

A CRITICAL LOOK AT QUEER MEDIA: WHAT *THE L WORD*
AND *QUEER AS FOLK* ARE COMMUNICATING

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ABSTRACT

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This study looks at the pay cable television series' *The L Word* (TLW) and *Queer as Folk* (QAF), two shows that focus predominately on gay and lesbian life. I analyzed the first seasons of the shows to explore how they perpetuate normative ideals about gender, race and class. Employing queer theory and ethnographic content analysis, I found that gay men on QAF were feminized and lesbians on both shows were masculinized. Heteronormative couplings were present within the same-sex couples in both shows and race or class often marked the member of the couple that was given the opposing gender role. While the masculinization of lesbians in the shows was done textually and contextually, visually the women of the shows adhered to a typically feminine look and style. The men on QAF upheld notions of males and masculinity by emphasizing the nature of the male sex drive. Because both shows maintained the divisions between the binary oppositions of gay/straight, male/female, and

masculine/feminine, they reproduce heteronormative ideology and help maintain dominant ideological paradigms.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Sociologists have studied how media and consumer capitalist society works with the ideological forces of dominant culture to dictate peoples' conceptions about and reading of popular culture (Croteau and Hoynes 2000). Because we are social creatures, our understanding of the world in which we live is necessarily bound by ideological structures that define and constitute societal norms. These ideological paradigms and discourses of knowledge are structured such that the power to define and categorize is not acknowledged, rather the labels and identities produced are seen as a taken-for-granted aspect of society. Within consumer, mass media culture these ideological structures are reproduced to the point of reification so that societal norms are often thought of as natural. In an effort to critique the power of ideology, contemporary post-modern theories have sought to deconstruct these ideologies as a way to open up an analysis of culture that not only seeks to question dominant society but that tries to make possible different understandings and knowledge of our world. One particular area of interest is that of sexuality, which has been theorized as a social and historical construct predicated on cultural ideals of biology, sex, gender, race and morality (Foucault 1990 [1978]; Weeks 1986).

Contemporary theories of sexuality and especially the emergence of the poststructuralist and deconstructivist paradigms of the 1970s and 1980s challenged the notion of a concrete and definitive idea of the heterosexual and homosexual labels. Jeffrey Weeks and Michel Foucault both theorized the idea of the “invention” of sexual identities as historical constructs (Gamson and Moon 2004; Namaste 1994; Seidman 1994). These sexual identities were inherently susceptible to “definitional” shifts and changes due to societal mores at any given historical time period (Foucault 1990 [1978]; Weeks 1986). The idea of a changing and hence unstable identity led to theories that have sought to problematize the idea of identities and labels. Sedgwick (1990) questions the notion of homosexual identity as a rallying point for political movements. She argues that the label of “homosexual” in all its variants (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, etc.) is positioned within the binary trope of Heterosexual/Homosexual with the former being superior and the latter being inferior (Namaste 1994; Seidman 1994). Butler (1990) posits that our understanding of sex and gender, as it is socially constructed, needs to acknowledge the performativity inherent in our identifying as male or female, gay or straight. Another theoretical perspective that questions the idea of a unified identity is Patricia Hill Collins’ (2000) Black feminist theory that articulates the idea of multiple and varying oppressive paradigms combining to form different matrices of oppression for different people based on their own contextual circumstance. Identities converge and overlap making the possibility of being doubly, triply or multiply oppressed a conditional reality for many (Collins 2000; Gomez and Smith 1990). By adopting aspects from these theories, the basis of a queer theoretical framework that seeks to critically look at normative society has been formed in the hopes of “[analyzing] the institutional practices

and discourses producing sexual knowledge and how they organize social life, with particular attention to the way in which these knowledges and social practices repress differences” (Seidman 1994: 174).

Within the context of a pop cultural, consumer saturated society, the dominant ideologies of sexuality are reproduced by the media. Media studies have focused their analyses along two opposing paradigms, that of effects theory and active audience theory. Effects theory argues that media depictions affect audience behaviors (Croteau and Hoynes 2000), and has been divided into sub-theories that take into account the way media influences how and what people think and talk about in society (Castells 1996; Croteau and Hoynes 2000). In focusing on how the media dictates societal attitudes and behaviors, effects theory tends to neglect the way mass media audiences can appropriate and make sense of mediated images in a way that gives them agency and allows for independent thought. Active audience theory argues that audiences do not just understand and believe mass media images, rather people interpret media messages in a different and specific way so that multiple meanings exist and audiences can make sense of these images and messages in particular ways (Croteau and Hoynes 2000). Without reducing these theories to base simplification of an either/or dichotomy – either media controls society or society is independent of media – many theorists approach the issue by acknowledging the symbiotic relationship between media and society.

That media and society engage and influence each other however is not at issue; what needs to be understood is the persistence of dominant ideologies within both society and media that fail to acknowledge the differences inherent in human sexuality. The rise in the presence and visibility of a distinctly gay culture, which has subsequently been

subsumed within the larger consumer society (Clark 1993 [1991]; D’Emilio 1993 [1983]), has necessitated an analysis into the role gay media plays within the dominant ideological structure of society. Using queer theoretical analysis and keeping in mind an understanding of the influence of media in society, the goal of this study is to critically examine current media images of non-heterosexual culture by qualitatively analyzing the pay cable television dramas *The L Word* (TLW) and *Queer As Folk* (QAF). In analyzing mass mediated products of gay and lesbian culture through the lens of queer theory, I seek to situate these television shows as indicators of the ambiguous and indefinable nature of sexuality and simultaneously as guardians of heteronormativity. When placed within the confines of a normative culture that must label and define everything in a binary (in this case hetero/homo) opposition, pop cultural messages that present sexual ambiguity and liminal sexual spaces can make inroads to a rethinking of the hetero/homo binary.

My analysis of TLW and QAF will ask how these television shows both perpetuate and contest heteronormative culture. How is homosexuality defined and portrayed in these shows? In what ways are gendered norms represented, if at all? Do the images of gay men and lesbians differ within and between the shows? And how and where do the interstices of race, class, sex and gender enter into the representation of heterosexual and homosexual identity within these forms of popular culture? In conceptualizing the term “heteronormative” culture I mean to signify that which is white, male, affluent, straight and monogamous (Brandzel 2005). Rich (1993 [1986]) and Wittig (1997 [1980]) theorize the privileging of heterosexuality within patriarchal society at the expense of non-heterosexuals and women. Heterosexuality and patriarchy work in

tandem and have similar effects on people's subjectivity and identification. Halberstam (1998) articulates normative culture as male centered, middle-class and monogamous. Thus "heteronormative" is constitutive of a dominant ideology wherein the "Other" is always marked such that women, people of color, non-heterosexuals, and the poor and working class at some point or other fall out of the category of "heteronormative" and as a result are open to the oppressions imposed by normative, dominant culture. I am using the terms homosexual, gay and lesbian as interchangeable because they all fall into categories that constitute non-heterosexual identities (Sedgwick 1990). The use of the word queer, independently or coupled with theory signifies a non-heterosexual yet indefinable "category" in which to put subjects who do not fall into the hetero/homo binary (Fuss 1991; Namaste 1994; Sedgwick 1990).

A sociological analysis that undertakes a queer theoretical perspective will ultimately question dominant, normative culture and ideology that is always already represented in mass media and popular culture. Before I can engage in an analysis of media culture with regard to the supremacy and power of heteronormative ideology, I discuss past research in the field of queer studies, sociological analyses of sexuality, and media content analyses.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter discusses four areas of previous research. First, I give a brief overview of queer theory. Second, I describe past sociological studies of sex, sexuality, homosexuality, and deviance. Then I outline recent sociological studies incorporating queer theory. Because my study involves an analysis of media, I discuss the relevant research on mass media and content analyses as they relate to my study. I then situate my study at the intersection of media studies, sociological inquiry and queer theory.

Queer Theory

Queer theory developed out of the post-structuralist and deconstructionist theories of the late 1970s and early 1980s. As overarching, master narratives were questioned within literary theory, queer theory emerged as a framework that sought to inquire about the concept of identities and to expose the socially constructed ideals of sex and gender, thereby opening up an avenue for a broader understanding of human sexuality. Leading theorists in the development of queer theory include Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Diana Fuss. The major ideas being articulated within queer theory focus on the notion of gender performativity, the problems of “identity,” and fundamentally the questioning of powerful discourses that frame society’s understanding of the world.

In her seminal work *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler (1990) posits that gender is inherently performative insofar as society's concept of sex and gender can only be understood through linguistic structures that have defined the terms male and female. The structure of language is such that meaning is derived through links of associations that seek to define a word by what it is not (Barthes 1972 [1957]). The chain of associations attached to specific words work to construct a common understanding of terms and ideas so that words such as female or male are imbued with cultural meaning (Barthes 1972 [1957]; Hawkes 1977). Being born into an ideological system in which gender is always already inscribed, gendered behavior becomes natural, an essential aspect of the sexes. Butler's (1990, 1993) assertion that gender is performative belies essentialist assumptions regarding sex and gender. In theorizing gender performativity, Butler shows how gendered norms are produced and reproduced in society as typically feminine behavior is known to be such because it is performed by females and not because it is an essentially feminine act (Butler 1993).

Rubin (1997 [1975]) articulates the concept of a "sex/gender system" that frames society and is simultaneously created by society. She describes a system of understanding in which sex and gender are products of certain types of social interactions and institutions, but are not solely determined by those interactions; however they often tend to be (Rubin 1997[1975]: 32). The distinction between sex and gender within the "sex/gender system" as discussed by Butler (1993) is predicated on biological sex differences to the extent that the material lived body is delineated by anatomy. Using Foucault (1990[1978]), Butler theorizes that male and female sex difference works as a discursive device through medicine, psychiatry and science, and marks the body through

its regulatory control. The difference between male and female is parlayed into the separation between masculinity and femininity and thus gender identity is understood through its ties to the body (Butler 1993). In acknowledging the way society structures gender differences without denying the material reality of lived bodies, Butler is working to move the constructionist/essentialist debate beyond an either/or dichotomy and attempting to understand the complexity of sex and gender. When we attempt to make sense of the concepts of sex and gender within a “sex/gender system,” the inadequacy of a binary, dichotomous framework is exposed. As a result, the notion of identity and particularly sexual identities can be critically examined.

In addition to essentialist notions of sex and gender, theorists question the issue of identity. Sedgwick (1990) and Fuss (1991) challenge the idea of stable and fixed sexual identities, as they are registered within an ideology of the “sex/gender system” of binary oppositions that fails to account for variations and inconsistencies within these identities. According to Sedgwick (1990)

What was new from the turn of the century was the world-mapping by which every given person, just as he or she was necessarily assignable to a male or a female gender, was now considered necessarily assignable as well to a homo- or a hetero-sexuality, a binarized identity that was full of implications...It was this new development that left no space in the culture exempt from the potent incoherences of homo/heterosexual definition (2).

It is exactly the “incoherences of homo/heterosexual definition” that problematizes gay and lesbian identity. Butler (1991) discusses the difficulty of producing scholarly work in the name of an identity because the naming of an identity inevitably frames the context of the work and the way others will see it. The naming of, or as Althusser (1972 [1971]) theorizes, the interpellation of a person works to obfuscate and silence any understanding that falls outside of the cultural and ideological ways of knowing who that person is

(Butler 1991; Cohen 1991; Fuss 1991). Because sexual identity has been conferred upon persons through the social discursive, attempts to collectively unify under a homosexual identity become problematic because it ignores differences with the group identification (Cohen 1991).

As queer theory critically analyzes sex, gender and identity it begins “the difficult but urgent textual work necessary to call into question the stability and ineradicability of the hetero/homo hierarchy” (Fuss 1991: 1). Queer theory as a literary framework that questions gender and identity has not been used frequently within sociology (Eves 2004). Traditional sociological inquiry has sought to empirically study society as it is and its effects on individuals. Within the sociology of (homo)sexuality and deviance, a body of knowledge has been built that lends itself to a quasi-queer theoretical understanding (Irvine 2003).

Sociology of Sexuality and Deviance

The idea that sexuality is a historically and socially constructed notion was posited by Jeffrey Weeks and Michel Foucault among others, before the emergence of queer theory (Epstein 1996; Irvine 2003; Seidman 1996, 1994; Stein and Plummer 1996). Irvine (2003) details the history of sociological research on sexuality and notes how social scientific sexuality research prior to 1978 understood the influences society had in framing sexuality. Some researchers theorized the production of sexuality by society (Irvine 2003). Weeks (1986) defines sexuality as “an historical construction, which brings together a host of different biological and mental possibilities – gender identity, bodily difference, reproductive capacities, needs, desires and fantasies – which need not be linked together, and in other cultures have not” (15).

While Irvine (2003), Stein and Plummer (1996), Epstein (1996) and Seidman (1994) acknowledge that some radical sociological work on sexuality pre-dated queer theory, they maintain that these sociological studies failed to encompass the larger critique of the ideological power inherent in the categorization of the hetero/homo paradigm (Ingraham 1996; Irvine 2003; Namaste 1994; Seidman 1994; Stein and Plummer 1996). Sociologists who did research on sexuality focused on homosexuality and deviance as instances of identity formation that stood outside of the norm (heterosexuality). In doing so they failed to question the power of heterosexual ideology to define homosexuality, thereby leaving unexamined the force with which the hetero/homo binary regulates society's understanding of sexuality (Seidman 1994: 170; see also Namaste 1994; Stein and Plummer 1996).

In problematizing supposedly fixed identities and questioning the utility of such identities, queer theory stands in contrast to other sociological theories, for example functionalism and symbolic interactionism which have emphasized the development of identities and groups and the interactions in society between these groups. If society is built upon the interaction of groups, a theory that posits the dissolution or questioning of groups and identities might not necessarily fit well within the traditional sociological framework.

As such queer theory and empirical sociological research have thus far seemed mutually exclusive (Gamson and Moon 2004; Irvine 1996; Seidman 1994). However, some contemporary sociologists are producing a much-needed dialogue that can infuse queer theory with tangible empirical evidence. Seidman (1994, 1996), Namaste (1994), Irvine (1996), Gamson and Moon (2004), Stein and Plummer (1996), Epstein (1996) and

others have articulated the need to incorporate queer theory and sociological research. They have theorized the merger between queer theory and sociology and have asked vital questions in an effort to provoke and incite the impetus for queer sociological, empirical research. In discussing the need to incorporate queer theory within sociology, Seidman (1994) concludes by asking what a queer sociology would look like and what form it would take. While Seidman does not proceed to answer his question, other researchers have attempted to. Valocchi (2005) argues that ethnographic and qualitative methodology works best in empirical sociological research that undertakes a queer theoretical perspective.

Queer Theory Meets Sociology

Some recent studies have sought to investigate contemporary society using queer theoretical frameworks. Researchers have begun to incorporate queer theory, specifically the critiquing of binary modes of thinking and the usefulness of identities (Ault 1996; Brandzel 2005; Esterberg 1996; Eves 2004; Richardson 2004). Eves' (2004) research on butch and femme lesbians finds that a lesbian identity seems more fixed for butch lesbians than for femme lesbians. The masculine visibility of butch lesbians marks them in society as such while the feminine visibility of femme lesbians allows them to pass through the socially visible marker of a culturally ascribed "lesbian" identity. In the pairing of the two, "lesbian" identity, in heteronormative culture, is troubled as the seemingly heterosexual female (femme) openly shows her same-sex desire.

Likewise, Esterberg (1996) uses queer theory to investigate the performativity of lesbian identities. Esterberg describes the way some lesbians in her study perform a traditionally feminine gender while others adopt masculine gendered characteristics and

still others prefer a neutral or androgynous style. That a lesbian identity can be rendered visible to normative society is questioned while paradoxically the idea within the lesbian community of “gaydar” upholds the notion of a lesbian identity. Ault’s (1996) study of bisexual identity uncovers the difficulty in negotiating a bisexual identity that is outside the hetero/homo divide. Because the stereotype of the sexually promiscuous bisexual is common within some lesbian communities, the bisexual faces animosity from not only straight society, but the lesbian community as well. In articulating a “bi identity,” the subversive power of complicating the hetero/homo trope falters. Ault writes, “In the contested space of the bisexual body, the ultimate conflict is not between categories, but *about* them...the move to define and defend the bisexual subject, seems, ironically, the move most likely to undermine the radical, transformative potential of its indeterminacy” (328).

Richardson (2004) and Brandzel (2005) engage queer theoretical frameworks in their analyses of gay culture and the way gay identity has problematized the notion of citizenship. Both Richardson and Brandzel examine the debate over same-sex marriage and tie it to the issue of citizenship and the way that the state can dictate gendered norms in society. They show how gay marriage challenges state norms and the ideal of the family, while still upholding the position of power the state has in conferring marriage and other gendered norms onto its citizens. Citizenship becomes a token of state power, but at the same time state power vis a vis heteronormative ideology is being questioned and troubled with the introduction of same-sex marriage. The refusal to take an either/or position on the issue of citizenship and gay marriage is telling of Richardson’s and Brandzel’s use of queer theory as the structural framework for their analysis. While these

studies are important because of their incorporation of queer theory to sociology, they have not taken up the issue of the media and the role it plays in the perpetuation of heteronormativity.

Mass Media, Consumer Society, and Gays and Lesbians

Media and consumer culture are two institutions that work in conjunction with each other to inform and define society. Adorno and Horkheimer (2000 [1944]) argue that mass media and consumer culture produce a screen for the workings of capitalistic economic power structures that are oppressive to most of society. Because the culture industry consumes different tastes and is all encompassing, being outside of consumer society becomes impossible (bell hooks 1992; Gladwell 2000 [1997]). The envelopment of alternative subcultures within mass media has led to the emergence of a distinctly gay cultural identity within consumer society.

Sears (2005) and Valocchi (1999) discuss the way gay identity has been commodified in society. The myth of “queer wealth” depicts the image of affluent, monogamous, white gay and lesbian couples. The presence of this constant image comes at the expense of images of gays and lesbians from the working class and gays and lesbians of color (Sears 2005; Valocchi 1999). The issue of the commodification of gays and lesbians is written about by Chasin (2000) and Walters (2001). Walters welcomes the emergence of gay men and lesbians into a visible place in the economic and consumer sphere while Chasin critically questions the issue of gay commodification. Chasin (2000) argues that as gays and lesbians are given more visual representation, it is done so on the terms of dominant ideology, specifically heteronormative ideology and as such it privileges certain people while silencing others, namely non-white, poor members of the

community. Clark (1993 [1991]), Stein (1993 [1989]) and Gross (2001) discuss the dilemma of specific gay and lesbian representations in media and consumer culture when those images support oppressive dominant ideologies that then bear on the overall struggle of the larger gay community.

Because of the importance that the media holds on the dissemination of ideology within society, it is vital that sociology critically examine the messages in media. To that effort, current studies of media that employ content analysis are useful to this study. Due to the historic lack in presence of gays and lesbians in media, there were few content analyses that dealt specifically with gay media. Two of the content analyses I found dealt with the show *Will and Grace*, and another dealt with overall homosexuality in television.

Fouts and Inch's (2005) quantitative content analysis of primetime television finds that the representation of homosexuality on television is not commensurate with the proportion of homosexuals in the population. Battles and Hilton-Morrow (2002) and Thomas Linneman (forthcoming) both engage in content analyses of the popular sitcom *Will and Grace*. As one of the few television shows with a predominately gay theme, *Will and Grace* could be viewed as a move towards greater visibility of gays and lesbians in media. However Battles and Hilton Morrow and Linneman find that *Will and Grace* perpetuates the stereotype of the feminized gay man in the way that Will and Jack are consistently referenced as feminine or women. Battles and Hilton-Morrow describe how heterosexual dyadic pairings visually and textually remain intact in spite of the fact that some of the main characters are gay. The emphasis of the pairing of Will with Grace and Jack with Karen is indicative of this. Overall, both studies suggest that *Will and Grace*,

as an example of a media representation of homosexuality, works to uphold heteronormativity and thus reinforces the hetero/homo paradigm.

A Queer Sociological Media Content Analysis

Taking all of this past research into account, my study engages queer theory and sociology. Following the few examples of sociological studies that use queer theoretical frameworks, I model my critique and analysis with the intention of questioning the hetero/homo binary. In studying mass mediated examples where the hetero/homo paradigm is dominant, I will be adding to the body of research within media studies, queer theory, and sociology.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Using Altheide's (1987) concept of ethnographic content analysis (ECA), this study examines ideological messages coded within media that reproduce the heterosexual/homosexual binary and reify heteronormative culture. Ethnographic content analysis differs from quantitative content analysis in that ECA does not seek to quantify images in an effort to prove hypotheses, rather, ECA looks to explore and inquire about content and messages imbedded within cultural products in an effort to support and build theories (Altheide 1987; Daniels 1997). As opposed to traditional quantitative content analysis, ECA focuses on the context and framing of images and themes (Daniels 1997). In ECA theories and concepts guide the preliminary analysis of data, and upon more in-depth analysis, new concepts emerge from the data. The researcher must then reflect back on what the emerging themes mean and how they enhance the initial theories and concepts (Altheide 1987). Given the fairly recent introduction of queer theory in sociology, it follows that any study that proposes a queer theoretical framework would be in a preliminary stage wherein the goal of the research is investigatory in nature. Valocchi (2005) argues that ethnographic and qualitative methodology is best able to capture the complexity inherent in a queer theoretical framework. Thus ECA is the best

fit for the purposes of this research, which is the exploration of underlying themes in gay media and not the quantification of specific gay and lesbian images.

Sample

This study's sample consists of 22 episodes, which make up the first season of *Queer as Folk* (QAF) and 13 episodes that make up the first season of *The L Word* (TLW) for a total sample size of 35 episodes. The units of analysis for this research were specific scenes within the 35 episodes. I acquired access to my sample by purchasing boxed sets of the entire first seasons of both shows. QAF debuted in 2000 on the pay subscription cable channel Showtime, and it was based on a British television miniseries of the same name. TLW debuted in 2004 on the same pay subscription cable channel as QAF. I have chosen to study the first seasons of these shows as they constitute American televisual firsts because they are among the first television series to predominately showcase gay and lesbian lead characters and themes. Unlike *Will and Grace* and *Ellen* (two of the first shows to focus on and have gay and lesbian lead characters) which were broadcast on network television, TLW and QAF do not have the same stringent censorship constraints that network television shows do, and as such they are considered groundbreaking because of the frank and often graphic depiction and talk of same-sex sex.¹ Due to the nature of the topic and the theoretical framework employed, the sample is necessarily purposive, meaning that I have "intentionally" chosen my sample "for the specific perspectives they have" (Esterberg 2002: 93).

¹ I came to this conclusion by reviewing Lexis-Nexis for entertainment news articles in the popular press concerning the premieres of both shows. Some common examples include Tom Shales' article, "'Queer' goings on at Showtime and the MPAA" (12/4/00) and Mark McGuire's article "Showtime gives new meaning to The L Word" (1/18/04).

TLW revolves around the lives of a group of lesbian friends in West Hollywood. The main characters Bette, an art museum director, and Tina, a former film industry businesswoman on leave from work, have been in a relationship for seven years and are in the process of trying to have a child. Alice is an unlucky in love bisexual journalist who writes for a Los Angeles magazine, Dana is a closeted professional tennis player, and Shane is a hairdresser at a trendy salon. They all frequent a local café, The Planet, owned by Marina. Bette and Tina's neighbor, Tim, a college swim coach, lives with his newly arrived girlfriend, Jenny, a fiction writer just out of college. A major plot throughout the season involves Jenny experiencing her first same-sex attraction and relationship with Marina, and the unraveling of her four-year relationship with Tim, whom she marries. Another important story line is Bette and Tina's attempt at pregnancy and the difficulties of maintaining a relationship after seven years. TLW is a dramatic ensemble soap opera about love, life and relationship² and is geared towards a lesbian niche audience with the hopes of having broad crossover appeal (Wallenstein 2004).

QAF, having debuted three years before TLW, is also a dramatic ensemble geared towards a gay audience (Messina 2001). Set in Pittsburg, QAF follows the lives of a group of four gay men, Michael, a comic-book enthusiast who is a manager at a Wal-Mart like store, his best friend Brian, an advertising executive, Michael's roommate Emmett, a clothing store window and mannequin decorator, and their friend Ted, an accountant. Major plots include Brian's newfound relationship with a 17 year old high school student Justin, Michael and Brian's close friendship and its hindrance to Michael's

² In a Lexis-Nexis search most every article described TLW in this manner. (see Matthew Gilberts article, "Same-Sex and the City Showtime's 'L Word' gives Lesbians Visibility – And a Soap-opera" (1/18/04) and Tim Goodman's article, "Showtime's 'The L Word' goes boldly where other series have only flirted – to love and sex among L.A. lesbians" (1/16/04))

emerging relationship with David, a chiropractor, and Brian's involvement with lesbian couple Melanie and Lindsay as the sperm donor for their newborn baby.

Analysis

Analysis for this study comprised 3 stages as outlined by Daniels (1997). Preliminary analysis was a visual analysis of the imagery within the shows, such as typically gendered, sexed, raced and classed bodies, clothing, style, and other accoutrement such as cars and accessories. Then I coded textual scripts (which were acquired online courtesy of www.twiztv.com) to find matching gendered, sexed, raced and classed messages within the text. The third stage of analysis combined the first two stages into a compositional analysis to see how textual and visual codes compliment, contradict, refute and support each other (Daniels 1997). Theoretically based explanations were then used to derive meaning from the compositional analysis.

Coding for sex, visually and textually, amounted to categorizing a character as male or female through visual cues and textual understandings of a characters being male or female. Gender was coded as masculine or feminine through visual cues such as thin, light-skinned, light-haired, and glamorous style of dress as markers of femininity (Bordo 1993, 1997; Peiss 1998; see Appendix A, 1) and muscular, assertive and erect in posture were marked as masculine (Bordo 1993, 1997; Pope, Phillips, and Olivardia 2000; see Appendix A, 2). Visually and textually, references to activity, professional working and doing were messages of masculinity (Bordo 1993, 1997; Pope, Phillips, and Olivardia 2000; see Appendix A, 3) and references to non-employment, household chores such as cooking, and idle time socializing with others was coded as feminine (Best 2000; Bordo 1993, 1997; Peiss 1998; see Appendix A, 4). Race was coded visually through skin tone

and textually through discussions about a characters race and self-placement within a racial identity. Class was coded through visual and textual references to material goods (vehicles, clothing, accessories, see Appendix D, 1), professional employment status, and discussion by characters that indicated issues of money, wealth and lifestyle.

Initial concepts and themes that guided preliminary analysis were the oppositional engendering of gays and lesbians (i.e. - gay men being feminized and lesbians being masculinized). This was further compartmentalized to include gendered coupling within the various same-sex couples. Another theme was the prevalence of couples versus singles and the concept of parenthood. The discussion of and actual pursuit of parenthood was coded using sex, gender and coupled status (i.e. – does want of children follow gendered norms and expectations). The third preliminary theme was race as it is exemplified within these gay media representations, however due to the scarcity of people of color in both shows (none in *Queer as Folk* and two women of color in *The L Word*, see Appendix C, 1 and 2), race became a non issue insofar as these shows held to the notion of gay life as upper-middle class young white people (Chasin 2000; Walters 2001). Adjacent to the theme of race was that of class, which did get more emphasis in the shows than the latter. In explaining the different initial concepts used in analysis, I must make clear that these concepts are not mutually exclusive, rather they more often than not blended into each other so that race and class categories also fell into the oppositional engendering of gays and lesbians (i.e. – lower class gay men were feminized and lesbians of color were masculinized).

The grounded theoretical emphasis inherent in ethnographic content analysis (Altheide 1987; Esterberg 2002) allows for the emergence of themes and concepts

throughout the research and analytical process. The emergent themes for this study included the concept of gay and lesbian antagonism exemplified by the use of derogatory terms for lesbians by gay men and vice versa, and the differentiation in the depiction and discussion of sex between the shows. The different concepts being explored in this study represent a broad yet comprehensive analysis of two distinct, homosexually oriented entertainment programs on American television. Because these shows are specific in their thematics and particular to certain representations, the analysis herein cannot be generalized to all gay mediated products, nor can it be considered exhaustive in the expanse of gay and lesbian culture studies. The findings that follow can however help to construct and deconstruct mediated images of gays and lesbians in pop culture and gain a more nuanced understanding of how meanings about dominant ideology are displayed in mass media.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Oppositionally Gendered Gays and Lesbians

The idea that gay men are feminine and lesbian women are masculine has been a part of the cultural, medical, and psychiatric discourse since the development of the modern “homosexual” (Foucault 1990 [1978]; Weeks 1986). Within the ideological binary of male/female, masculine/feminine, gay/straight, normative stereotypes of masculine lesbians and feminine gay men are represented in QAF and to a certain extent on TLW. Thus I argue that gay men and lesbians are portrayed as “oppositionally gendered.”

Of the six main gay men on QAF, two of them were primarily depicted in a feminized context, two were projected as masculine and the other two easily moved from masculine to feminine. Michael, the narrator of the series, is put in the feminine position in his relationship with Brian and David. In his relationship with David, a chiropractor, Michael is feminized when he is referenced as a wife, and when he is shown being taken care of financially by David. Michael is also feminized in relation to his friendship with Brian. This scene from QAF (Appendix B, 1 and 2) is typical of the visual imagery used to represent such an occurrence, as the two best friends Michael and Brian imagine themselves the superhero couple Superman and Lois Lane. Brian takes the Superman

position, which is the masculine character, while Michael is the Lois Lane or feminine character. Linneman (forthcoming) and Battles and Hilton-Morrow (2002) found that gay media images like those found on *Will and Grace* replicate heterosexual coupled roles, such that even in same-sex dyads, one member is masculine and the other feminine. The references of gay men as women were prevalent in each show and most instances of a gay man as woman was done in the context of a masculine/feminine coupling.

While same-sex couplings on QAF mirrored the masculine/feminine pairing, the same character moved from masculine to feminine depending on the coupling. When paired with his best friend Daphne, Justin was masculine, but when coupled with Brian, Justin took the feminine role. As best friends in high school, Daphne and Justin experience a traditional rite of passage with each other when they attend their senior prom together (Appendix A, 5). As Best (2000) argues, the prom is a site where heterosexually gendered norms are expressed and maintained. However, in his relationship with Brian, Justin is afforded the feminine role because he is the younger and less experienced of the two. When Brian shows up to Justin's prom and they share a dance on the dance floor, Justin is positioned as feminine in his posture and stance (Appendix B, 3). If moving between masculine and feminine with ease is a way towards subverting traditionally gendered roles, then this attempt is mitigated by the more common turn to gendered types.

Even without the gendered coupling, gay men were depicted as feminine, the most blatant example being the character of Emmett (Appendix B, 4) who was always the first to reference gay camp icons like Cher, Barbara Streisand, Judy Davis and Liza Minelli. Emmett revels in his "queen" like behavior and does not shy away from it. In

one scene where Michael, Emmett and Ted are working out at the gym, Michael is fretting about having to hide his sexual orientation at work. Emmett advises Michael to be out and proud, to which Ted responds.

Ted: Look, he's not like you, okay?

Emmett: What is that supposed to mean?

Ted: Meaning he's not an obviously gay man.

Emmett: Are you accusing me of being obvious?

Ted: If the fuck-me pump fits...

Emmett: Well, I could be a-a-a real man if I wanted to. You know, just lower my voice. Stop gesturing with my hands. Make sure my face is expressionless. Never, never use words like-like 'fabulous' or 'divine.' Talk about, I don't know, nailing bitches and RBI's. But I'd rather my flame burn bright than be some puny little pilot light.

Ted: And a fabulous flame it is.

Emmett: Thank you.

Emmett's advice on being out and proud is here conflated with his portrayal of the traditional stereotype of the effeminate gay man. Emmett's conceptualization of what a real man is consists of stereotypically masculine gendered traits. Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity works to show how acknowledging gendered norms and using them transgressively by accentuating certain traits in an ironic manner (i.e. – Drag, camp) can subvert the intended meanings behind these norms. While gay camp can be defined as subversive and transgressive, it can also be viewed as a perpetuation of gendered norms and heterosexuality depending on the context (Taylor 1991). In the context of this scene, Emmett is not a "real man," he is just being himself, which is a stereotypical

feminine gay man. Thus this scene remains within the theme of oppositionally gendered gay men.

The reference to the masculinity of lesbians is frequently commented on in QAF, especially with regards to Melanie, the lesbian partner of Lindsay. Lindsay and Melanie, as the only lesbian couple on QAF, follow the normative gendered roles, with Lindsay as feminine and Melanie masculine. Because Melanie is a lawyer and the sole financial supporter, she is coded as masculine. Attempts to visualize and stylize Melanie as masculine or butch (Appendix B, 5) to compliment the dialogue and demeanor of the character go as far as giving Melanie a short haircut, and keeping her in pants and t-shirts or work clothes. Melanie is also regarded as masculine because it is Lindsay who gets pregnant and has a child, thereby making her the “natural” female to Melanie’s working partner (Appendix B, 6). Lindsay as the lighter-skinned, blond haired woman represents the ideal feminine image (Bordo 1993, 1997; Peiss 1998; see Appendix A 6).

If Melanie represents a televisual lesbian masculinity, then the women of TLW represent a televisual lesbian femininity. Yet the occurrence of lesbians being referenced as men or masculine in TLW is still present. However the imagery of masculine women is scarcely found as this publicity photo of the cast attests to (Appendix C, 2). Of the eight regular female characters on the show, only one can be categorized as visually masculine looking or at least androgynous looking. In dress and demeanor the character Shane (Appendix E, 1) is masculinized by being referenced as a “Don Juan,” a heartbreaker, someone who has “been around,” is described as looking like a “rock star,” has been mistaken for a gay man, and through the course of the season acquires a “Hollywood wife.” To the extent that the visual imagery of lesbians on TLW accentuates

and promotes a feminine look and style (Appendix C, 2), oppositionally gendered frames are not always present. However when text and circumstances in narrative plot are considered, the masculinized lesbian emerges. Bette is positioned as masculine because she is the working woman, and the financial provider of her partner Tina, and their soon to be child. Bette is always given the active role when coupled with Tina, who assumes the passive role. For instance Bette is shown driving her car with Tina in the passenger seat (Appendix B, 7) or while talking with Tina on the telephone she is imaged at work while Tina is at home (Appendix B, 8). Tina, like Lindsay, is the member of the couple who is trying to get pregnant, and the one who is lighter-skinned with blond hair, again the image of traditional ideal femininity. She and Tina represent the masculine/feminine couple (Appendix B, 9), much like Lindsay and Melanie do on QAF.

Other instances of masculinized lesbians portrayed on TLW come with the character of Candace, a carpenter who works on an upcoming display at Bette's workplace, and Ivan, a drag king who romances Bette's sister Kit, who is heterosexual. While the attempt to visually masculinize these women is evident (Appendix C 3 and B 10), their mannerism, gestures and behavior mark them more as masculine than their appearance. In the affair between Candace and Bette, it is Candace who advances on Bette, Candace who takes Bette to a hotel and pays, and Candace who informs Bette that "You can't always be in control." If Bette is masculinized in her coupling with Tina, she is feminized in her affair with Candace (Appendix B, 11). In the character of Ivan, who is a drag king, the visualization of masculinity is potentially greater, however, the role of Ivan is played by Kelly Lynch, a well-known and beautiful actress. This has the effect of negating the subversiveness of drag as the audience is able to recognize Lynch. While

visually, the masculinized lesbian is virtually ineffective, contextually it is upheld, as in this dialogue between Kit and Bette, regarding Ivan. In this scene, Ivan has left to throw out the trash after having bought lunch for Bette and Kit.

Bette: Wanna tell me what you're doing?

Kit: I was taking out the trash

Bette: No, with her, She's madly in love with you, you know.

Kit: No he's not, we're friends, he helps me out with stuff.

Bette: That's because *she* is in love with you, and *she* wants to be your husband.

Kit: No, it's not like that.

Bette: Kit – believe me. You may not be able to read the signals, but they're there. I saw the way she looks at you, she is fully courting you old school, and you're letting her.

Kit: Oh, is that so!

Bette: Yeah. It is.

Kit: Well, thank you for the lessons of the ritual mating habits of the indigenous lesbians. Maybe next week we'll do butch and femme role-play –

Ivan: Um, ladies.

Ivan: I figure we should get going, and let you get on with your business. You must wanna get home to the little woman *sometime* tonight.

This exchange exemplifies the rigidity of gendered norms and the masculinization of lesbians. At the same time, visually it upholds dominant cultural ideals of femaleness. Mulvey (1999 [1975]), Gaines (1999 [1988]), and Kuhn (1999 [1984]) discuss the notion of the gendered ways of viewing film and television, which has typically been predicated on masculine, heterosexual ideology. Because ways of seeing and looking are

conceptualized as active and masculine, cinematic experience has traditionally been framed within a heterosexual ideology (Gaines 1999 [1988]; Mulvey 1999 [1975]). Even when intended for a female audience, heterosexual norms of femaleness and femininity are employed (Kuhn 1999 [1984]).

Singles, Couples and Parenthood

If past homosexual representations in film and television emphasized the spinster old maid or the perpetual dandy bachelor, TLW and QAF deviate from that in their attempt to highlight coupledness and the continual effort to find a life partner in a monogamous relationship. Of the men on QAF, the only one who does not actively look for a relationship, Brian, is in effect in a relationship with Justin, albeit a very open, non-committed relationship. While Brian is depicted as the bachelor playboy who does not want a relationship, that he develops one with Justin illustrates the ideal of coupledness that permeates through all of the plotlines in the show. In proffering the coupled ideal, QAF implies that gays and lesbians are just like heterosexuals in their pursuit for happiness and love. Rubin (1993 [1982]) argues that invoking a sexual hierarchy necessarily privileges dominant ideology. In other words, if the ideal is the monogamous heterosexual couple, then the scale of acceptability begins there and slowly moves to non-monogamous heterosexuals, and then to monogamous homosexuals and so forth. But because the ideal is a monogamous heterosexual couple, non-heterosexuals of all kind stand outside of the respectable ideal. Rubin argues that ascribing to the coupled, monogamous ideal reinforces heteronormative culture in which gays and lesbians are always outside of. As the line of the social sexual hierarchy begins to accept homosexuality when in the form of coupled relations the gap between acceptability and

unacceptability is widened, and ultimately heteronormative ideology is reified (Richardson 2004; Rubin 1993 [1982]).

The coupled ideal is more prominent in TLW and with Melanie and Lindsay on QAF. Gendered notions of the “nature” of females to want to be in a relationship and have a family is played out in both shows with regards to the lesbian couplings. Bette and Tina, the gendered lesbian couple on TLW, attempt to have a child and Melanie and Lindsay, the lesbian couple on QAF, have a child in the first episode. So prevalent is the emphasis on monogamy and parenthood that one occasional character on TLW, Harrison, a gay man, jokingly comments, “They even had to change that famous joke. It used to be: What do lesbians bring on the second date? A moving van. Now, it’s: What do lesbians bring on a second date? A turkey baster.” In another episode, Bette and Tina are confronted, in a humorous way, for being the stereotypical pregnant lesbian couple. Alice, Dana, and Shane show up at Bette and Tina’s and in a serious, interventionist tone, inform them that they have become boring. In employing humor to offset stereotypical representations, TLW is attempting to challenge lesbian/feminine/female roles (Cooper 2003), yet the thematic emphasis throughout the season is the monogamous, stable coupled ideal. If Shane, as the character representing sexual liberation, is apt to express a desire for coupledness in the same episode where Bette and Tina are castigated for it, then the emphasis goes back to the coupled ideal. After an all night boat party, Alice, Dana and Shane recover from the festivities and inquire about the whereabouts of Bette and Tina.

Alice: Hey you guys, where are Bette and Tina?

Alice: Boring

Dana: Yeah. So boring.

Shane: I don't know. You know, I've been thinking about it. What's more boring, right? You can make endless lists. You can bawl your head off and puke over the side of the boat. Or you get to go home. You get to sleep with the same person you've been in love with for 7 years.

While the ideal of coupledness would lead to assumptions about marriage, the topic of same-sex marriage is hardly broached. However, implicit in the representations of couples within the shows is the idea of marriage. Several researchers discuss the debate within the gay community about gay marriage and argue that in modeling gay and lesbian relationships on the marriage paradigm, the power of the state to define its citizens and legitimate personal relations continues to be articulated from a heteronormative standpoint (Brandzel 2005; Butler 2000; Richardson 2004; Sears 2005). Thus the emphasis on coupledness and parenthood that is prevalent in both TLW and QAF appears to promote a heteronormative ideology.

Race and Class

Because heteronormative, capitalist ideology is predicated on a middle-class, white, male viewpoint, heteronormative ideology invariably erases race and class differences (bell hooks 1992; Gaines 1999 [1988]). In looking at the publicity and promotional images for QAF and TLW (Appendix C, 1 and 2) the lack of people of color is evident. No character on QAF is African-American, Hispanic or Asian, and only two main characters on TLW (half-sisters Bette and Kit) qualify as racial minorities. Insofar as the characters of Candace (Hispanic) and Yolanda (Black) appear in several episodes of TLW, this show better represents racial minorities. Yet this representation is constructed within dominant ideological frameworks. Dialogically and textually the themes of race are dealt with in a sensitive manner as this potentially controversial

exchange between Bette and her sister Kit can attest to. In this scene, Bette is upset at Tina's apprehension to using a black sperm donor, so she goes to discuss her feelings with her sister Kit.

Kit: When she looks at you, she's not looking at a black woman or a white woman, she's looking at the woman she loves.

Bette: She sees what she wants to see.

Kit: Maybe she sees what you let her see. I mean, maybe this wasn't important before, maybe what's worked best for you all these years, you know, getting all your pretty things and, you know, putting together your pretty life, is that you let people see what they want to see.

Bette: What are you trying to say?

Kit: Nothin'! Just...maybe it's been easier for you that way.

Bette: That's nice. That's really nice.

Kit: Oh, come on, don't walk out! Oh, come on girl, don't walk outta here! Don't walk outta here like this! Oh, come on!

Kit: We gotta stop doing this to each other!

Bette: We ?!

Kit: Okay. I gotta stop doing it. I'm the one that always ran away. Okay, but don't do what I did. Stay, hear me out, because I'm not going to say what you think I'm going to say. There's only one thing that cuts across all our realities. It's love. The bridge between all our differences.

Kit: And you have so much love in your life. Why are you trying to tear down that bridge? Why?

Bette: I don't know.

Because American conceptions of race are based on physical features, the issue of skin color, and bi-raciality among African-Americans and all racial minorities is fraught with controversy. Some minorities are confronted with less discrimination and oppression than others simply because of their lighter skin color (Feagin 2001). That

Jennifer Beals, (Appendix C, 5) plays the part of Bette (a major role) and Pam Grier (Appendix C, 6) was given the role of Kit (a supporting role), Kit's assertion that Bette can be implicated in allowing her fairer skin to provide greater access and opportunities is true. Kit apologizes for making such a statement and advises Bette to ignore racial issues because they only cause discord. She advises Bette to focus on love as the great equalizer and healer. Bonilla-Silva (2003) argues that attempts to move beyond race, or to state that race does not matter is a way for racist ideology to continue and for institutional racism to disproportionately affect minorities. This idea of moving beyond race neglects the real effects of racism in society (Bonilla-Silva 2003).

The idea of a color-blind society (Bonilla-Silva 2003) that is posited within the show is exacerbated by the representation of the Candace-Bette affair further in the season. As I discussed earlier, the Candace-Bette coupling follows gendered lines, but it is also marked by racial lines. Candace the masculine one of the two is represented as a racial minority (Appendix C, 3) where as Bette is not (Appendix C, 4). Freedman (1996) describes the construction of the Black, masculine lesbian within the confines of women prisons in the first half of the 20th century. This portrayal of masculine minority women prisoners appears to apply to a plotline in the show. A Christian-right protest over a provocative art exhibition at Bette's place of work, and an ensuing confrontation between protesters results in several of the main characters being arrested, including Bette and Candace. However, the only visuals of characters in prison attire and in a jail cell is that of Bette and Candace (Appendix C, 7). Coupled with the fact that it is in the prison cell that Bette and Candace have their first sexual experience, the masculine, minority, prison lesbian iconography discussed by Freedman is being played in these scenes.

While TLW has minority characters in the show, the frames in which they are depicted adhere to dominant racial ideology. In representing minorities TLW does not include class differences that are a material reality for many people of color (Jhally and Lewis 2003; bell hooks 1992). The elision of any discussion of class on TWL and the highly stylized televisual imagery showing wealth and affluence work to perpetuate the “myth of queer wealth” and keep the structure of gay mediated images firmly within a heteronormative ideology (Sears 2005: 105; see also Chasin 2000; Valocchi 1999). The idea of “queer wealth” rests in the proliferation of media images of young, affluent, white, metropolitan gay men (Chasin 1999; Sears 2005; Valocchi 1999).

As QAF has few minority representations, it does portray class differentials. Like TLW though, QAF’s attempt to deal with issues of class are constructed through dominant frames. The characters who are not professional, white-collar workers, namely Michael and Emmett, fall into the previously discussed theme of the oppositionally gendered gay man. While those in the professional white-collar occupations, David (a chiropractor) and Brian (advertising executive) are strictly represented as masculine men with their larger framed, muscled bodies and their juxtaposition to a feminized Michael (Appendix B 12, 1 and 2). That QAF would broach the topic of class differences, even if it is traditionally engendered and illustrative of heteronormativity, the “myth of queer wealth” exposed. However, like TLW, QAF does not accurately address class because Michael and Emmett do not fit the image of poverty. Michael is a manager at a Wal-Mart-esque store and Emmett works at a clothing store. Neither is lacking in funds. They go out frequently with Ted and Brian to the gay club Babylon. Nor are they without the necessary income for gym membership, as all four men work out at the same gym. The

predominance of imagery of gym life (Appendix D, 2) and gay club life (Appendix D, 3) work to dispel any commentary on the “myth of queer wealth” and help to keep implying and bolstering the common gay mediated images of affluent, white males.

Gay/Lesbian Antagonism

In several episodes of QAF lesbians were ridiculed or were the butt of a joke by gay men. The “jokes” and comments referenced lesbians as masculine and described disgust with the thought of having sex with women. This exchange between Brian and Justin in the shower the morning after Lindsay gives birth illustrates a typical example of gay males disdain for lesbian women.

Justin: Gross. She must have really wanted a kid.

Brian: Most women do.

Justin: Even lesbians?

Brian: Lesbians *are* women...sort of.

Justin: My mom says sometimes she wished she never had me.

Brian: That’s probably because she’s stuck with this annoying brat for the rest of her life.

Justin: Sō, you gonna raise him?

Brian: Me? No way. The munchers are. But I’ll be around to provide the masculine influence so important in every young boy,s life.

Justin: I’ll bet Melanie could do it better than you.

Other “jokes” and comments included Ted’s reasoning for befriending lesbians (“I’ve always said there’s only two reasons to be friends with lesbians. They’ll never convince you that the only reason you’re gay is because you haven’t met the right woman. And, uh, they know how to change a tire”). Given a patriarchal ideology and “compulsory

heterosexuality.” lesbians signify the worst type of subject because they do not desire or want men (Creed 1999 [1995]; de Lauretis 1993 [1988]; Rich 1993 [1986]). In this context, the antagonism between gay men and lesbians is constitutive of the “differences” between the sexes and the privileging of masculinity over femininity in dominant patriarchal society.

While the gay/lesbian antagonism was not as prevalent in TLW, it was still present as in the earlier discussed joke made by Harrison, a gay male character on TLW, about lesbians and pregnancy (“They even had to change that famous joke. It used to be: What do lesbians bring on the second date? A moving van. Now, it’s: What do lesbians bring on a second date? A turkey baster”). The gay/lesbian antagonism in TLW also materialized in the representation of one of the few gay men on the show, Shane’s friend Clive, a drug addicted grifter. Unlike QAF, the gay/lesbian antagonism was not as prevalent. On the other hand, there was an antipathy for “non-lipstick” lesbians by the characters in the show. In this scene, Dana is negatively commenting on Shane’s attire because it is easily readable as lesbian (Appendix E, 2), and Dana has not come out publicly as being a lesbian.

Dana: Y’know, do you have to dress like that all the time?

Shane: Like what?

Dana: Well, I wouldn’t be seen on the street with you.

Shane: Yeah?

Dana: I mean, every single thing about the way you’re dressed, like, screams dyke.

Other examples of antagonism towards non-feminine lesbians include Alice's understanding of a "hundred footer" ("I can tell she's a lesbo from across a football field") and her arguments against Shane's suggestion of giving Dana a mullet haircut ("I don't think she's ready to be a bulldyke, Shane"). If this theme of stylized lesbian animosity towards a butch lesbian aesthetic is meant to highlight the differences within lesbian culture, the effects are negated because the other side is not represented. There are no butch lesbians on the show making snide remarks about non-butch lesbians.

I argue that the gay/lesbian animosity and the feminine lesbian/masculine lesbian discord present in QAF and TLW is a result of a heteronormative framework that guides both shows and is dependent on the binary oppositions of male/female and masculine/feminine. If these binaries are upheld, then an understanding of anything that does not fall within the either/or dichotomy is silenced and continues to not be represented within mass media and popular culture. Without knowing how to make sense of the world outside of binary oppositions, media images will invariably continue to reproduce them.

Binary Oppositions

In trying to acknowledge the fluid nature of sexuality, TLW broaches the topic through the characters of Alice and Jenny, both identified as bisexual. The character of Shane can also be argued as an expression of sexual fluidity insofar as she visually exemplifies the androgynous ideal (Appendix E, 3). To the extent that "bisexual" is dependent on two and only two sexes, it does not escape the binary, socially inscribed categorization of the sexes (Fausto-Sterling 1993). Alice's stance of "looking for the same qualities in a man as I am in a woman" seems progressive, and an attempt at

transgressing the rigid heterosexual/homosexual divide. Alice even goes so far as to date Lisa, a “lesbian-identified man.” While this plot line is intended for comedic relief and entertainment value, it is telling that this story ends with Alice declaring

Alice: You know what, Lisa? When I first started seeing you, I wanted something simple and easy. And instead I end up with the most *complicated* interpretation of sexual identity I’ve ever *encountered*. You know, I mean, you do *lesbian* better than any lesbian I know! Okay. And I don’t want a lesbian boyfriend. I’m sorry! I want a boyfriend who’s straight, or a I want a lesbian who’s a girl!

Jenny on the other hand, is not as adventuresome as Alice as she dates either straight men or lesbian women. That TLW would make a point of representing bisexuality is indicative of an attempt at understanding beyond gay and straight.

Queer as Folk does not represent bisexual characters the way TLW does. Instead it portrays gay/straight and male/female binaries. The emphasis on sex, the sexual imagery, and the graphic depiction of same-sex activity in QAF is illustrative of normative ideals of the “nature” of men. Masculine, male and gay male ideals are upheld throughout the show with the tone being set from the beginning of the first episode as Michael’s voiceover announces

The thing you need to know is, it’s all about sex. It’s true. In fact, they say men think about sex every 28 seconds. Of course, that’s straight men. Gay men it’s every nine. You could be at the supermarket, or the laundromat or buying a fabulous shirt when suddenly you find yourself checking out some hot guy. Hotter than the one you saw last weekend or went home with the night before, which explains why we’re all at Babylon at one in the morning instead of at home, in bed. But who wants to be at home, in bed? Especially alone, when you can be here, knowing that at any moment, you might see him. The most beautiful man who ever lived. That is, until tomorrow night.

Gay men are being referenced as more manly and virile because their sex drive is greater than heterosexual men. This coupled with the stereotypically gay televisual

representation of club life (Appendix D, 3 and 4) and the emphasis on promiscuity and meaningless sex, works to position gay men as distinct from straight men, while still privileging masculinity.

The focus on sex in QAF is relegated to gay men only because Melanie and Lindsay rarely engage in sexual activity. The imagery, representation and dialogic emphasis of sex, and graphic sex, on TLW differs from that on QAF. If TLW is intended for a lesbian female audience then the depiction of sex would have to play to a distinctly female desire, one that is not predicated on heteronormative ideology. Researchers theorize the inability or difficulty of an expression of female desire that is not framed within a male, patriarchal, heterosexual paradigm (de Lauretis 1993, 1984; Doane 1999 [1982]; Mulvey 1999 [1975,1981]). Insofar as TLW incorporates heterosexual sex acts on a more frequent basis than QAF, TLW portrays the heteronormative ideology that structures female desire. The lesbian sex acts depicted in TLW are imbued with an association to emotion and intimacy in a way that is not evident in QAF. Where QAF shows some characters engage in random meaningless sex acts, most of the sex acts on TLW are constructed within relationships between characters. This difference in the way sex is shown in both shows, specifically lesbian sex acts versus gay male sex acts is emblematic of how normative gendered ideals of male and female are qualified within these gay media representations.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

As televisual representations of gays and lesbians, *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* differ from past representations in that they are explicit in their same-sex sexual depictions. However, the form and contexts in which homosexuality is shown follows normative patterns of gender and are marked by heteronormative frames of race, sex and class. Stereotypical references to lesbians as masculine and gay men as feminine structure the representation of gays and lesbians, yet the televisual images are overtly indicative of traditional gendered ideal. The stylization and imaging of women on TLW typify the feminine ideal and disregard and denigrate non-feminine women. The men on QAF uphold notions of the “nature” of men in its emphasis on sex.

That both shows fail to or poorly represent racial and class minorities is constitutive of the heteronormative framework that structures these examples of gay media. When race and class are presented they are done so within the confines of dominant ideology such that women of color on TLW were masculinized, to the extent that they could be given its prominent display of chic fashionable feminine style. When class differentials were presented on QAF they were done so that the people with less financial resources were feminized, which helps to reify capitalist, patriarchal ideology and privileges the ideal of wealthy, white males.

This study has sought to inquire and critically assess the impact of a newly emergent gay media visibility. The narrow focus in exploration allowed for a thorough analysis of two examples of gay media. As an empirical study of gay media it lends tangible, evidentiary support to theories within gay and lesbian studies like queer theory and lesbian feminist theory. Because this study was limited to only two pay cable shows, and then only the first season of each show, the findings cannot claim to be representative of all gay media, nor should it. Further research needs to explore how these new gay-mediated outlets add to society's understanding of queer people, as well as how they obfuscate it by reverting to dominant ideological norms.

Nonetheless, this study has at least three implications for queer theory in sociology. First, it questions the utility of greater quantifiable visibility of non-heterosexuals in media if the visibility is framed within dominant ideology. Chasin (2000) and Walters (2001) discuss the concessions accepted for representation within mainstream, popular media. Second, given an increasingly global, diverse and heterogeneous society, adherence to an ideological structure that favors wealthy, white masculinity at the expense of all "others" helps to maintain an unequal and unjust balance of power. It also fails to recognize an inherent self-discrimination, or rather a false consciousness as gay media representations that perpetuate heteronormative ideology inadvertently support the inequality of the heterosexual/homosexual binary.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Traditional Gender Images



1) A publicity image for TLW of Laurel Holloman who plays Tina. This image is an example of the feminine ideal of beauty



2) The stature and positioning of Brian (left) and his boss illustrates a masculine representation on QAF



3) Images of men at work to illustrate the masculine ideal. Brian (left) and David (right) are imaged as masculine men on QAF



4) An image of characters on TLW socializing. This represents the feminine stereotype of women sitting and talking



5) Daphne and Justin at the prom in traditional gender roles



6) Lindsay as the typically imaged feminine ideal

Appendix B: Oppositionally gendered gay men and lesbians



1) Michael (left) and Brian (right) in a feminine/masculine coupling



2) Michael (left) and Brian (right) in a masculine/feminine embrace



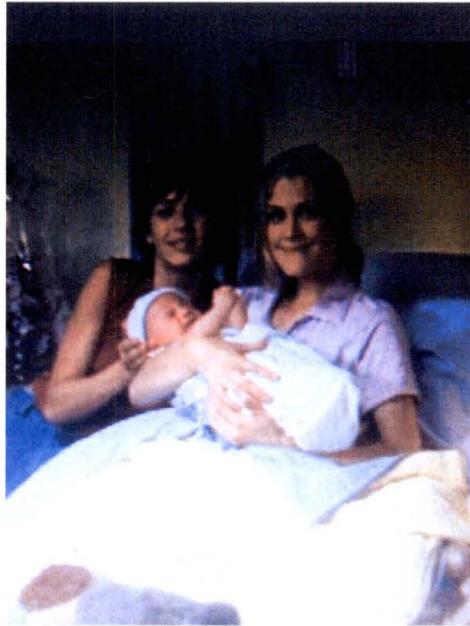
4) Brian (left) and Justin (right) in same-sex, but heterosexually gendered coupling



4) Emmett being feminized



5) A masculinized Melanie



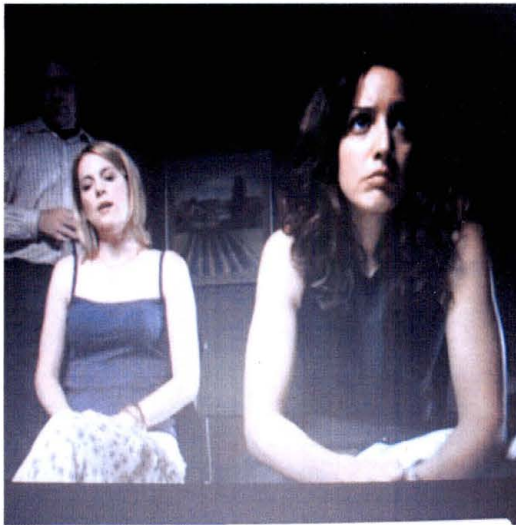
6) Lindsay (right holding baby) and Melanie as a masculine/feminine gendered couple



7) Bette is more often shown in the drivers seat while Tina takes the passengers seat



8) Bette and Tina as a masculine/feminine gendered couple, with Bette as the working partner and Tina the stay at home, soon to be mother



9) Bette and Tina as a masculine/feminine gendered couple



10) A masculinized Ivan



11) Candace (left) and Bette (right) as a masculine/feminine gendered dyad



12) Michael (left) and Ted (right) as a masculine/feminine gendered couple

Appendix C: Race



1) Cast of QAF



2) Cast of TLW



3) Candace on TLW being visibly raced and masculinized



4) Bette is not as visibly recognizable as a woman of color



5) Jennifer Beals who plays Bette Porter on TLW



6) Pam Grier who plays Kit Porter, Bette's half-sister on TLW



7) Candace and Bette in jail

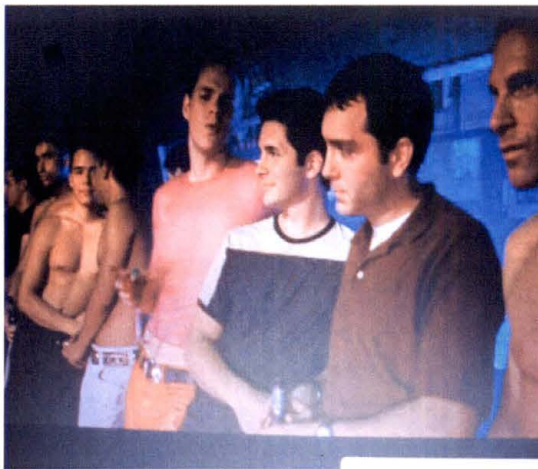
Appendix D: Class



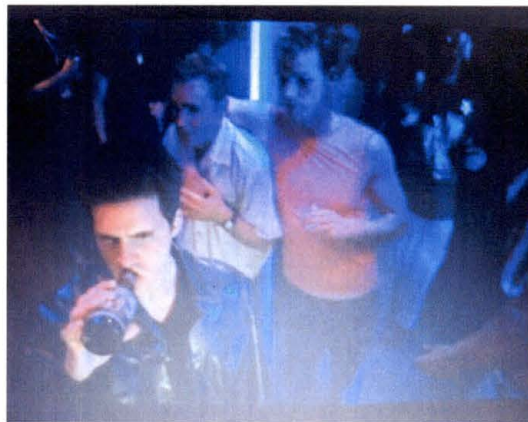
1) Typical image from TLW of an affluent lifestyle replete with stylized clothing, accessories and vehicles



2) An image of gym life on QAF



3) An image of club life on QAF



4) An image of club life on QAF

Appendix E: Androgynous Representation



1) An image of the character Shane on TLW



2) An image of Shane that is meant to illustrate a typical lesbian look



3) An image of androgynous looking character Shane on TLW

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