

I enjoy a tender pass
By the boss of Boston, Mass.,
Though his pass is middle-class
And not Back Bay
But I'm always true to you, darlin', in my fashion
Yes, I'm always true to you, darlin', in my way

There's a madman known as Mack
Who is planning to attack
If his mad attack means a Cadillac
Okay!
But I'm always true to you, darlin', in my fashion
Yes, I'm always true to you, darlin', in my way

I've been asked to have a meal
By a big tycoon in steel
If the meal includes a deal
Accept I may
But I'm always true to you, darlin', in my fashion
Yes, I'm always true to you, darlin', in my way

I could never curl my lip
To a dazzlin' diamond clip
Though the clip meant "let 'er rip,"
I'd not say "Nay!"
But I'm always true to you, darlin', in my fashion
Yes, I'm always true to you, darlin', in my way

There's an oilman known as Tex
Who is keen to give me checks
And his checks, I fear, mean that sex
Is here to stay!
But I'm always true to you, darlin', in my fashion
Yes, I'm always true to you, darlin', in my way

There's a wealthy Hindu priest
Who's a wolf, to say the least
When the priest goes too far east
I also stray
But I'm always true to you, darlin', in my fashion
Yes, I'm always true to you, darlin', in my way

There's a lush from Portland, Ore.,
Who is always such a bore
When the bore falls on the floor
I let him lay
But I'm always true to you, darlin', in my fashion
Yes, I'm always true to you, darlin', in my way

From Milwaukee, Mister Fritz
Often moves me to the Ritz
Mister Fritz is full of Schlitz
And full of play
But I'm always true to you, darlin', in my fashion
Yes, I'm always true to you, darlin', in my way

Mister Harris, plutocrat
Wants to give my cheek a pat
If the Harris pat
Means a Paris hat
Bébé
(Ooh la la!)
Mais je suis toujours fidèle, darlin', in my fashion
Oui, je suis toujours fidèle, darlin', in my way

From Ohio, Mister Thorne
Calls me up from night 'til morn
Mister Thorne once cornered corn
And that ain't hay
But I'm always true to you, darlin', in my fashion
Yes, I'm always true to you, darlin', in my way

Mister Gable, I mean Clark
Wants me on his boat to park
If the Gable boat means a sable coat
Anchors aweigh!
But I'm always true to you, darlin', in my fashion
Yes, I'm always true to you, darlin', in my way
APPENDIX J

LYRICS TO LISA BEN’S “ALWAYS TRUE TO YOU DARLING, IN MY FASHION”

Photograph taken by Kate Litterer of lyrics from folder 31, “Songs A-Y Circa 1950-2000,” from Box 1 of Coll2015-019 Lisa Ben Papers at ONE Archives at the USC Libraries, University of Southern CA, Los Angeles, CA.

ALWAYS TRUE TO YOU, DARLING,
IN MY FASHION

(Parody)

If a tall, athletic dyke
Asks me out to take a hike,
I'll desert my rusty bike without delay...
But, I'm always true to you, darling, in my fashion,
Yes, I'm always true to you, darling, in my way.

If a cute, curvaceous queer
Wants to share her glass of beer,
Who am I to say, "My dear, I'm not that way!"
But, I'm always true to you, darling, in my fashion,
Yes, I'm always true to you, darling, in my way.

If a girl with hair cut short
Asks me to her tennis court,
If that's her racket,
I'll be glad to play!
But I'm always true to you, darling, in my fashion,
Yes, I'm always true to you, darling, in my way.

If a smartly-tailored miss
Should request a little kiss,
Why should I deny her this, to her dismay?
But, I'm always true to you, darling, in my fashion,
Yes, I'm always true to you, darling, in my way.

If a butch with lots of jack
Drives me in her Cadillac
For a cozy midnight snack in some cafe,
I'll be always true to you, darling, in my fashion,
Yes, I'm always true to you, darling, in my way.

If a country lass invites me
To hayride late these nights,
If a hayride means a gay ride
That's okay! (Hey-hey!)
But, I'm always true to you, darling, in my fashion,
Yes, I'm always true to you, darling, in my way.


---. “Commentary on a Pertinent Article.” *Vice Versa*, vol. 1, no. 9, Feb. 1948, pp. 7-11.


---. “Here to stay.” *Vice Versa*, vol. 1, no. 4, Sept. 1947, pp. 4-5.

---. “New Year’s Revolution.” *Vice Versa*, vol. 1, no. 8, Jan. 1948, pp. 2-11.


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Film Advertisement for *Children of Loneliness*. *Long Beach Independent* [Long Beach, CA], 16 May 1950, p. 21.


Front Cover and Advertisement for Ben’s Record (p. 22). *ONE Magazine*, vol. 8, no. 9, Sept. 1960.


