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Ladies on Fire: Examining Feminist Solidarity from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Day

All that can be heard is the crackle of a roaring campfire and light chatter among women at an evening gathering. There are no stars or moonlight; everyone is being illuminated by the warm light of the fire. Suddenly, a symphony of voices slowly begins a glissando, which rises in pitch and volume until the women are in a circle, all facing one another. Once eye contact is made, some women begin to clap and add voice parts of their own. The song grows, with more and more women repeating the melodic chant. The camera pans to Marianne, one of the protagonists of Celine Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, glowing in the bright light of the fire while wearing a matching red-orange dress. She smiles and quickly diverts her attention across the large fire and towards Heloise, the second protagonist. The camera whips back and forth between Heloise and Marianne before it frantically whips back to Heloise, who slowly walks away from the scene, only for the hem of her dress to catch on fire. The singing stops abruptly. Heloise takes a moment to look down at her burning dress, as the hem is engulfed in a red-orange flame. The two make eye contact for just a moment - before one of the singing women rushes towards Heloise to put out the flame. Heloise falls, only for Marianne to pull her up just before the scene transitions.

In Sciamma's period lesbian romance, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019), this scene and many like it are the reasons the film is hailed as "a manifesto about the female gaze" (Sciamma

qtd in VanDerWerff). The film delves into the intimate and romantic relationship between two women, Heloise, an aristocrat, and Marianne, a painter, in eighteenth-century France. Sciamma does not make the unorthodoxy of the situation the focus of the film, especially given the time period, rather, she depicts the rise of desire between the two women through the female gaze. Beneath the tensions of Marianne's fiery red-orange color palette and Heloise's dark blues simmers an inner desire for sisterhood, sorority, and feminist solidarity. *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* is an exploration of the ways female solidarity can provide women with the freedom to break down heteronormative barriers. However, this freedom is fleeting and temporary at best throughout the film, as Sciamma expertly shows how the presence of the patriarchy can be felt even in the absence of male characters. Despite the movie taking place two hundred years ago, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* reflects on the impact that heteronormative patriarchy still has on our lives and provides a glimpse of what feminist solidarity, empowerment, and liberation could feel like in the present day.

Portrait of a Lady on Fire destabilizes the more traditional male gaze in favor of creating something more feminine and empowering. Film Theorist Karen Hollinger's essay, "Theorizing Mainstream Female Spectatorship: The Case of the Popular Lesbian Film," articulates that "the power of the look is said to be male, and the female is typically positioned as the object rather than the subject of desire" (12). The male gaze objectifies women, as men are allowed to actively perceive women while female characters in movies are merely there for men to look at. What makes Sciamma's film different and quietly radical is the fact that she subverts the normativity of the male gaze in favor of what Hollinger calls "the lesbian look" (12). The lesbian look is centered on the exchange of gaze rather than a one-sided viewing. Hollinger expertly notes this difference by highlighting that "the lesbian look "requires exchange. It looks

for a returning look, not just a receiving look” (Strayer qtd in Hollinger 12). In a typical romance film, the focus would be on the man perceiving his romantic interest, while in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, the focus on the film is about women seeing each other. Further, Sciamma creates a story by and for queer women, bringing light to a lot of history that is typically “left on the cutting room floor” (VanDerWerff). In an interview about *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* between *Vox*’s Critic at Large Emily VanDerWerff and director Celine Sciamma, the two discuss how the stories of women and queer people are often ignored and disregarded in stories about the past. Sciamma wanted to “give back to these women from the past their hearts, their desire, the rush of blood to the cheek” (qtd in VanDerWerff). She wanted to intricately depict the rise of the desire between two women, something that is rarely depicted in a period piece and romance movies at large.

The “lesbian look” is also centered on active female desire, which is typically characterized as “a subject that infamously resists documentation” (Binhammer 2). Katherine Binhammer’s academic essay, “Accounting for the Unaccountable: Lesbianism and the History of Sexuality in Eighteenth-Century Britain,” explains that lesbians in the past have been “hidden and silenced” (2). Sciamma uses *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* and the lesbian look to break the silence on female desire. From her choices of lighting to the unorthodox decision to shoot her period piece using digital and not film, Sciamma is dedicated to depicting a part of history that has never been depicted before. She simultaneously “examines the historical limitations placed on women and queer people,” and resists the typical patriarchal perspective when it comes to representing lesbianism at large (VanDerWerff). *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* is heralded as “a manifesto on the female gaze” because “the active desire of the coupled lesbian subject is presented through the lesbian look to the film’s female spectator, who is thereby offered

empowerment as an active desiring female subject” (Hollinger 12). Sciamma not only accomplishes the feat of portraying lesbianism in the eighteenth century so beautifully, but also distances herself from the male gaze and dedicates her film to female empowerment on screen and off-screen.

What we know about lesbianism in the eighteenth century is determined by who depicts it, and it is typically depicted by men or not at all. Because of this, Sciamma uses *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* to wield the power of gaze and shape the narrative surrounding women and queer people of the past, creating a love story rooted in solidarity and equality. In the second half of the film, immediately after the evening bonfire gathering, the lovers, Marianne and Heloise, are seen briefly holding hands as they lead each other to a nearby cave on the beach. Despite the viewer, being taken out of the bonfire scene, the haunting and enchanting singing continues and only fades when Heloise is shown nervously waiting in the cave. The viewer is left with the soft sounds of the ocean waves as the camera shows Marianne from behind, walking up to meet Heloise. The rocky walls of the cave loom over the two as they move closer together, breathing heavily. They slowly inch closer and closer together, removing their mouth coverings just before their lips embrace. The lovers kiss longingly before Heloise pulls away. Marianne’s gaze remains directly at Heloise, but Heloise looking downwards after she breaks the kiss, barely being able to make eye contact with Marianne before she darts away. *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* uses scenes like this to portray the building desire between the two female protagonists. The strategic use of diegetic sounds, such as the ocean waves and heavy breathing, makes the scene feel much more intimate, as Sciamma fully immerses us into Heloise and Marianne’s love story. *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* is not only a manifesto on the female gaze and the lesbian look, but also depicts how powerful gaze and perspective are at large (Sciamma qtd in VanDerWerff).

Sciamma's scene shows that she is aware that "what we know about sex in the past is determined by who speaks, from where, and when" (Binhammer 1). In any other film, and especially one that utilizes the male gaze, this scene would include dramatic background music, gushy make-out scenes, and the build of desire between the two women would be oversexualized. By diverging from these stereotypes, Sciamma creates a love story that prioritizes female agency and not male entertainment.

Portrait of a Lady on Fire is also a story of organic female solidarity. Rachel Syme's *The New Yorker* essay, "*Portrait of a Lady on Fire* is more than a 'Manifesto on the Female Gaze,'" claims Sciamma "allows sisterhood to bloom organically out of the setting's austere traditionalism." Sisterhood and solidarity do not only grow simply because of the setting, but also because of the lack of men throughout the movie. Sciamma's use of the female gaze is so strong that "there are hardly any men in the movie at all, and, when they do appear, they often have their backs turned or their faces out of focus, and once we see a man clearly, 'it feels like an intrusion.'" Men as characters in Sciamma's film are irrelevant, but that does not mean the presence of the patriarchy cannot be felt, making female solidarity especially important throughout the story. In the very last beach scene of the film, Heloise, who is wearing the emerald green dress from her portrait instead of her typical dark blue, is seen from behind. While Heloise is watching the fierce ocean waves, Marianne, in her fiery orange-red dress, runs up behind Heloise and embraces her. All that can be heard are the crashes of the ocean waves, Marianne's heavy breathing, and sobs between the two women. Upon hearing the news that her mother comes home tomorrow, Heloise turns to face Marianne, who immediately kisses her. There are no men supervising or watching the two women, as this scene, and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* at large, focus on empowering representations of lesbianism and female solidarity.

Sciamma creates a story free of men, yet critiques them and their role in the patriarchy. Despite not having men in the film, the effect the patriarchy has on both Heloise and Marianne is felt. Sciamma's strategic use of colors symbolizes how the women have been impacted by their newfound freedom and patriarchal oppression. In so doing, she subtly emphasizes the importance of female solidarity. For a rather sad scene, the colorways Sciamma uses are quite bright, and arguably the brightest in the entirety of the film. The ocean and the sky are a bright blue, symbolizing the freedom Heloise and Marianne have gained once The Comtesse, who is Heloise's mother, leaves for a few days. Heloise's emerald green dress and Marianne's reddish-orange dress, although both dark in tone, appear bright as the women passionately embrace for the final time. However, once the Comtesse returns home, so does Heloise's more restrained dark blue color palette. The Comtesse, who is representative of the patriarchy and Heloise's fate, also wears dark blue. Heloise wearing this color in her mother's presence shows that she has to accept the fate that is given to her, as her arranged marriage to an unknown man is inevitable. After having Heloise and Marianne be relieved from the pressure of the patriarchy for a short period of time, Sciamma uses the color scheme in the last scenes of the film to show the inescapability of the patriarchy, even when men are nowhere to be found. Because the patriarchy cannot be easily escaped, Marianne and Heloise cling onto each other, as well as the sisterhood they formed, tightly, with the turbulent crashes of ocean waves mirroring the turbulent feelings they share about their fate as women.

Heloise's freedom she experiences with Marianne is temporary, but the way Sciamma depicts their freedom suggests ways we can make it more permanent. In Katja May's academic essay, "The Pussyhat Project: Texturing the Struggle for Feminist Solidarity," she uses the Pussyhat Project and the 2017 Women's March to display the complexities behind twenty-first-

century feminist solidarity. The pink, knitted, pussyhats are initially defined as “a global symbol of female solidarity and the power of collective action,” but as May explores the role intersectionality plays into feminist politics and solidarity, pussyhats are no longer a global symbol, transforming into “a texture in the struggle for feminist solidarity in the women’s liberation movement of the Global North, particularly in the context of North America and Europe” (May 85). The pink pussy hats, often heralded by white women, became a global symbol of female solidarity when the movement only spoke towards one group of women. Additionally, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* displays a rather white utopian feminism, lacking the intersectionality that is essential to establishing feminist solidarity today. Despite their limitations, both Sciamma’s film and the Pussyhat Project are both useful in displaying the importance of female empowerment and how we should move forward to achieve it. Feminist solidarity is not only an essential texture in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, but also feminist liberation. Although the methods of achieving sorority have changed over the course of two hundred years, its significance and importance to feminist liberation have never waned. The increased importance of individual and collective action and intersectionality seen in today’s feminist movement adds even more texture to analyzing the solidarity shown in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* in a modern context.

How Sciamma depicts feminist liberation and solidarity in eighteenth-century France highlights the most important aspects of the modern feminist movement. When women come together around one thing, whether it is a bonfire or knitting pink pussy hats, it is powerful and directly pushes back against the patriarchy. Sciamma’s film is feminist, but not in a way that begs for equality with men, but enforces solidarity among women. She shows two women, both from different class backgrounds and with varying degrees of societal freedom, building an

intimate relationship with love and equality as the foundation. However, feminist liberation is not as easy as singing around a campfire. Feminism is “a “critical practice” that serves to unpack the multiple layers of domination related to patriarchy in a way that also gestures toward an undoing of these structures” (May 77). Sorority is not liberation, because the gathering ends, the pink pussy hat gets shoved into the back of an old drawer, we wear the dark blue dress, and the fire goes out. However, solidarity can help us work towards feminist liberation and making our freedom permanent.

There are many textures to achieving freedom, and Sciamma’s film may not show us what liberation looks like in the modern-day, but *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* shows us what undoing patriarchal systems can feel like. Heloise and Marianne’s story intentionally speaks to all women, as we have all come so close yet so far to achieving personal and collective liberation. *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* may be considered utopian by some, but it acutely and accurately depicts not only the power that comes from sorority, but also the oppression that comes from the patriarchy. The love between Marianne and Heloise may not be able to take down systems of heteronormative patriarchy, but the sisterhood they develop gives us the flint to light the fire. Forming relationships rooted in equality with other women, as well as accounting for the myriad of textures May suggests, such as class, race, and collective action, will move us towards achieving feminist liberation.

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