

Research article

Stepping Out: Representations of female sexuality in the Canadian television series Bomb Girls

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Abstract

This paper analyzes representations of female sexuality in the Canadian prime-time television series *Bomb Girls* (2012-2013), which depicts the lives of women working at a munitions factory in Toronto during the Second World War. The historical drama takes place in a period of simultaneous restraint and liberation around female gender and sexuality. This paper contends that *Bomb Girls* (re)constructs a narrative about female sexuality that breaks from a traditionally gendered and heteronormative story. *Bomb Girls* challenges dominant discourse on representations of gender in media, instead capturing the complexities around female sexual relationships and sexual orientation during the war. These threads coalesce into a narrative that paints the 'bomb girls' themselves as progressive symbols of female sexuality. This paper, like the series, contributes to a feminist counter-discourse focusing on the plurality of female voices and experiences and, in doing so, it pays tribute to working women on the Canadian home front during the war.

Keywords: women, sexuality, gender, representation, television, Second World War, Canada.

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Introduction

“I guess you’d call me a stepper.... Means a girl who likes a good time, likes to go out dancing and partying a lot, and not with one fellow but with lots of fellows. Well, I sure stepped out in Toronto. I learned what this old world is all about, and I had a good time during the war and I made good money and because I always had dates, I saved some money ... And our pay kept getting better and better. The war killed all this servant business, being a maid, and I think it did a lot to finish off the idea that a woman’s place and her only place was in the home. My God, there were tens of thousands of us living a life we’d never known before, money and good times and lots of men and, more than anything, I guess you could say freedom.” (Broadfoot 1974, 358)

Freedom. That is how this Canadian woman remembered life during the Second World War. Her war story began in 1940 when she moved from Winnipeg to Toronto in her early twenties to work in the war plants. She stands among the two million women who worked for wages in Canada during the war—1.2 million full time and another 800,000 part time or on farms by 1944 (Canada 1944: 7; Pierson 1986: 9). With men overseas on active duty, the demand for labour on the home front propelled women of all ages, single and married, and those with children, into the workforce. The line between public and private blurred, and this incited ambiguity and fear about the role of women in society. Traditionally, women were homemakers and men were breadwinners. During the war, the federal government called on women to enter the workforce, including in positions formerly occupied by men, challenging stereotypical conceptions of what was ‘proper’ for women. Women’s entry into the workforce ushered in a new reality. Their lives changed suddenly when the war ‘liberated’ them from the confines of the home and the social restrictions that went along with the sexual division of labour. The opening quote to this paper, spoken by an anonymous female and immortalized in Barry Broadfoot’s oral history collection *Six War Years* (1974), suggests that, in the backdrop of a World War and in the midst of a patriarchal society, women experienced freedom—and this included sexual freedom.

This paper focuses on the representation of female sexuality in the Canadian prime-time television series *Bomb Girls*, a historical drama about the diverse lives of a group of women building bombs at a munitions factory in Toronto, Canada, during the war. The series ran for two seasons (2012-2013) on the Global Television Network, airing in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Ireland, New Zealand, and Finland (*Save Bomb Girls* 2013). *Bomb Girls* was the first of its kind—a “Canadian-made drama, about a piece of Canadian history,... on a network other than the [publicly-owned] CBC [Canadian Broadcasting Corporation], ... [that was] not just a serialized drama, but a serialized period piece” (Stinson 2014). The Global Television Network described the series on its website as follows:

Set in the 1940s, Bomb Girls tells the remarkable stories of the women who risked their lives in a munitions factory building bombs for the Allied forces fighting on the European front. The series delves into the lives of these exceptional women from all walks of life—peers, friends and rivals—who find themselves thrust into new worlds and changed profoundly as they are liberated from their home and social restrictions.

The five lead female characters all work the Blue Shift at Victory Munitions in Toronto, Ontario, and all vary in personality and demographics. This reflects a strategic effort by the series’ creators to represent “a wide swath of women ... [who] come together and form a kind of power and sisterhood that would not have been possible if it were not for the war; to combine their strength and diversity,” as *Bomb Girls* co-creator Michael MacLennan, a Canadian filmmaker, screenwriter and television producer, explained in an interview (Bendix 2012a). The war created the conditions for women of different backgrounds to meet and “cross-pollinat[e]” because, before the war, as MacLennan noted, “if they weren’t in your church or in your family, you would never meet them. There was just no way to meet other women” (Ibid.).

Bomb Girls is the only period piece to date to portray the lives of Canadian women who worked during the Second World War, and it was a successful, award-winning Canadian series. Season premiere episodes drew over one million viewers and ratings lingered in the

range of 800,000 to 900,000 until the series went on hiatus in early 2013 to accommodate programming from the United States (Taylor 2013). *The Globe and Mail* attributed the series' success to its fit within two popular genres: the period drama and female-centric shows. *Bomb Girls'* social-media presence revealed "a strong following among young women charmed and intrigued by the story of how their grandmothers fought to get jobs and respect" (Ibid.). When the series returned to air after two months, viewership had decreased by 25 per cent and the series could not compete with more popular American shows airing at the same time or with its Canadian competition, CBC's *Murdoch Mysteries* (Ibid.). *Bomb Girls* was cancelled that year. Fans fought the cancellation with online petitions and social media campaigns and, although unsuccessful in reviving the series, the Network announced its plan to "wrap up the storylines" with a two-hour series finale film (Ibid.). The film, "Bomb Girls: Facing the Enemy," aired in early 2014.

Bomb Girls set out to offer a historically accurate, yet lesser known, story about life for women during the Second World War. Speaking about the impetus for creating the series, MacLennan said: "... the more research I did, the more I realized that really most presentations of the '40s are just not accurate. It was a time of immense experimentation, social experimentation, sexuality — these were women who were, many of them, working for the first time in their lives" (Bendix 2012a). This spirit of "experimentation" is indeed absent in government propaganda and newspapers of the time, which reduced the story of women working during the war to a narrative about patriotic women who worked simply to do their 'bit' for the war effort—nothing more (King 1942; Moniz 2012, 2015; Nash 1982; Pierson 1986; Library and Archives Canada). But there was more to their story, and *Bomb Girls* set out to tell this history—to (re)present stories of working women who "[found] themselves thrust into new worlds and changed profoundly as they [were] liberated from their home and social restrictions," including confines associated with sexuality (*Global* 2014). And it did so through a medium that has, as feminist media theorists have argued, traditionally and historically marginalized women, portrayed them in stereotypical ways, and reinforced dominant gender discourse (Carter, Branston, and Allen 1998; Valdivia and Projansky 2006; van Zoonen 1994, 1995; and Wood 2009).

Through content analysis, this study set out to address the following research question: How was female sexuality represented in *Bomb Girls*? This paper begins by setting the historical context for *Bomb Girls* with an overview of two aspects of women's lives during the Second World War relevant to this study—their entry into the paid workforce and social norms around their sexuality. It continues by outlining the feminist theoretical framework and content analysis methodology guiding the study, and then presents the results through a thematic analysis that foregrounds female sexuality as complex, diverse and progressive. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of this research for feminist media studies and for the lingering social and historical narrative about Canadian women during the Second World War.

On Women and World War II

This section offers background on two areas of women's lives during the Second World War that are central to the focus of this paper: (1) women's entry into the paid workforce during the war, and (2) female sexuality circa 1940.

Women, Work, and the Second World War

Bomb Girls takes place in the early 1940s when the Canadian government called on women to join the paid workforce to alleviate the critical labour shortages experienced with men overseas at war. Women's participation in the labour force was crucial to Canada's involvement in the war. As stated in a Department of Labour report, the depleted labour force left industry "almost entirely dependent upon women workers as a means for expanding employment" (Library and Archives Canada: 80). This resulted in large-scale, organized recruitment efforts by government to bring women into the workforce (Keshen 2004: 145; King 1942). In March 1942, the federal government established the National Selective Service (NSS) "to control and direct the services of men and women in the manner which will best serve the national interest at a time of war" (King 1942: 8). William Lyon Mackenzie King, then prime minister of Canada, asserted that the "recruitment of women for employment [was] 'the most important single feature of the program'" and, that same month, he announced the government's 10-point program, a series of social and economic measures to facilitate women's increased employment, including recruitment campaigns, child care

provisions, and job training (Ibid. 6). In May 1942, the government created the Women's Division of the NSS to recruit women and run this program.

The nation's "manpower policy" stated that "every man and woman capable of performing some form of war service should undertake the service for which he or she may be best qualified and when the demands of war require" (King 1942: 5). Men and women were needed for three main purposes: (1) to join the armed forces; (2) "to make the machines, the munitions and the weapons of war for [Canada's] fighting men, and to provide their food, clothing and shelter," and "to make the machines and munitions of war for [Canada's] partners in the war ... and to provide food for the people and the armies of [Canada's] allies in the active fighting zones"; and (3) to keep the home front running (Ibid. 6-7). The government conscripted women's labour, holding a national registration to create an inventory of women available for employment to then direct female labour to meet the needs of the wartime economy (Pierson 1986: 24). In recruiting women, the NSS Women's Division first targeted young, unmarried women, even launching programs to relocate single women from the Prairies and Maritimes to Central Canada to work in war production (Prentice et al. 1988: 298; Library and Archives Canada: 19). By 1943, war production needs led to recruiting married women without children for part-time work and eventually full-time work, and then married women with children for part-time work and finally full-time work (Pierson 1986: 22).

At the start of the war, about 600,000 women worked for wages in Canada (Library and Archives Canada: 8-9). By November 1943, the number of women working full time doubled to 1.2 million; 260,000 of them were employed in the war industry (Canada, Final Report 1944: 7; Prentice et al. 1988: 298). Another 800,000 held part-time jobs or worked on farms (Pierson 1986: 9). Manufacturing, traditionally male-dominated labour, was in the top three industries employing women during the Second World War in Canada, along with service and then retail industries. The number of women working in manufacturing rose 236 per cent between June 1939 (when 111,000 women held manufacturing jobs) and January 1943 (when 373,000 women worked in manufacturing).

Women flooded the workforce, causing ambiguity over the proper role of women in society. A sexual division of labour, with women in the home and men in the workplace, was crucial to

upholding a patriarchal system. The need for women to participate in the workforce—to enter the public sphere, to earn a wage, and to perform jobs traditionally held by men—blurred gendered lines and threatened the patriarchal social structure. With the war, women went to work and a public perception—and fear—arose “at the prospect of women’s abandonment of domesticity” and, with that, femininity, and the potential loss of social control over female sexuality (Pierson 1986: 136). In Canadian newspapers published during the war, coverage of women in the workforce “reinforced and perpetuated gender stereotypes,” ultimately “foreground[ing] femininity and subordinat[ing] and objectif[ying]” working women (Moniz 2012, 2015: 5). News coverage mirrored government propaganda, which maintained that women worked out of patriotic duty, not an inherent right, and that neither their femininity nor their devotion to the ‘home’ would suffer as a result of what the government intended as a temporary stint in the workforce (Nash 1982; Moniz 2012, 2015).

Female Sexuality and the Second World War

In the years preceding the Second World War, sexual beliefs and behaviours in Canada “were the product both of moral codes and practices inherited from the Victorian period and of exposure to the changing social and economic demands of the time” (Light and Pierson 1990: 81). Beth Light and Ruth Roach Pierson (1990) explain:

For women, heterosexuality was only gradually being dissociated from procreation. Indeed, the powerful voice of the Catholic Church continued to rule that sexual intercourse should be limited to procreation. That directive, however, ... tended to be applied according to a double standard. The “sex drive” ... was assumed to be basically male and as such to enjoy the status of an imperative. Indeed, surviving well into the twentieth century was the Victorian middle-class identification of a “maternal instinct” in women as the equivalent of the “sex instinct” in men. Even after the existence of an active sexual impulse in women gained recognition, male sexuality remained primary, female sexuality secondary.
(82)

Ideas about female sexuality reflected traditional gender identities. Referring to domestic life in urban Canada from the mid-1920s onward, Pat and Hugh Armstrong (2010) included sexual relations among the ‘tasks’ performed by women in the home, along with housework, reproduction and child care, care of the elderly and disabled, tension management. Women’s domestic work, including sexual relations, was about service to others. A woman’s identity—and sexuality—was tied to her stereotypical roles as wife and mother.

The knowledge and availability of effective birth control methods was a necessary precursor to the sexual liberalization of the 1920s and, concomitantly, the separation of sex from procreation (Light and Pierson 1990: 82). But, as Light and Pierson (1990) noted, “such practice was rarely for the pursuit of sexual pleasure. Limitation of fertility was sought most commonly for economic or health reasons” (83). The Great Depression exacerbated this, increasing acceptance of birth control in Canada—“not as a woman’s right” but as a political and economic measure against “poverty and social unrest” (Ibid. 85). Nonetheless, the Victorian ideal of the “passionless woman” was giving way to the “notion of a respectable female sexuality not exclusively procreative” (Ibid. 86). In the years between the World Wars, however, the emphasis was on the importance of containing sexuality within marriage (Latz 1934: 97-99, as cited in Light and Pierson 1990: 86). Even with the recognition of women as sexual beings and even within marriage, the ideal of the passionless Victorian woman prevailed in the 1930s through 1960s. A “Good Woman” would “never talk about sex” and “would never initiate sex” (Light and Pierson 1990: 86). Of course, this was not blanket reality. “I am not a Good Woman,” recalled Phoebe McCord, a married woman with children who lived in the Ottawa Valley during the war years. “I am very outspoken, odd... I enjoyed sex and even talked about it” (Ibid., 163). As Light and Pierson (1990) argued, this was a time fraught with “conflicts between restraint and liberalization” (87).

The gain in recognition of women’s sexual impulses was further limited to heterosexuality: “Heterosexual attraction was variously billed as the only permissible, the only healthy and ‘mature,’ or the only ‘natural’ sex ‘instinct,’ leaving homosexuality to be characterized as “‘abnormal,’ ‘deviant,’ ‘immature’ or ‘sick’” (Ibid., 87). Dominant cultural forms, such as novels, films, magazine stories and music, reinforced this message, depicting and celebrating

romantic love as heterosexual (Ibid. 87). The twentieth century was a “less hospitable” time for same-sex love relationships than the nineteenth century when “women were permitted to imbue romantic female friendships with a high degree of passion. In certain circles of respectable middle-class society, a long-term relationship of affectionate attachment and cohabitation between women was acceptable” (Smith-Rosenberg 1975, as cited in Light and Pierson 1990: 87;). Still, “despite how overwhelmingly heterosexist the twentieth century would become, such passionate friendships and same-sex unions survived in Canada into the 1920s, 30s and 40s” (Light and Pierson 1990: 87-88). Women’s entry into non-traditional jobs during the war and the sex segregation of factory jobs further “created opportunities for same-sex relationships of affection to develop among co-workers” (Ibid. 88).

With the war years came new and increased employment opportunities—and financial independence—for women. Nearly half of the women employed by late 1943 were working for the first time in their lives, and others had left low-paying jobs to work in the higher-paying factories and munitions plants in place of men overseas (Roelens-Grant 2004: 13). War jobs typically paid women 50 to 75 per cent more than what they earned in traditionally-female jobs such as domestic service (Keshen 1997: 248). Women were financially supporting themselves, and the thousands of unmarried young women who moved into urban centres to work war jobs were doing so “out of the family circle” and “away from parental surveillance” (Pierson 1986: 169, 170). This cleared a path for greater sexual freedom and promiscuity—“conjugal, extramarital, or just plain fooling around”—further distancing the female sexual impulse from a “maternal instinct” (Pierson 1986: 82; Gossage 1991: 117). Stories of women’s lives, including their sexual lives, are captured in oral histories during the Second World War (Broadfoot 1974; Gossage 1991). In *Six War Years*, one woman, married with a baby, who worked in a war plant described the social and sexual lives of women on the home front and of the men overseas as “one long party”:

Sure, I could have gone out partying. It was one long party anyway, but I guess it was my strict upbringing that a woman didn't go out with strange men... If you went out and your husband was overseas, then the neighbours would talk and talk... You just worked your

shift and came home and looked after the baby... I'm not bitter. I guess I could be. I know that when my husband was overseas it was just one long party. He used to write and say he was going on another leave and he always seemed to be on leave, but I stayed home and did what I was suppose to do. Be the good wife. I know, oh sure, hundreds of women didn't. Thousands of women didn't. Lots of women I knew didn't. And maybe I should have too. (Broadfoot 1974: 245)

Perceptions about increased promiscuity, concerns over moral decline and fear over the breakdown of the family persisted during the war years (Keshen 1997: 248, 261). Sexual freedom and promiscuity among women was considered a 'dangerous' thing—a threat to traditional gender roles fundamental to patriarchy.

Bomb Girls is set in a historical period of simultaneous liberalization and restraint around female gender and sexuality. On the one hand, women entered the workforce in unprecedented numbers, crossing gendered divisions around labour, and experiencing unprecedented financial and social freedom. This represented social change. At the same time, traditional values about women's 'proper' place and fears over losing control of female sexuality persisted. With this as a socio-cultural backdrop and with respect to female sexuality specifically, how then did *Bomb Girls* represent this time in women's lives—this time of "immense experimentation, social experimentation, sexuality?" (Bendix 2012a). The next section outlines the theoretical framework and methodological approach to addressing this research question.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Drawing on feminist theory and, specifically, feminist media studies, this paper is based on a content analysis of representations of female sexuality in *Bomb Girls*. Content analysis demonstrates trends or patterns in representation, as analyzed through a theoretical lens. Feminist media researchers analyze the content of media texts including the construction of gender therein and consider the media's role in transmitting and reinforcing stereotypical, patriarchal, and hegemonic values about women and femininity (Carter, Branston and Allen 1998; Valdivia and Projansky 2006; van Zoonen 1994, 1998; and Wood 2009). Feminist media theory has historically posited that

“media have marginalized women in the public sphere” and that “media purvey stereotypes of femininity and masculinity” (McQuail 2010: 123). Based on their international survey of feminist media studies on women’s representations in media, Carolyn Byerly and Karen Ross (2006) argued that women are framed in highly restricted and mostly negative ways that promote “patriarchal” versions of “‘acceptable’ femininity” (50). According to Liesbet van Zoonen (1995), media representations of gender—masculinity and femininity—are expressions of dominant gender discourse and reflect a dichotomous, binary, and hierarchical definition of gender. Anna Gough-Yates (2003) argued that media “contribute to the reinforcement of gender differences and inequalities” and, as such, constitute a “key site through which oppressive feminine identities are constructed and disseminated” (7).

Indeed, women are underrepresented across various types of media, including television. In 2015-2016, 79 per cent of American prime-time television programming (dramas, comedies and reality programs on broadcast networks, cable channels and streaming services) featured male-dominated casts, and the percentage of female characters on broadcast network programs (41 per cent of all speaking characters) has not increased in the last decade (Lauzen 2016: 2). Furthermore, when women are portrayed, it is “often in a circumscribed and negative manner. Women are often sexualized....[,] subordinated in various ways.... [and] shown in traditionally feminine (i.e., stereotyped) roles. Women are portrayed as nonprofessionals, homemakers, wives or parents, and sexual gatekeepers” (Collins 2011: 290). Across television platforms, female characters were “more likely than men to be identified by their marital status, and less likely than men to be seen at work and actually working” (Lauzen 2016: 3). In portraying relationships between men and women, television series have likewise reinforced gender stereotypes: men's independence/women's dependence, men's authority/women's incompetence, men as breadwinners/women as primary caregivers, men as aggressors/women as victims and sex objects (Wood 2009).

Alongside these assertions, feminist media research also suggests change—“that gender roles on television seemed to become increasingly equal and non-stereotyped,” that “modern media has a more complex view of gender ... than ever before” and that “female independence has entered into contemporary common sense”

(Gauntlett 2008: 98, 63; McRobbie 1999: 126, as in Gill 2007: 2). One reason for this may be the unprecedented increase in female-centred television dramas in North America in the mid-to-late 1990s, both in number and in form (Lotz 2010: 6). This was significant because, while various female-centric television shows existed in the 1970s, they followed similar formats and storylines, in keeping with their action/adventure genre. Amanda D. Lotz, in her book *REDESIGNING WOMEN: Television after the Network Era*, contends that the resurgence of female-centred television programming in the later twentieth century brought “plurality and diversity”—“a multiplicity in series type and variation within type” (Ibid. 6). In the mid-1990s alone, more than 20 dramatic series with female protagonists emerged and, from 1995 to 2005, 43 series debuted as female-centred, with 74 per cent of these running for multiple seasons (Ibid. 5).

These dramatic series depicted an unprecedented range of female protagonists, from “empowered and fantastic actions heroines” and “single career women” to “flawed yet authentic professionals struggling with family commitments and occupational demands” and “even the continued success of characters depicting a more traditional femininity” (Ibid. 3). While some such series foregrounding professional women, such as *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002) and *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), focused on women’s “quests for sex, pleasure and romantic love” (Gauntlett 2008: 65), the “concurrent appearance and success of so many female-centred dramas is noteworthy in relation to the historical lack of female-centred dramas” (Lotz 2010: 2). Similarly, even though female protagonists were uniform in demographics—“white, heterosexual, single, employed in highly professionalized careers, and live in upper-middle class, if not upper-class, worlds”—Lotz maintains that these series “explored a new multiplicity of stories about women’s lives” (Ibid. 6). Furthermore, while the “number and range of these series reached a high point in 2000 and began waning in the early years of the twenty-first century, ... they remain more pronounced than in previous years” (Ibid. 6).

The twenty-first century has seen a number of female-centric historical television dramas emerge out of the United States (e.g. *Mercy Street*, *Black Sails*), Britain (e.g. *Downton Abbey*, *Call the*

Midwife, Crimson Field) and Canada (e.g. *Bomb Girls, Vikings*²). This trend has roots in noted proliferation of female-focused dramas in the 1990s, which produced award-winning period dramas such as *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* (1993-1998) in the United States and *Bramwell* (1995-1998) in the United Kingdom. Such modern-day historical dramas depict life in an earlier time and often do so through a feminist lens, tackling social and cultural issues and featuring independent women who encounter and challenge restrictive societal norms around gender.

Bomb Girls is a female-centric series—one influenced by feminism or perhaps even feminist itself. It is a series that tackles stories about women during the historical period of the Second World War—a time of restraint and liberalization around women’s roles and female sexuality. To analyze how female sexuality was represented in *Bomb Girls*, this study comprised a content analysis of the series’ two seasons—five episodes in the first season³ and twelve in the second. Methodologically, this study draws on the work of Klaus Krippendorff (2013), who defined content analysis as “an empirically grounded method, exploratory in process, and predictive or inferential in intent” and “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (24). The content analysis comprised two parts: a series analysis and a character analysis.

For the overall series analysis, the unit of analysis was each episode and variables were coded for within each episode and then analyzed collectively. The overall series analysis aimed to draw inferences about how female sexuality was represented in the series overall by examining specific variables (and their respective categories). For the character analysis, the unit of analysis was each of the five leading female characters—Lorna Corbett, Gladys Witham, Betty McRae, Kate Andrews, and Vera Burr—and specific variables about each character were coded for within each episode and then analyzed collectively. Of the five, Corbett is the eldest (estimated at

² *Vikings* is a Canadian-Irish co-production.

³ The first season has six episodes, but only five (Episodes 1, 3-6) were used in the analysis. The second episode (“Misfires”) was excluded from the analysis because it was used for initial training of the two research assistants/coders to orient them to the method and assess reliability informally (Lombard, Snyder-Duch and Bracken 2002), prior to starting the pilot study (of Season One, Episodes 1, 3-6). For this reason, Episode 2 was excluded from the analysis.

early forties), the floor supervisor and the only lead character who is married and a mother. Witham is an engaged, 22-year-old upper-class socialite from old Toronto money. She is cultured, privileged and naïve, yet outspoken, defiant, and non-traditional when it comes to how she perceives ‘womanhood’ (Eramo 2014). Witham takes a job on the assembly line against her parents’ will and is eager to prove herself and fit in. McRae is smart, skilled, and hardworking. Like many working-class women, she moved to Toronto from the Prairies to work in a munitions factory and live in a boarding house. McRae struggles with her sexuality—she is a lesbian—throughout the series, and she struggles “to live her life as a single, independent woman in a time when finding a husband and being a homemaker was the only accomplishment that was expected of a female” (Bendix 2012b). Andrews is McRae’s closest friend and love interest, even though Andrews is heterosexual. Sheltered, naïve and reserved, Andrews is on-the-run from a strict and abusive home life with a fanatical street preacher father. That leaves Burr—charming, clever, and often outspoken. She is partially scalped in an accident while working the assembly line in the pilot episode. Traumatized, she eventually returns to the factory in a clerical position. The character analysis aimed to draw inferences about how sexuality was represented in the series overall by examining variables about each of these lead characters.

Research formally began with a pilot study of Season One where two trained graduate research assistants independently coded the episodes. Results were averaged for both raters for Season One. The pilot study ensured common understanding of coding categories and variables, established inter-rater reliability, and enabled finalization of the coding chart. Following the pilot study, one research assistant continued to code all 12 episodes in Season Two.

In both the series and the character analysis, two variables related to representations of female sexuality (and each of their respective categories) were coded for: (1) types of sexual relationships depicted (marital, extramarital, premarital, casual, homosexual, emotional affair) and (2) symbolic representation of female sexual freedom (dangerous, progressive). For “types of sexual relationships,” the categories were derived intuitively based on general knowledge of the series and the demographics of its lead characters. Specifically, *marital* relations were defined as sexual relations between husband and wife (legal marriage between a male

and female). *Extramarital* referred to an extramarital affair where the wife engages in some type of physical sexual relationship with someone who is not her partner of marriage. *Pre-marital* referred to an unmarried woman engaging in sexual relations. *Casual* relations referred to engaging in sexual relations outside a committed relationship, whether married or not. *Homosexual* referred to same sex relations. An *emotional affair* was defined as a relationship characterized by emotional intimacy between two people where at least one is already engaged in a romantic relationship (e.g. married, engaged, in a committed romantic relationship) with someone else. This type of emotional relationship excluded sexual relations. The variable “symbolic representation of female sexual freedom” analyzed how the series navigated the real-life push-and-pull between progressive and patriarchal values about women’s sexuality—between a more liberal social reality and a more traditional social norm—prominent in wartime society. As such, the category ‘*dangerous*’ referred to sexually active women being represented in the series as promiscuous (negative connotation), while *progressive* referred to sexually active women being represented as liberal and liberated—a step forward for women (positive connotation).

The following section presents the results of the study (the series- and character-level analyses combined) through a thematic analysis of representations of female sexuality in *Bomb Girls*.

Representing Female Sexuality in *Bomb Girls*

Bomb Girls tells the story of Canadian women at a time in history that simultaneously reinforced and challenged patriarchal ideals about women and their sexuality. As the findings of this study show, the series navigates these contradictions in ways that acknowledge their existence and impact on women at the time, but that ultimately portray change through strong female protagonists who break away from restrictive gendered norms, including those related to their sexuality. These ‘bomb girls’ lead sexual lives that are complex and active outside the confines of marriage, that are diverse and dispel the wartime myth of heteronormativity, and that are liberating and challenge the idea of female sexual freedom as dangerous.

Female Sexual Relationships as Heterogeneous

Bomb Girls portrayed various types of sexual relationships: marital and extramarital, premarital and casual, heterosexual and homosexual, abstinence and emotional affairs (see Table 1). Over the course of the series, the main female characters engage in a range of sexual relationships, oftentimes simultaneously (see Table 2). Although dramatized, this range of relationships is historically informed, echoed in oral histories of Canadian women who experienced the war. Even though social norms of the time limited female sexuality to heterosexual, married relations that correspond to gendered notions of femininity—women as passive and submissive, women as lacking sex drive—stories of real women affirm this was not the complete picture. *Bomb Girls* captures ‘her-story’ by depicting the range and complexity of sexual relationships that characterized life for women during the Second World War.

TYPE OF SEXUAL RELATIONSHIP	% Representation (N=17 episodes)
Marital	88%
Extramarital	29%
Premarital	68%
Casual	79%
Homosexual	65%
Emotional Affair	44%

Table 1. *Bomb Girls* Series Analysis – Types of Sexual Relationships Represented, by Percentage of Episodes

CHARACTER	Type of Sexual Relationship					
	Marital	Extramarital	Premarital	Casual	Homosexual	Emotional Affair
Lorna Corbett	88%	29%	0	29%	0	29%
Gladys Witham	0	0	65%	24%	0	24%
Betty McRae	0	0	18%	18%	65%	0
Kate Andrews	0	0	0	0	0	6%
Vera Burr	0	0	29%	56%	0	0

Table 2. *Bomb Girls* Character Analysis – Type of Sexual Relationship Engaged in, by Lead Female Character and Percentage of Episodes (N=17 episodes)

The character of Lorna Corbett, the series' matriarch, offers an example of the complexity and multiplicity that characterized women's sexual lives in wartime. As Table 2 demonstrates, Corbett is married throughout the series, yet she has a casual extramarital affair with a male colleague at Victory Munitions and later finds herself emotionally drawn to men who are not her husband. Corbett's marriage shapes her storyline and evolution as a character, which explains why marital relations featured prominently in the series. Hers is a troubled marriage with a distant and depressed veteran-husband, Bob Corbett, paralyzed on duty during the First World War. The couple married at 18, after finding out she was pregnant around the time Bob left for the Great War. His experience at war left him "broken"—frustrated, angry, and unemployed (*Save Bomb Girls*). Corbett is the primary wage earner in their middle-class family, and she enjoys working outside the home—and her husband knows it. This sense of 'brokenness' permeates the marriage, and loneliness propels Corbett into a sexual affair. The affair makes for drama onscreen, but it also represents real life in wartime and the "thousands" of women who did not play the stereotypical role of "the good wife," as first-hand accounts revealed (Broadfoot 1974: 245). Corbett eventually finds herself in the same situation that she warns her female supervisees about—pregnant. Historically, women were dismissed from war jobs and from the military when pregnancy was discovered. Like young single women "in the family way" at the time, Corbett weighs her limited options: illegally terminating the pregnancy, feigning that the baby is her husband's (although their lack of intimacy presents an obstacle), or sending herself 'away' to give birth in secret ("Armistice" 2013). She eventually miscarries. Corbett embodies the conflict between restraint and liberalization that characterized this period in history. She tries to play the role of the 'Good Woman' or 'Good Wife,' yet her actions do not align. Actor Meg Tilly aptly describes her character: "Lorna is ... human and a mix of things. She's not black and white. Sometimes she behaves quite honourably and heroically, and other times she behaves badly. It's just that humanness in her that we all have. Lorna is learning and growing and falling down and picking herself up, and along the way she's finding out who she is" (Eramo 2013).

As Tables 1 and 2 illustrate, representations of casual and premarital sexual relationships see significant air time in *Bomb Girls*.

Among the unmarried 'bomb girls,' the series depicts premarital sex both in the context of a committed relationship, as in the case of Witham who has sex for the first time with her fiancé before he leaves for war, as well as in the context of a casual encounter, as in the case of Burr who has casual sex with a string of soldiers in the second season. Opposite to this, Andrews is a virgin. Even when she becomes engaged to a male co-worker in the second season, she practices abstinence. Andrews, too, represents reality for women at the time who chose not to have premarital sex.

At various points in the series, other characters in committed relationships find themselves emotionally drawn to someone other than their husband or boyfriend (see Table 2). This happens to Corbett who, in the second season, finds herself too interested in a male instructor she takes dance lessons with. Witham, too, indulges a flirtation in the first season with a soldier about to depart for battle—to 'buoy' him up for war—and, in the second season, with her fiancé overseas, she finds herself attracted to the spontaneity and daredevil behaviour of Eugene Corbett, her supervisor's soldier-son who returns from war.

The focus of this analysis so far has been the portrayal of female heterosexuality, but *Bomb Girls* was distinct in that it represented lesbian relations through its lead character McRae. This sets *Bomb Girls* apart as a period piece. Throughout the series, McRae grapples with her sexuality—to understand it, to accept it, to explore it. She struggles with what it means to be a lesbian in a heteronormative society, and she hides her sexuality for much of the series. Homosexuality was still considered a crime under the Canadian Criminal Code during the Second World War, so while lesbianism was alive, it was also invisible.

Female Sexual Relationships as Sexually Diverse

Betty McRae, one of *Bomb Girls*' lead characters, is a lesbian. This portrayal of lesbianism (see Tables 1 and 2) makes *Bomb Girls* unique among period pieces as well as among historical representations of women in the media, which tended to depict heterosexual women, leaving lesbians either marginalized or invisible (Gauntlett 2008; Gill 2007; Wood 2009). In wartime society, too, lesbianism was not openly discussed or expressed. The gay and lesbian movement did not happen until the 1970s. While "most women who desired women in the period 1910-1965 did not have the identity categories 'lesbian'

and 'bisexual' available to them ..., many were able to explore same-sex relationships, to engage in physical sexual activity with women, and even to form community on the basis of same-sex desire and behaviour" (Duder 2001: ii). Where is their story in representations of women who worked during the war?

Enter McRae.

McRae emerges in the pilot episode as "a Rosie the Riveter type with a confident swagger that noticeably sets her apart from her more feminine counterparts"—a "tough-talking, take-no-crap from her male peers bombmaker who seems to soften only in the presence of her co-worker Kate [Andrews]" (Bendix 2012b). McRae is outspoken yet guarded, abrasive yet sensitive, independent yet yearning for something. Perhaps friendship? Love? Acceptance? She does not appear to get along with her female coworkers at first or have female friends until she meets Andrews in the second season. McRae seems comfortable and competent in the workplace and receives praise as Victory Munitions' best worker. She is not new to working-class life. In fact, many lesbians in the 1940s held jobs before the war, which made them stand out as "different" until other single women, mothers, and wives were called on by government to work in the factories too (Bendix 2012a). *Bomb Girls'* co-creator MacLennan described McRae as follows: "To me, I think Betty is somebody who had worked before, was really only comfortable in a male milieu and probably the character as she has grown up in a farm, she was around men all the time and now she's getting to do that kind of work and her challenge is that she's never really known or trusted women and so I wanted to make sure there was a kind of complexity with her whereas a lot of other women have never had a job before" (Ibid.).

At the start of the series, McRae's sexuality is deliberately and strategically unclear. MacLennan said he envisioned McRae's story as "not of somebody who understood herself and could identify or have the language to come out, per se. Rather somebody, like many women at the time, who is discovering herself. And discovering ... what sets her heart ticking. I think she's somebody who [has] been very guarded until this sort of transformative force comes along in the shape of Kate Andrews" (Ibid.). McRae struggles to make sense of her romantic feelings for Andrews, her new friend. In telling McRae's love story, MacLennan noted the need to respect the time in which the series was set—a time when "these things didn't come easy for these

women,” a time when “there was an incredible fear of showing themselves and experiencing feelings that had been long shut down” (Ibid.). McRae’s unease over her sexuality leaves her vulnerable and the prospect of others learning about it—and rejecting her—terrifies her. Still, in the final episode of Season One, “Element of Surprise,” McRae acts on her feelings for Andrews:

“I really like you, Kate,” she says.

“I like you too, Betty,” replies Andrews.

*McRae leans over and kisses Andrews on the lips.
Andrews pulls away and stands.*

“What are you doing?” Andrews says.

“Well, ... well, ... you said you—”

“What do you think I am?”

“I, um, nothing. I’m sorry. It’s ... it’s stupid. I just ... I thought—”

“That’s disgusting, and if you can’t see that, then you’re disgusting too.”

McRae runs out of the room.

McRae experiences rejection from the person she loves most and, later in the same episode, Andrews’ father, a fanatical street preacher, confronts McRae: “You think I can’t see the sin inside you?” (“Element of Surprise”). *Bomb Girls* depicts the homophobia characteristic of the time. Dominant discourses around gender and sexuality that defined and shaped sexual experience in the early- to mid-twentieth century in Canada were based on binaries. Heterosexuality was “normal,” “respectable,” “healthy” and “Christian,” and homosexuality was “abnormal,” “unrespectable,” “unhealthy” and “sinful” (Duder 2001: 8). In this broader context, after exposing herself to Andrews, McRae fears that she may be ‘outed’ and then fired from Victory Munitions, so she begins to date a male co-worker, Ivan Buchinsky, as a cover but remains fixated on restoring her friendship with Andrews. The McRae-Buchinsky

relationship ends when Buchinsky grows frustrated at his girlfriend's lack of interest in advancing the relationship, either sexually or through marriage. A highlight of McRae's journey with her sexuality occurs mid-way through the second season when she meets Teresa Hill, a lesbian and member of the Canadian Women's Army Corp. Hill is older than McRae and, more importantly, more comfortable with her sexuality. The pair connect romantically and their relationship intensifies. With Hill comes McRae's first opportunity to explore her sexuality and to feel accepted.

McRae is a complex, multi-dimensional character who does not conform to historical archetypes about lesbians or stereotypes of lesbian characters in the media. These have historically (especially in the 1950s and 1960s with respect to the former) polarized lesbians into either 'butch' or 'femme' identities, with the former associating lesbianism with the expression of masculinity and the latter with the expression of femininity (Ciasullo 2001; Levitt 2003). But there is nothing flat or binary about McRae's character, and she is neither 'butch' nor 'femme.' Her characteristics and behaviours reflect varying degrees of traditionally 'masculinity' or 'femininity,' both simultaneously and at a given time. MacLennan said: "There's so rarely a character like Betty that's allowed to be on television.... I just felt like, especially in that time when roles were so clear, why not? If we're talking about variety, why can't we have that character and tell love stories about her and make her this beautiful complex haunted person?" (Bendix 2012a). Through a character like McRae, *Bomb Girls* also makes visible the experience of gay women during the war and it reminds audiences that lesbians, too, were part of Canada's war story.

Female Sexual Relationships as Progressive

This analysis considered the symbolic representation of female sexual freedom in *Bomb Girls*—that is, was it depicted as dangerous or progressive or both? The answer reflects the context of the time, where "conflicts between restraint and liberalization continued to bedevil the subject and experience of sex and reproduction into the 1950s and beyond (Light and Pierson 1990: 87). Overall, across episodes and some characters, sexual freedom was portrayed as dangerous nearly as much as it was portrayed as progressive (see Tables 3 and 4), capturing both the societal climate of the time and its reality.

	% Representation (N=17 episodes)
Dangerous	56%
Progressive	53%

Table 3. *Bomb Girls* Series Analysis – Symbolic Representations of Female Sexuality in *Bomb Girls*, by Percentage of Episodes

CHARACTER	Representation of Female Sexual Freedom	
	... as Dangerous	... as Progressive
Lorna Corbett	35%	0%
Gladys Witham	21%	12%
Betty McRae	0	50%
Kate Andrews	3%	6%
Vera Burr	24%	9%

Table 4. *Bomb Girls* Character Analysis – Symbolic Representation of Female Sexual Freedom, by Lead Female Character and Percentage of Episodes (N=17 episodes)

With the war came possibility and freedom for women. With possibility and freedom came public fear of losing control over women’s sexuality. And this was dangerous. This true-to-life sentiment filters through the series. In the *Bomb Girls* pilot, “Jumping Tracks,” Witham lies to her parents (who she lives with in an affluent Toronto neighbourhood) about going out to a bar, The Jewel Box, to drink and dance after her first day on the job. At the factory, she sticks out as a “rich girl” and “princess” to her working-class coworkers, and she wants to fit in. When she arrives home, her father says: “You are courting disgrace.” His priority is to keep tight rein on his daughter who is engaged to a wealthy man he approves of: “I’m making sure this hellcat is worthy of walking down the wedding aisle,” Mr. Witham says to his wife. This reflects Victorian ideals about the virgin bride and the need for parents to protect their innocent and vulnerable unmarried daughters and control their sexuality (Light and Pierson 1990: 86). Still, Witham exercises her sexual agency later in the series when she has sex for the first time, with her fiancé before he ships off to war. As was wartime sentiment: “When your overseas lover could be shot dead tomorrow, when the materials you work with could explode in your face today, when you’re not sure if the free world will even be standing next month, you play your cards how you want—and you don’t play by the old rules” (*Bomb Girls*, Season One).

Bomb Girls moves past symbolic representations of women's sexual freedom as dangerous to tell a progressive and historically-representative story too. The barriers of sexual license were extended during the Second World War and, as stated, "women found freedom" to reimagine themselves and to explore their sexuality—and this was a good thing, at least for the women themselves and even if patriarchal public sentiment conveyed otherwise (Broadfoot 1974: 358). *Bomb Girls*, a story told in the twenty-first century with the benefits of historical research and hindsight, captures this progressive sentiment.

Burr, a lead character, embodies this progressive spirit towards women's sexual freedom amid lingering societal fear over it (see Table 4). Burr is the most sexually active of the lead characters. In effect, she is a "stepper" (Broadfoot 1974: 358). Early in the second season, Burr "considers a novel way to show her patriotism" and begins to casually date soldiers about to ship off or on leave (*Bomb Girls*, Season Two). Her string of dates involve dinner and always end up in Burr's bedroom. In the episode "The Enemy Within," Burr discovers that "helping out soldiers in need has reciprocal benefits" (*Bomb Girls*, Season One). She amasses a collection of gifts from her casual lovers, among these "a broach from Soldier Frank" and "earrings from Airman Georgie," as Burr says, as well as a satin slip and a pair of silk stockings, the latter being a rare commodity given wartime rations ("The Enemy Within"). Burr's is not an overt decision to trade sex for gifts. Rather, she seems to "drift into it," just as one real-life Canadian woman, 17 at the time, describes it:

All the boys were in uniform and everybody had a lot of money and there was fun around. The first time. It was in a dance hall... There was ... all these good-looking boys. One I got to like, he was an airforce something or other at the manning pool, he asked if I would go to a hotel with him and I didn't even think it over too much. I just said yes.... I wanted him and he wanted me. So we went to this hotel... We made love and then he took me to a nice restaurant and we had fish and chips, and that was the first time I ever tasted that kind of sauce they put on the side of your plate. The next night or the next time I was there we went again and this time he gave me a cashmere scarf. Soft. I won't say that's the way it started, but a cashmere scarf, that was something. So the

next time a fellow asked me I said yes, and this one gave me 3 dollars... You just seem to drift into these things. Quite honestly, cross my heart, I didn't think of it as prostitution. (Broadfoot, 247-248)

Over the next two years of this woman's life, three dollars became 10 or 15 dollars, and ten dollars became 700 dollars a month when she rented out a room for her "business" (Ibid. 248).

Burr's casual sexual encounters with soldiers do not reach this height in *Bomb Girls*, but they happen enough to get noticed. In the episode "The Harder We Fight," a co-worker gossips about Burr's behaviour, calling Burr a "patriotute"—part-patriot, part-prostitute. The term "patriotute" was coined by a physician in the U.S. Public Health Service to refer to "women who entertained the troops in order to maintain morale," a term that "stigmatized numerous young women who had responded to their nation's call to support the war effort" through "morale-maintaining services to the military, such as attending dances at military bases and servicemen's clubs" (Hegarty 2008: 1). As Hegarty (2008) described the U.S. context: "Inevitably, the latter sexualized services raised public and private fears regarding the present and future impact of the wartime disruption of the gender system. At a time when the state had initiated a campaign to protect the nation from prostitutes carrying venereal diseases, female sexuality seemed particularly dangerous" (Ibid. 1-2). The story is not unique to the United States. In Canada, as women's sphere broadened from the private to the public and, moreover, to domains previously exclusive to men, most notably the military, a fear arose that "sexual divisions might break down completely," that "out of the family circle daughters would be away from parental surveillance" and that, "removed from parental control and thrown together with men on military bases, [servicewomen] would lose their sexual respectability" (Pierson, 1986: 170). Yet, the military made use of 'sexualized services.' Pierson (1986) explained this "two-sided conception of female sexuality": "on the one hand, men have required that their own women - wives and daughters—be chaste, that is, keep their sexuality under the control of the husband/father; on the other hand, other women have been required to be sexually available outside the familial context" (188). While Burr is not 'required to be sexually available'—she chooses to be— *Bomb Girls* touches on the less visible story of the "patriotute."

Burr's storyline mirrors wartime reality and highlights female sexual agency. In the oral history account, the 17-year-old who "drifted" into prostitution affirms: "You can't think of me doing this alone. I knew lots of girls, oh hell, dozens of them whose husbands were away, overseas, everywhere, and they did it.... Look at me. Do I look as though I had a terrible time?" (Broadfoot 1974: 249). When whispers of Burr "prowling for soldiers" on the street corner surface at Victory Munitions, she explains her choice to a male friend and co-worker: "Those gifts... They're like love letters. They help me remember nights when somebody made me feel beautiful. I'm not ashamed of any of it" ("The Enemy Within"). Burr finds some healing in these casual encounters. In *Bomb Girls'* first episode, Burr is partially scalped in an accident while working on the assembly line, as did happen to some factory workers during the war, leaving her scarred and traumatized. Describing Burr's choice to have casual sex with soldiers as 'healing' is not intended to minimize or avoid problematizing her reasons for seeking comfort and validation through sex, but, rather, to foreground her attitude and the agency she articulates. She makes a choice that challenges gendered ideals about female sexuality, and she owns it.

In summary, *Bomb Girls* (re)constructs a narrative about female sexuality that breaks from a traditionally gendered and heteronormative story. The series captures the complexities around female sexual relationships and sexual orientation during the war, coalescing into a narrative that presents the 'bomb girls' as progressive symbols of female sexuality. The final section of this paper discusses the implications of these findings.

***Bomb Girls* as Feminist Counter-Discourse and Historical Tribute**

Bomb Girls offers insight into the nature of women's sexual freedom during the war. *Bomb Girls* depicts women as engaging in a range of sexual relationships, challenging restrictive Victorian stereotypes that defined female sexuality as passive and that confined sex to marriage. *Bomb Girls* also depicts lesbianism, injecting sexual diversity into Canada's war story and, in the process, challenging binary stereotypes about lesbians. Representations of female sexuality in the series reflect the real-life push-and-pull between liberation and restraint and, together, tell a story that, as the *National Post* described, "at its heart ... [is] about the empowerment of women at a time when they still lived sheltered lives" (Stinson 2014). The

series set out to tell the story of Canada's real 'bomb girls'—to capture this period of change and liberalization in women's lives. And it did.

These findings have implications for feminist media scholarship. As a modern media text, *Bomb Girls* challenges dominant gender ideologies characteristic of representations of women in mainstream media wherein women are marginalized and (mis)represented in stereotypical ways. The series presents a complex, diverse and progressive view of female sexuality during wartime. The female protagonists are empowered, authentic heroines with distinct voices and diverse experiences. *Bomb Girls* offers an example of modern-day media that takes female independence as "common sense" and, using this series as an example, this paper contributes to the voices in feminist media research positing that change is afoot—that women's roles on television are becoming increasingly diversified and less stereotyped (McRobbie 1999: 126, as in Gill 2007: 2; Gauntlett 2008: 98, 63). This shift is especially notable in female-centric dramatic series generally and in female-centric period pieces specifically. As this study has demonstrated, *Bomb Girls* explored a multiplicity of storylines about women's lives during the war—storylines that portray women as navigating, challenging and subverting social constraints around gender. *Bomb Girls* breaks with stereotypes, portrays women as exploring and taking control of their sexuality, and illuminates a more progressive history about women who worked on the home front during the war. This paper, like the series, contributes to a feminist counter-discourse focusing on the plurality of female voices and experiences.

As a historical piece, *Bomb Girls* offers a tribute to working women during the Second World War who have suffered from recurrent misrepresentation in the media and in political discourse alike (Moniz 2012, 2015) as well as a lack of representation in popular culture today. Representations of women's lives during the war have not echoed the voices in oral histories—voices that communicate a spirit of experimentation and a sense of liberation, including sexual liberation, that came along with women's entry into the workforce and their changed lives during the war. *Bomb Girls* tells of this other side to life during the war. It tells a story of freedom and, as the opening quote to this paper states, 'freedom' is indeed how some Canadian women remember life during the Second World War.

Theirs was a lesser told story—until *Bomb Girls*. *Bomb Girls* pays tribute to these working women, contributing a representative and progressive narrative to the history of women's lives on the Canadian home front during the Second World War.

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