



Julia Wajdziak

UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW, POLAND

J.WAJDZIAK@UW.EDU.PL

[HTTPS://ORCID.ORG/0009-0005-7955-1247](https://ORCID.ORG/0009-0005-7955-1247)

Ghosted Desires: Lesbian Spectrality and Neoliberal Resistance in Kelly Reichardt's *Certain Women* (2016)

Abstract. Western cinema has long struggled with the representation of lesbian identity, often reinforcing tropes of erasure, invisibility, and marginalization. *Certain Women* (2016), directed by Kelly Reichardt, disrupts these conventions by employing slow cinema aesthetics and embracing the concept of the apparitional lesbian. This paper examines the film through Terry Castle's theory of lesbian spectrality, Patricia White's notion of lesbian minor cinema, and Heather Love's concept of "feeling backward". The film's narrative, centered on the unspoken attraction between Jamie (Lily Gladstone) and Beth (Kristen Stewart), resists dominant queer cinematic tropes by immersing its characters in a world of quiet longing, solitude, and unresolved connection. Rather than conforming to neoliberal narratives of queer progress and visibility, *Certain Women* embraces stillness and subtlety as a form of political resistance. Through a close reading of the film, this paper argues that *Certain Women* aligns with the tradition of minor cinema by rejecting mainstream representational norms. In doing so, Reichardt's film expands the possibilities for lesbian storytelling, offering a vision of queerness that exists in the liminal space between presence and absence. By reframing queer identity through a lens of spectrality and melancholy, *Certain Women* challenges the limitations of dominant lesbian representation and asserts the potential of cinema as a space for alternative modes of queer existence.

Keywords: lesbian cinema, slow cinema, apparitional lesbian, minor cinema, spectrality

Introduction

Throughout the history of Western cinema, lesbian representation has been characterized by erasure, misrepresentation, or the reinforcement of harmful stereotypes. In classical Hollywood, censorship and ideological constraints led to the systematic

exclusion of lesbian characters, often rendering them invisible or portraying them as tragic figures (Castle 1993, 6). This paper examines how Kelly Reichardt's *Certain Women* (2016) challenges these conventions by employing the concept of the apparitional lesbian through the lens of lesbian minor cinema. *Certain Women*, adapted from Maile Meloy's short stories, follows the lives of four women in rural Montana, with one narrative strand focusing on Jamie (Lily Gladstone), a Native American ranch hand, and her quiet yet profound attraction to Beth (Kristen Stewart), a young lawyer teaching a night class. Jamie's subtle yearning and Beth's detached responses create a dynamic of unfulfilled desire and quiet alienation. Rather than offering a conventional love story or explicit representation of lesbian identity, the film embraces ambiguity, stillness, and isolation, placing its characters in a liminal space between presence and absence. This reflects the broader historical and cultural phenomenon of lesbian invisibility, a theme that scholars such as Terry Castle, Patricia White, and Heather Love have extensively analyzed.

Castle's concept of the "apparitional lesbian" describes how lesbian figures have historically been rendered spectral—always implied but rarely acknowledged (1993, 2). This ghosting effect, whether through censorship, implicit coding, or narrative elision, has shaped the ways in which lesbian characters are depicted in film and literature. *Certain Women* subverts this trope by embracing apparitionality as an aesthetic and political strategy rather than a limitation. Reichardt's use of long takes, minimal dialogue, and stark landscapes foregrounds themes of isolation and longing, positioning the film within the tradition of slow cinema (White 2008, 411). The film's aesthetic choices align with Patricia White's notion of lesbian minor cinema, which operates outside dominant cinematic structures, resisting mainstream expectations of representation and narrative closure (2008, 411). Furthermore, the film's engagement with themes of loneliness, failed connection, and alienation resonates with Heather Love's theory of "feeling backward," which critiques the pressure within queer discourse to frame lesbian identity through triumphant narratives of visibility and acceptance. Instead of adhering to a progressive, linear vision of queer identity, *Certain Women* lingers in ambiguity, depicting Jamie's experience through affective registers of solitude and yearning. This refusal to conform to neoliberal expectations of identity politics makes the film a crucial case study in alternative forms of queer representation.

By analyzing *Certain Women* through these theoretical frameworks, this paper argues that Reichardt's film challenges dominant portrayals of lesbian identity in cinema. The film's resistance to mainstream narrative structures, its embrace of stillness and melancholy, and its engagement with apparitionality as a mode of queer existence highlight its significance within lesbian minor cinema. In doing so, *Certain Women* not only critiques historical patterns of lesbian erasure but also expands the possibilities for representing lesbian desire and subjectivity in contemporary film.

Lesbianism as Specter: Censorship, Pathology, and Tragic Ending in Classical Hollywood

Throughout the twentieth century, lesbianism—and homosexuality more broadly—was systematically omitted from cinematic representation due to the restrictions imposed by the Motion Picture Production Code (1930–1968). The Code explicitly prohibited the depiction, implication, or even indirect suggestion of homoerotic content. As Patricia White asserts, tracing the representational strategies and tropes associated with lesbianism in classical Hollywood provides insight into “the historical implications of the ‘exclusion’ of homosexuality from U.S. cinema to formulate the relationship between reading against the grain and the history of sexuality” (1999, 1). Furthermore, White contends that cinema played a crucial role in shaping cultural perceptions of lesbian identity, as the pathologization of lesbianism coincided with the construction of a “highly visible femininity” (1999, 2). Historically, cinematic portrayals of lesbianism have been framed through discourses of inversion, sin, deviance, and pathology, while romantic relationships between women were often infantilized, reduced to mere friendships, or rendered invisible (White 1999, 3).

Within classical Hollywood, characters coded as homosexual frequently endured tragic narratives, with their stories culminating in suffering, ostracization, or death—often by suicide. William Wyler’s *The Children’s Hour* (1961), an adaptation of Lillian Hellman’s Broadway play, exemplifies the ways in which lesbian desire has been both obscured and pathologized within mainstream cinema. The film follows Martha (Shirley MacLaine) and Karen (Audrey Hepburn), two former college classmates who run a private boarding school for girls. When a vindictive student, overhears Martha’s frustration regarding Karen’s engagement, she fabricates a rumor about their relationship. Though the nature of the accusation is never explicitly stated, its implications are clear, leading to the mass withdrawal of students, social ostracization, and legal repercussions. Despite Karen and Martha’s insistence that the allegations are false, Martha ultimately confesses that she has always harbored romantic feelings for Karen. However, Karen dismisses Martha’s confession as mere confusion, reinforcing the broader cultural invalidation of lesbian desire. Shortly thereafter, Martha dies by suicide, solidifying the film’s adherence to the “bury your gays” trope. Notably, the term “lesbian” is never uttered in the film, yet its absence has profound material effects (White 1999, 21). Karen and Martha function as “apparitional lesbians” in that their queerness is never explicitly named but exists as a spectral presence—emerging obliquely, through implication, whispers, or off-screen insinuation. Martha’s confession occurs only after her life has been irreparably damaged, and her emotional turmoil casts doubt on the sincerity of her realization, further reinforcing the trope of lesbian desire as unstable or pathological. By ultimately aligning lesbianism with shame, destruction, and death, *The Children’s Hour* presents a deeply troubling representation of queer female desire, one that reflects the broader ideological constraints governing classical Hollywood’s treatment of non-heteronormative identities. *The Children’s Hour* exemplifies

how classical Hollywood obscured and pathologized lesbian identity, rendering it an unspeakable presence. This tradition of spectralization persists beyond mid-century cinema, resurfacing in contemporary works such as Kelly Reichardt's *Certain Women*, which engages with the notion of the 'apparitional lesbian' in a more nuanced yet equally revealing manner.

The Lesbian Apparition in *Certain Women*

Kelly Reichardt's *Certain Women* engages with the concept of the apparitional lesbian, as theorized by Terry Castle. According to Castle, lesbians have been subject to what she terms the "ghost effect"—even when visible, they remain spectral, elusive, and ultimately are denied full recognition (Castle 1993, 2). Castle sees the lesbian as "never with us, it seems, but always somewhere else: in the shadows, in the margins, hidden from history, out of sight, out of mind, a wanderer in the dusk, a lost soul, a tragic mistake, a pale denizen of the night" (1993, 2). The lesbian is refused space in Western culture and tradition even when she is present, her existence is never affirmed, she remains invisible—a ghost or an apparition. She argues that this spectralization stems from the lesbian's fundamental threat to patriarchal order: uninterested in men, she disrupts ideological, political, and economic structures that rely on female subjugation (1993, 3). As a result, the lesbian is cast as a cultural agitator, her presence erased through systemic dehumanization. Crucially, Castle challenges the notion that lesbian invisibility results from historical indifference; instead, she frames it as an "anxiety too severe to allow for direct articulation" (1993, 6). This ghosting of lesbians, Castle asserts, is not only a feature of Western literature and cinematic tradition but extends into lived reality, where lesbians have often been denied presence within both feminist and gay movements. The historical refusal to grant lesbians full subjecthood, either erasing them outright or reducing them to cultural stereotypes, has led to what Castle calls "self-ghosting," a phenomenon in which lesbians internalize their own erasure (Castle 1993, 17). At the core of Castle's argument is an insistence on recognizing how lesbian identity has always been woven into the fabric of cultural life, even as it remains unacknowledged (1993, 17).

Within this framework, *Certain Women* offers a compelling portrayal of Castle's apparitional lesbian through Jamie and Beth, characters who exist in a liminal space between visibility and erasure. Their relationship is marked by an implicit intimacy that suggests homosexuality, yet their sexualities remain unnamed, and their desires are never explicitly acted upon. They hover in the threshold of recognition, embodying what Castle identifies as the tension between presence and absence that has historically defined lesbian representation. However, unlike traditional narratives that pathologize lesbian invisibility, *Certain Women* embraces this liminality as a mode of being, rather than a site of repression. As Eliot and Hemmings argue, because the lesbian has been consistently positioned at the boundary between "the real and the phantasmatic," her

presence carries a visceral intensity (2019, 352). Reichardt's film resists the constraints of neoliberal homonormativity and instead aligns itself with lesbian minor cinema, foregrounding the spectral as a site of potentiality rather than absence. In doing so, *Certain Women* does not resolve the tension between visibility and invisibility but instead makes space for the lesbian apparition as a mode of queer existence.

In her discussion of Daniel Defoe's *The Apparition of Mrs. Veal*, Castle reflects on the unease associated with reading Mrs. Bargrave and Mrs. Veal as lesbians, citing concerns of "crassness, anachronism, even narcissism" (1993, 30). This hesitation is reinforced by Defoe's assertion that their bond was incorporeal, as Mrs. Veal is a literal apparition. However, Castle argues that it is precisely this spectrality—what she calls "the seeming ineffability"—that enables a queer reading of their relationship (1993, 30). The inexpressibility of their desire is what makes its interpretation as lesbian not only possible but, in fact, necessary. A similar dynamic is at play in *Certain Women*, where the relationship between Jamie and Beth remains unspoken, existing within a space of unresolved intimacy. There is no explicit articulation of desire, no confirmation of identity, and only a single moment of physical contact—when the two women ride a horse together. Yet, through the film's lingering close-ups, the sustained gaze of Jamie, and her repeated attempts to reach out to Beth, an undercurrent of queer longing emerges. The film does not obscure lesbianism through apparitionality but rather employs it to embrace the lesbian experience. In other words, "the repressed idea" of the lesbian manifests through the apparition itself (Castle 1993, 62).

Moreover, *Certain Women* not only situates its lesbian characters within the liminal space between visibility and invisibility but also extends the notion of apparitionality to Beth's character. While she is not a victim of ghosting in the conventional sense, her presence in Jamie's life is marked by ephemeral appearances and disappearances, culminating in a final vanishing act that reinforces her spectrality. Yet, crucially, unlike traditional narratives in which lesbian existence is foreclosed through erasure, Reichardt's film refuses to deny Jamie and Beth their subjectivity or desire. Rather than positioning this liminality as a site of repression, *Certain Women* reclaims it as a generative space—one that resists assimilation into neoliberal homonormativity. By embracing the lesbian apparition rather than seeking to resolve it, *Certain Women* challenges the normative frameworks that demand visibility, legibility, and assimilation. The film thus demonstrates how spectrality can function as a mode of resistance, offering an alternative to neoliberal identity politics and expanding the possibilities of lesbian representation. This embrace of spectrality as a mode of resistance aligns with Patricia White's concept of lesbian minor cinema, which foregrounds alternative modes of representation that resist assimilation into dominant cinematic frameworks (1999, 410). In this sense, *Certain Women* not only explores the lesbian apparition narratively but also engages with minor cinematic aesthetics, reinforcing its refusal of neoliberal visibility politics.

Lesbian Minor Cinema

Patricia White argues that films by and about lesbians remain marginal within mainstream cinematic production, yet they have historically engaged with minor forms in ways that are culturally and politically significant (1999, 410). She observes that lesbian filmmakers, like women and trans creators more broadly, tend to operate outside dominant cinematic structures, often working within categories traditionally considered “minor” in relation to mainstream filmmaking—short films, television, documentary, and experimental fiction (White 1999, 411). However, while feature-length lesbian narratives remain scarce in commercial cinema, lesbian filmmakers have strategically embraced what White describes as “a certain ‘poverty’” in their aesthetic and narrative approaches” (1999, 411). By rejecting the normative structures of neoliberal cinematic production, lesbian minor cinema resists assimilation into dominant cultural economies, instead foregrounding alternative modes of representation and relationality, embracing “stillness, sparseness, solitude” and portrayals of “isolation, waiting, longing” (White 1999, 412).

White situates minor cinema as a politically charged aesthetic practice, one that, as she argues, employs “limited resources in a politicized way” (1999, 412). Rather than prioritizing representation in the conventional sense, minor cinema engages in formal and narrative experimentation, providing a cinematic space in which marginalized identities can challenge and subvert dominant cultural logics (1999, 413). Minor cinema provides a space for unfavorably situated minorities in which they can subvert “regimes of cultural power” (White 1999, 414). White suggests that the concept of “minor” in this context parallels the term “queer” in its resistance to hegemonic norms and its investment in collective, often revolutionary, artistic and political projects (1999, 414). Lesbian minor cinema, in particular, embraces the aesthetics of stillness, sparseness, and solitude, often portraying themes of isolation, waiting, and longing as central affective registers. Furthermore, White positions lesbian minor cinema within the broader feminist critique of Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “becoming-woman,” emphasizing how deterritorialization, as theorized by the philosophers, often reinforces rather than disrupts gendered hierarchies (White 1999, 14). She contends that women’s cinema, by necessity, functions as minor cinema, continually challenging dominant cinematic traditions through its modes of production, narrative structures, and aesthetic choices. The designation of “minor” in this context, then, reflects not only an engagement with reduced means—such as low-budget formats, minimal narrative, and constrained settings—but also an active refusal of dominant cinematic paradigms (White 1999, 414).

Reichardt’s *Certain Women* exemplifies the principles of lesbian minor cinema, both in its thematic concerns and its formal execution. The film’s narrative focus on Jamie and Beth aligns with White’s framework, as it resists the expectations of mainstream lesbian representation, opting instead for an understated, fragmentary exploration of desire, alienation, and unfulfilled potential. As previously discussed, *Certain*

Women incorporates the aesthetics of slow cinema—characterized by long takes, minimal dialogue, and an emphasis on atmosphere—which resonates with White’s articulation of lesbian minor cinema’s embrace of stillness, isolation, and intimacy. The film’s engagement with lesbian desire is not framed through conventional romantic resolution but is instead conveyed through fleeting, often asymmetrical interactions between Jamie and Beth. Through its aesthetic and narrative strategies, *Certain Women* resists dominant cinematic economies of visibility and coherence, offering instead a form of representation that foregrounds quiet longing and the structural limitations imposed on queer desire. By drawing on both slow cinema and lesbian minor cinema, Reichardt creates a cinematic space that challenges normative temporalities and narrative expectations, positioning queerness within an alternative aesthetic and affective register. This disruption of dominant cinematic economies is further reinforced by Reichardt’s adoption of slow cinema, a stylistic mode that deepens the film’s engagement with lesbian minor cinema by privileging stillness, mood, and temporality over conventional narrative resolution.

The Politics of Stillness

As Elena Gorfinkel argues, Kelly Reichardt’s filmmaking “sits at the cusp of experimental and classical film traditions,” blending neorealism with the aesthetics of slow cinema (2015, 123). Slow cinema understood here as embodying “a certain rarefied intensity in the artistic gaze that downplays events in favor of mood, evocativeness, and an intensified sense of temporality.” (Romney 2010, 43). *Certain Women* exemplifies these characteristics through minimal dialogue, restrained camera movement, ambient soundscapes, long takes, and a heightened awareness of the natural world. Nature, in particular, is not merely a backdrop but an integral aspect of Jamie’s existence, situating her within a more organic, embodied mode of being. By adopting the techniques of slow cinema, Reichardt resists the narrative conventions of mainstream capitalist Hollywood, instead foregrounding an alternative cinematic temporality that privileges observation over action.

The film’s slowness functions as an affective register of melancholy and nostalgia, reflecting the alienation and disillusionment endemic to late capitalism. The subdued atmosphere conveys a quiet mourning for a world structured by unfulfilled aspirations and pervasive loneliness. Beth, in particular, emerges as a figure of neoliberal exhaustion—disconnected from those around her and enmeshed in the isolating demands of capitalist labor. She is rarely shown engaging in meaningful dialogue beyond her interactions with Jamie, which themselves remain largely one-sided. Beth speaks but never inquires about Jamie, orders food she never finishes, and mechanically commutes long distances between multiple jobs, suggesting a life dictated by economic necessity rather than personal agency. She embodies the affective consequences of neoliberalism: disillusionment, detachment, and a sense of being reduced to mere func-

tionality within a capitalist machine. By contrast, Jamie, despite her own alienation, appears more attuned to her surroundings and to a sense of embodied existence. Her proximity to nature and her connection to living, breathing entities offer a counterpoint to Beth's hyper-mediated, mechanized existence. It is Jamie who initiates moments of intimacy and connection, suggesting that her embeddedness in the natural world affords her a measure of agency and emotional presence that Beth lacks. In this way, *Certain Women* contrasts two forms of alienation: one dictated by the rigid structures of neoliberal labor and the other shaped by an alternative, quieter mode of relationality. Through slow cinema, Reichardt gestures toward a form of queer existence that resists the dominant temporalities and affective economies of capitalism, offering instead a space of lingering, presence, and quiet yearning. Moreover, Kelly Reichardt engages with iconic symbols of Americanness—cars, roads, gas stations, and diners—only to systematically undermine them. The movie subverts the traditional association of mobility with freedom, portraying movement instead as hollow and unfulfilling. Jamie's eight-hour drive to see Beth, captured in long takes of her traversing a postindustrial landscape, ultimately leads to unrequited feelings. Beth's own pursuit of upward mobility proves equally futile; consumed by her two jobs, she is perpetually in motion, yet never at rest. Capitalism, rather than facilitating agency, instead fosters social dislocation and personal fragmentation, exemplified in Beth's relentless, unsatisfying routine.

The film's aesthetic and narrative structure reinforce its underlying sense of loneliness and pessimism, challenging the protagonists' persistent optimism—Jamie's quiet yet determined pursuit of Beth despite limited time, and Beth's guarded demeanor shaped by physical and emotional distance. Reichardt presents Montana's landscape in long, static shots of snow-covered mountains, emphasizing an environment that is vast yet isolating. The *mise-en-scène* is consistently cold and bleak, with dim lighting and a subdued color palette dominated by blues and grays. The seasonal setting—fall and winter—further accentuates the characters' emotional distance, as they are constantly wrapped in layers, visually emphasizing their detachment from warmth and comfort. Yet within this solitude, Jamie exudes a quiet calmness, a slowness that contrasts with Beth's hurried existence. Her interactions with animals, particularly the long takes of her tending to horses, offer a moment of respite from the film's otherwise restless motion. Though Jamie's heritage remains unspoken, her description of childhood horseback riding—without a saddle, using only a piece of string—hints at a Native American background. In contrast to Beth, whose white middle-class identity leaves her adrift in neoliberal capitalism, Jamie's connection to nature and self-assured pursuit of desire suggest a more rooted, potentially liberating identity. Solitude shapes both Jamie and Beth's experiences as they navigate life in a postindustrial world. *Certain Women* resists a mainstream homonormative narrative with a neatly resolved, happy ending, instead offering a portrayal of lesbian solitude in rural Montana. Yet this solitude is not necessarily a condition of despair—Jamie, despite her isolation, actively pursues Beth. There is no need for verbal affirmations of neoliberal identity; instead, desire is conveyed through Jamie's lingering gazes and quiet vulnerability. Ultimately,

Jamie—a Native American ranch hand deeply connected to nature—is rejected by Beth, a white, middle-class woman struggling to structure her life within the pressures of late capitalism. Their disconnect is not rooted in rural homophobia or the ineffability of queer desire but rather in Beth’s own social dislocation, her immersion in the demands of survival within a neoliberal system that leaves little space for intimacy or self-reflection. *Certain Women* thus presents a subtle critique of neoliberalism, implying that a freer existence might be found in rejecting its rigid categorizations rather than conforming to them.

Alienation and The Limits of Neoliberal Identity

This tension between solitude and agency, between isolation and quiet pursuit, resists the pressures of homonormative narratives that demand linear progress and affirmation. Rather than framing Jamie’s longing or Beth’s distance as inherent failures of queer connection, *Certain Women* situates their experiences within broader structures of labor, class, and neoliberal constraint. In doing so, the film echoes Heather Love’s concept of ‘feeling backward,’ which challenges triumphalist queer narratives and foregrounds the emotional complexities—longing, withdrawal, and exhaustion—that shape queer subjectivity (2007, 3). Love’s framework offers a lens through which to understand the film’s refusal of closure, its embrace of melancholic attachment, and its engagement with queer temporality. Through examining literary works from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Love introduces the concept of “feeling backward,” a mode of queer experience marked by what she calls an “archive of feeling”—an account of the corporeal and psychic costs of homophobia” (2007, 4). The emotions that emerge from this archive—nostalgia, regret, shame, despair, *ressentiment*, passivity, escapism, self-hatred, withdrawal, bitterness, defeatism, and loneliness—challenge the demand for narratives of queer success and instead offer a more complex engagement with queer subjectivity (Love 2007, 4–5). *Certain Women* evokes the “archive of feeling” by foregrounding isolation and loneliness, particularly in the experiences of Jamie and Beth. Both women inhabit rural Montana, a setting traditionally positioned in opposition to queerness. Historically, cities have functioned as queer refuges, while rural landscapes have been cast as “gay America’s closet,” sites of repression or erasure (Mary L. Gray 2009, 4–6). Yet, rather than reinforcing this binary, Reichardt’s film complicates the relationship between rurality and queerness. Jamie, who lives alone on a farm, experiences a profound physical isolation, her daily interactions are largely limited to animals. Beth, in contrast, is embedded within a capitalist system that fragments her time and bodily autonomy. Her isolation is not defined by geographical remoteness but by the demands of late capitalism: her eight-hour round-trip commute twice a week, her exhaustion, and her perpetual state of transit. The film suggests that alienation is not inherent to rural life but is instead produced through structures of labor and economic precarity. Despite her physical isolation, Jamie remains emotionally

open. She actively seeks out Beth, attending her night classes, accompanying her to the diner, and inviting her to visit the ranch. Their only physical interaction occurs when Jamie offers Beth a ride on her horse—a moment of fleeting intimacy that, despite its subtlety, encapsulates the film’s understated portrayal of queer longing. Jamie’s quiet acts of care, her gaze lingering on Beth, and her persistent yet unspoken desire all constitute a lexicon of queer intimacy, one that resists overt articulation but remains deeply legible. Beth, by contrast, remains distant, ultimately rejecting Jamie, not due to rurality’s supposed hostility to queerness but rather as a consequence of her own exhaustion, alienation, and entrenchment within neoliberal structures of labor.

In this way, *Certain Women* resists dominant lesbian tropes. It refuses the narrative of compulsory urban migration, demonstrating that lesbian desire is neither contingent upon nor confined to the city. Moreover, through Jamie’s affinity with nature, Reichardt challenges the heteronormative association between heterosexuality and the “natural.” By immersing Jamie within the rural landscape, the film dismantles the binary opposition between heterosexual/homosexual and natural/unnatural. Rather than positioning nature as something to be overcome or escaped, *Certain Women* suggests that queer existence can thrive within rural spaces. The film ultimately proposes that the primary obstacle to queer connection is not rural isolation but the demands of late capitalism, which displace and exhaust subjects, foreclosing the possibility of intimacy. By embracing “feeling backward,” *Certain Women* offers a lesbian narrative that does not strive toward resolution or triumph but instead lingers in the complexities of desire, isolation, and loss. In doing so, Reichardt disrupts neoliberal demands for visibility and assimilation, demonstrating that queer narratives need not adhere to linear progress to be meaningful. Instead, *Certain Women* reclaims the affective textures of queer life, making space for a lesbian experience that is both historically resonant and radically resistant to normative incorporation.

Conclusions

Kelly Reichardt’s *Certain Women* offers a compelling and unconventional representation of lesbian identity that resists dominant cinematic norms. Through its use of slow cinema, minimal narrative resolution, and an emphasis on isolation, the film departs from traditional depictions of lesbian relationships in mainstream media. This paper has demonstrated how *Certain Women* engages with the concept of the apparitional lesbian, as theorized by Terry Castle, by portraying Jamie and Beth in a liminal space between presence and absence. Their relationship is marked by silence, distance, and an unspoken yearning that challenges conventional expectations of queer representation.

By situating the film within the framework of Patricia White’s lesbian minor cinema it is possible to see how Reichardt’s aesthetic and narrative choices align with a broader tradition of queer filmmaking that rejects the dominant structures of commercial cinema. Lesbian minor cinema often embraces themes of solitude, stillness, and

non-conformity, resisting assimilation into neoliberal narratives that demand clear and affirmative portrayals of queer identity. *Certain Women* exemplifies this by refusing to provide a neatly resolved love story or a conventional coming-out narrative. Instead, the film lingers in the quiet moments of Jamie's longing, allowing for a representation of lesbian experience that is deeply affective and politically charged. Moreover, Heather Love's theory of feeling backward provides another critical lens through which to understand the film's engagement with affective histories of queer experience. Rather than presenting a triumphant or progressive vision of lesbian identity, *Certain Women* embraces feelings of loneliness, alienation, and longing as intrinsic to the queer experience. By doing so, the film resists the pressure to frame queer representation solely through narratives of success, instead acknowledging the complex emotional realities of lesbian existence. Jamie's character, in particular, embodies this tension between desire and isolation, as she navigates her attraction to Beth in a world that offers little space for meaningful queer connection.

In conclusion, *Certain Women* stands as a powerful example of how contemporary lesbian cinema can challenge mainstream narratives while embracing aesthetic and thematic elements that have historically defined minor cinema. By engaging with the concept of the apparitional lesbian, rejecting the constraints of neoliberal identity politics, and incorporating the affective textures of queer loneliness, the film expands the possibilities for lesbian representation in contemporary cinema. By centering negative emotions, *Certain Women* further challenges mainstream expectations and offers a more complex vision of lesbian existence. It stands as a significant example of a non-conforming narrative that provides a refreshing portrayal of the modern lesbian experience, enriched by a historical understanding of this identity.

References

- Bradbury-Rance, Clara. 2019. *Lesbian Cinema After Queer Theory*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Castle, Terry. 1993. *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Certain Women*. 2016. Directed by Kelly Reichardt. Los Angeles, Calif.: Criterion Collection. DVD.
- D'Emilio, John. 1983. *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Eloit, Ilana, and Clare Hemmings. 2019. "Lesbian Ghosts Feminism: An Introduction." *Feminist Theory* 20 (4): 351–60. doi:10.1177/1464700119871219.
- Gorfinkel, Elena. 2015. "Exhausted Drift: Austerity, Dispossessions and the Politics of Slow in Kelly Reichardt's *Meek's Cutoff*." In *Slow Cinema*, eds. Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge, 123–136. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Gray, Mary L. 2009. *Out in the Country. Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America*. New York: New York University Press.

- Lewis, Rachel. 2012. "Towards a Transnational Lesbian Cinema." *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 16 (3): 273–290.
- Love, Heather. 2007. *Feeling Backward. Loss and The Politics of Queer History*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Mayer, Sophie. 2015. "Uncommon Sensuality: New Queer Feminist Film/Theory" In *Feminisms: Diversity, Difference and Multiplicity in Contemporary Film Cultures*, eds. Laura Mulvey and Anna Backman Rogers, 86–96. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Romney, Jonathan. 2010. "In Search of Lost Time." *Sight and Sound* 20 (2): 43–44.
- Traub, Valerie. 2015. "The of the Lesbian." In *Thinking Sex with Early Moderns*, 287–316. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Villarejo, Amy. 2003. *Lesbian Rule. Cultural Criticism and The Value of Desire*. London: Duke University Press.
- White, Patricia. 1999. *UnInvited. Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- White, Patricia. 2008. "Lesbian Minor Cinema." *Screen* 49 (4): 410–425. doi: 10.1093/screen/hjn057.